

Book review – King Cobra: Natural History and Captive Management

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King Cobra: Natural History and Captive Management. Tom Charlton (2018). Natural History Publications (Borneo), A913, 9th Floor, Wisma Merdeka Phase 1, PO Box 15566, 88864 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia. 151 pp. ISBN 978-983-812-183-5. UK £35.00 (hardback).

Among snakes, the king cobra (*Ophiophagus hannah*) is in a class by itself in many ways. It is the longest venomous snake in the world; it is the only species in its genus (barring any new species identification from future taxonomical work); and it is the only snake known to build a nest for its eggs. It preys almost exclusively on other snakes: even other venomous species are fair game. Within its range, it is greatly feared for its size and venom, rather unfairly as it causes far fewer human fatalities than many of its elapid cousins. Such a unique and fascinating species thoroughly deserves a book to itself, and British herpetologist and photographer Tom Charlton has provided an excellent example.

As indicated by the title, the book is split into two main parts. The first explores the king cobra's natural history, covering its original scientific description, distinguishing features, distribution, behaviour, and of course, its uneasy relationship with humans and the research being done to conserve it. In the second part, Charlton applies his extensive experience to describe how best to manage this species in captivity, including proper housing

and handling, captive breeding, and how a king cobra may be gradually persuaded to eat rodents rather than more expensive and less easily obtained feeder snakes.

It is difficult to think of any detail regarding king cobras that Charlton overlooks. The first part delves into such information as how to distinguish a king from similar Asiatic species, what species it is known to feed upon, how geography impacts its distribution, the effects and treatment of a bite, and whether the existence of the largest recorded individual – allegedly owned by London Zoo in the late 1930s – can be verified. Wherever possible, there is plenty of precision in the facts presented, down to the typical size of a nest. The book also makes note of where solid information is currently lacking, particularly with regards to young king cobras, which are especially elusive.

The opening of the second part makes it clear that a reptile keeper looking to own a king cobra should already have several years' worth of experience with venomous snakes. However, the author still maintains the same level of detail in explaining what he considers to be best practice, presenting information so that every facet is considered and any reader can understand, whilst also highlighting the challenges involved, and that personal safety and the wellbeing of the animal are priority. Charlton also takes care to note that "opinions...vary from keeper to keeper, and a

balanced viewpoint should be considered at all times.”

Charlton writes in a straightforward style that is easy to follow, and illustrates the book with a wide range of clear and relevant photographs. Most of the points made in the text have at least one excellent accompanying photograph to visually demonstrate them to the reader. This aids in fully appreciating both parts of the book: the variability and

complexity of the king cobra’s morphology, habitat and behaviour in the first part, and of its captive management in the second.

In conclusion, *King Cobra: Natural History and Captive Management* is a book to be recommended to anyone with an interest in snakes; even those who are not currently intending to keep a king cobra will still gain a full appreciation of this exceptional animal.

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