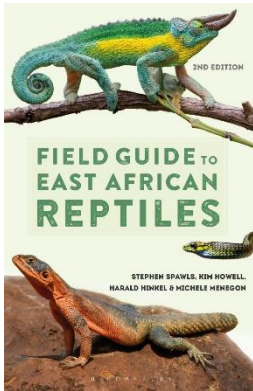


Book review

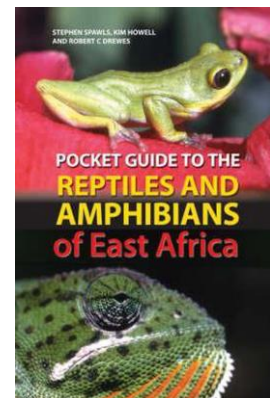
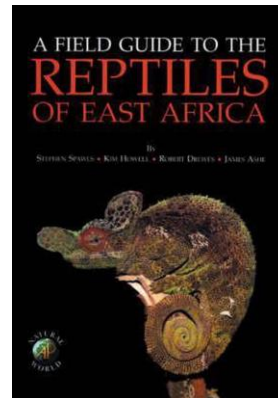


SPAWLS, S., K. HOWELL, H. HINKEL & M. MENEGON, 2018.
Field guide to East African reptiles, 2nd edition.
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, London, UK, New York, USA.
624 pages, 600+ colour photos, colour distribution maps, paperback
ISBN/EAN: 978-1-4729-3561-8
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Price: Ca. €39

The vast majority of people travelling to East Africa is likely to be primarily interested in the large mammals (and a few might be interested in the birds) for which the region is famous. Those people usually travel by car, bus or truck. Such vehicles are excellent for viewing bigger animals and, for safety reasons, are generally the only travel option. Observing smaller animals, like most of the reptiles, is virtually impossible from safari trucks or something similar. Crocodiles, monitors and large snakes may be the only exceptions. Only a limited number of national parks or game reserves, like [Arusha National Park](#) in Tanzania, are accessible on foot. Those interested in reptiles need therefore to rely on those parks or on the often spacious terrain around the lodges or camping sites. As a consequence, the need for travel guides to East African reptiles is limited and the number of reptile guides is much lower than those focussed on mammals.

Over the years, field guides to East African reptiles were limited to simple listings, checklists or comparable publications issued by local organisations and covered only restricted areas. The above mentioned Arusha National Park, for example, published a field guide focussed on the herpetofauna of that park (RAZZETTI & MSUYA, 2002). In the early years of the current millennium a comprehensive field guide was produced covering the reptiles of Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania (SPAWLS et al., 2002). This book will be referred to as the first or 2002 edition. Over almost two decades this book could be considered as the standard work covering the complete field of East African reptiles. The group of authors of this first edition published

a pocket guide in 2006 (SPAWLS et al., 2006) representing an excerpt from the standard guide, and added amphibians. As in other parts of the world, many new species have been found and described in East Africa. Existing species have been split and range extensions have been recorded. As a result of new techniques in the field of genetics and molecular biology, many species were reclassified, regrouped and their scientific names changed. The need for an updated version of the field guide was therefore obvious and recognised by the authors. The second edition was published in 2018 and is reviewed in this article.



Older field guides to East African herpetofauna by SPAWLS et al., 2002, 2006.

The introduction states: “Our original guide described 432 species of reptile from East Africa; the new list contains 492 species. Well over 100 species have had their generic names changed.”. Trying to deal with all these species in some detail makes the book a reference work in addition to a field guide.



East African reptiles; top left: *Agama lionotus*, Tsavo West, Kenya; top right: *Broadleysaurus major*, Bamburi, Kenya; bottom left: *Latastia longicaudata*, Tsavo West, Kenya; bottom right: *Trachylepis striata*, Mto Wa Mbu, Tanzania.

