**Book Review**


To anyone remotely interested in Afrotropical butterflies, the author of this splendidly produced book needs no introduction. Torben Larsen has spent close on 40 years studying the butterfly fauna of the continent, especially in West Africa, and the wealth of especially ecological information that can be found in his latest work bears testimony to this. Larsen has published extensively on Afrotropical butterflies, and a perusal of his publication list demonstrates a keen interest in conservation. Probably his best-known earlier contribution in book form is *The Butterflies of Kenya and their Natural History* (1991, 2nd edn 1996, 3rd edn 2000). The present title is, however, his most significant contribution yet.

*Butterflies of West Africa* consists of two volumes, the first comprising a detailed introduction to the topic, followed by the systematic account, and the second containing the 125 colour plates. The introduction provides brief accounts on the position of Afrotropical butterflies in a global setting, as well as their evolution, present-day diversity and biogeographical divisions. This is followed by a historical account of butterfly collecting in Africa, and detailed observations on the ecological biogeography of West Africa, building on the earlier concepts of the sylvan and open formations of R. H. Carcasson. Comments on migration and threats to butterflies in West Africa conclude the introductory part.

The systematic part is prefaced by a short and concise introduction of the format to be followed in the main section, a glossary of technical terms including a very brief treatment on venation and genitalia structure, and, perhaps most importantly, a gazetteer. The latter should be highly welcome for any reader trying to get to grips with place names in often inaccessible regions, and it is unfortunate that the gazetteer is not accompanied by the actual co-ordinates of the places cited. Next comes a list in tabular form of Afrotropical butterfly genera and their approximate geographical ranges; a useful feature of this table is that it gives the total number of species known in 1995 and 2005, providing an indication of areas of taxonomic activity during the past decade, as well as the number of species recorded from West Africa.

The entries in the systematic part are concise yet contain a wealth of information; they follow the format ‘Heading; Note(s); Identification; Subspecies (if applicable); Habits; Early stages; and Distribution’. The layout of the text was chosen to occupy two columns per page, and an average entry for a species would occupy one quarter of a page. I found the sections on Habits to be the most interesting as it is here that the author’s remarkable experience gained in the field over many years comes to the fore.

The first volume closes with a first appendix listing new species and subspecies described in this work by the author and various co-authors. Acknowledgements, a short reference section amounting to only 19 entries, and a second appendix detailing main taxonomic and nomenclatural changes suggested. This is followed by a rather more comprehensive section entitled ‘Literature cited or consulted’. I find the reasoning given on p. 563 as to why this part appears as a separate entity somewhat hard to follow. Further, it has been my experience in the past that reference sections are usually a good place to start gaining an impression as to how meticulously the main part of a publication has been prepared, and I confess to being somewhat disappointed in this regard.

The reproductions of digital images taken from actual specimens on the 125 plates gracing the pages of the second volume are of a consistently high standard. The white background is aesthetically neutral and affords good contrast in most cases, although it is unavoidably less suitable for some piersids, such as the *Mylothris* spp. depicted on plate 10. I found the legends rather too concise for my taste; seeing that actual specimens are depicted I would have preferred to find more complete locality information than merely the country where the specimen was collected, especially in case of variable species; also, cross-referencing with the text volume would have been made easier by at least citing the author, if not the year of publication.

All in all, this is a magnificent work, and there is nothing comparable available for other parts of the Afrotropical region. What criticisms I have of this work can largely be subsumed under the comment that it is a pity that a little more care was not taken in the final stages of preparation, given the long gestation period of the work (see preface on p. 13). The absence of bracketed notation to indicate subsequent generic combinations is unfortunate, as it requires constant alertness by the reader wishing to quote from the book. Also, access to the
primary literature would have been facilitated by including a brief reference to the original description in the species accounts.

In a similar vein, the convention of placing subsequently derived information, especially dates of publication, in square brackets is given scant regard. The error of applying the wrong number to taxonomic ranks above the genus level (e.g., ‘The Papilioninae is by far the largest’, p. 71) has become so widespread of late that it would seem almost unfair to blame the author. Even so, clearly unnecessary misspellings such as ‘Hesperidoidea’ (for Hesperioidea) on p. 61 and *M. maximiliana* (for *M. maximiliana*) on p. 561, to name but two, could have been avoided by some careful editing. These criticisms notwithstanding, *Butterflies of West Africa* is a must-have for any entomologist with a serious interest in Afrotropical butterflies.

*Butterflies of West Africa* is available at the abovementioned price from Apollo Books, Kirkeby Sand 19, DK-5771 Stenstrup, Denmark.

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