



Mammalian Biology

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Book Review

D.E. Wilson, R.A. Mittermeier (Eds.), *Handbook of the Mammals of the World, vol. 2. Hoofed Mammals* Lynx Edicions (in association with Conservation International and IUCN), Barcelona (2011). 885pp., 56 colour plates, 664 colour photographs, 430 distribution maps, Hardback, €160, ISBN: 978-84-96553-77-4

Long and eagerly awaited, the second volume of the *Handbook of the Mammals of the World* has now been published. It covers the "Hoofed Mammals", a non-phylogenetic assemblage combining aardvarks, hyraxes, elephants, pangolins, perissodactyls and terrestrial artiodactyls (whales are lumped with other aquatic mammal groups into the fourth volume yet to be published). The odd systematic set-up of this multi-volume work has already been bemoaned when reviewing the first tome (Zachos, *Mammalian Biology* 74 (2009), pp. 423f.), but then phylogenetic relationships is not what these books are primarily about. Continuing the structure of the carnivore volume, each group is introduced with a general essay covering systematic issues, species biology including ecology and behaviour and conservation status. These introductory chapters are lavishly illustrated with world-class wildlife photography. These pictures alone are worth the book's price – I could not take my eyes off them! In the taxonomic section every single species is shown in high-quality colour plates and given a detailed description taking up the pattern of the introductory chapters and being reminiscent of the *Mammal Species* series. Apart from all common English names, species names are also given in French, German and Spanish, and the 5000 bibliographic references (the list is 65 pages long!) make this book even more valuable. Given that 29 different authors have contributed to the book, it is hardly surprising that there are substantial differences among the groups covered, most notably so when it comes to taxonomy. Here lies perhaps the single most serious shortcoming of the book – while some authors are very cautious with species designations, others are obviously (and regrettably) enthusiastic splitters. The most drastic example is the taxonomy of

the Bovidae which, sadly, is a mess! While the authoritative third edition of the "Wilson and Reeder" (2005) lists 143 bovid species (including some recently extinct ones), the authors of the bovid chapter in the present *Handbook* seem to have found evidence for the existence of no fewer than 279 "species" (even without the extinct forms covered by Wilson and Reeder)! This doubling in species numbers is of course a taxonomic artefact, and the reader is left with the impression that every single colour variation or geographic population is treated as a "good" species, which seems even stranger considering that D.E. Wilson is one of the two chief editors of this *Handbook* as well. Often, whatever name is listed as a synonym by Wilson and Reeder has been granted species status: There are allegedly 11 (eleven!) species of klipspringer (*Oreotragus*), not a single one, five species of wildebeest (*Connochaetes*) instead of two, four species of sub-Saharan *Oryx* instead of two, two impala (*Aepyceros*) species because the southwest-African black-faced population is listed as a distinct species, four (!) species of African buffalo (*Syncerus*), etc. By the same reasoning there would be certainly more than one extant human "species" and dozens of "species" of domestic dog. There will always be borderline cases in species designation, and in some other chapters I was surprised, too, at finding a few "new" species, but fortunately these authors have been much more considerate than the ones responsible for the Bovidae. This splitting frenzy indeed clouds my enthusiasm for the book, but I am still happy to own it, and it is by far the most up-to-date and most comprehensive book on ungulates available. If there is ever a second edition, taxonomic splitting should be given a second thought and hopefully will; in the meantime, we have to enjoy this book and try to ignore the taxonomic artefacts it contains.

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