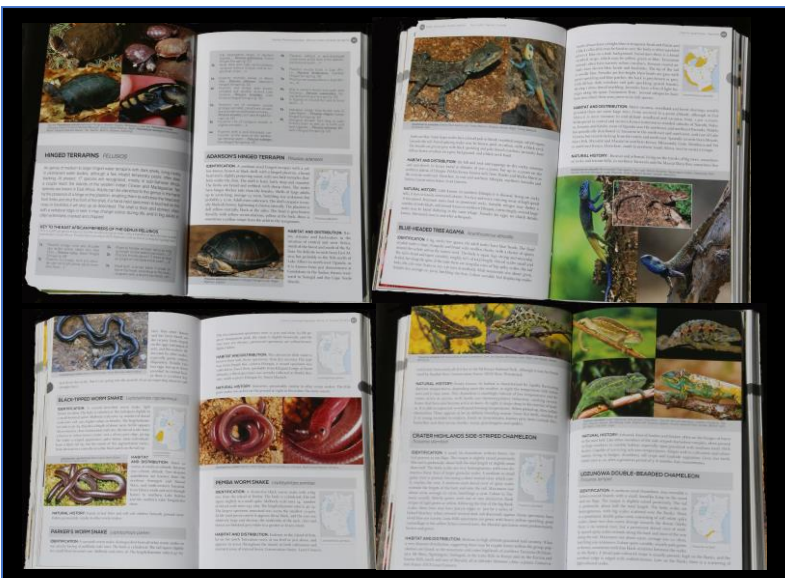
Photos: John Boonman.

On first impression the book is overflowing with information. The chosen font is rather small and the pictures are clustered together with minimal space between them. The resulting layout has almost no margins as the photos and text fill each page in every direction. The quality of the photos is generally good. It seems the authors were trying to fit as many species as possible in as small a book as possible. This worked in the first edition as it was solely a field guide. As a reference work as well, this edition would be much improved if they had chosen a more reader-friendly layout.

This second edition is available as an e-book, not a very common practice for books other than novels. It should be realised that most of the older e-readers have black and white screens. In order to be able to make full use of the possibilities of the field guide, it should be used on modern e-readers with a colour screen, tablets or laptops fitted with software

to deal with documents in ePub-format, or as a PDF. For use in the field, small sized, modern e-readers with sufficient battery capacity (usually not a real problem) can be recommended, even more since e-books with E-ink screens are readable in full daylight (and in fact need an external light source), in contrast to tablets and laptops which are best read in dim light.

The guide is very well-structured. Twenty-five pages of "introductory essays", less than in the first edition, are followed by the species accounts, grouped as chelonians, lizards, worm lizards, crocodiles, and snakes with more than 550 pages in total. The book ends with a glossary, line drawings, defining scales, shields, horns and alike and an index. A list of literature or references is sorely missing. Only in the introduction is there one page devoted to recommendations for further reading, and resources.



A selection of pages from the reviewed book.

Each grouping of animals contains general information followed by keys to families and genera. At the end of those identification trees each and every species is described in the same fashion: identification, habitat and distribution, and natural history. All the sections contain at least one photo of the species, often more, and a small distribution map. Because a map of the same size is used for every species, even the scarce ones, the yellow shadings indicating the distribution are often very small.

As a practical test some reptiles observed in the area were identified according to the recommendations described in the book. After an animal was spotted, I leaved through the book, matched the animal with the pictures shown, checked the distribution map and finally looked at the text. In all cases — not the most difficult ones must be admitted — identification turned out to be straightforward.

LITERATURE

- ALEXANDER, G. & J. MARAIS, 2007. A guide to the reptiles of Southern Africa. Struik Publishers, Cape Town, South Africa.
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John Boonman
 Tormentil 17
 2631 DD Nootdorp
John.boonman@xs4all.nl

Results are shown in the photos on the previous page. It can be concluded that the claim of being a field guide is fulfilled, at least for the easy species. Less well-known or scarce species will probably provide more difficulties when attempting to identify them.

The status of this book as a potential reference work is also achieved as even the most seldomly encountered species are described. Any possibly new form will, however, escape attention in such a manner. For that reason some more background would have been appreciated. For instance, while describing *Philochortus rudolfensis* the authors mention “some authorities” believe it to be a subspecies of another form. It would have been useful to refer to those authorities, in whatever form, to allow the reader to follow up if they are interested.

To conclude, the book is a useful field guide. As far as it can be judged, it is as up-to-date as a work of this type can be with lots of detail. Its use in the field is slightly hampered by the lay-out. It would have been more user-friendly if a form was chosen similar to the one of “A guide to the reptiles of Southern Africa” (ALEXANDER & MARAIS, 2007), describing a representative example of a group in a more transparent lay-out, with pictures of that example and related species, and finally listing all the species in the group by name. At present, readers must check the Internet for the differences between the species. In many cases that will assist in completing the identification process. As a reference work the book is useful as well. A more explicit linking to background resources would have improved its value.