

Torben B. Larsen 2005. Butterflies of West Africa. – Apollo Books, Stenstrup. – Text-Volume: 595 pp.; Plate-Volume: 125 pls. Size 28 × 217 cm. Hardcover (ISBN 87-88757-43-9). DKK 1280.00 (excluding postage). (In English).

Regarding systematics, butterflies are certainly the best studied large group of lepidopterans although many questions remain for future generations, for example to answer sibling species problems or well supported phylogenetic relationships. In contrast, the number of species seems to have reached an equilibrium as descriptions of new species are well balanced by synonymisations. One remaining problem is that taxonomic knowledge is usually scattered over uncountable publications, and syntheses to summarize this information and make it available to a broader public are still wanting. Torben Larsen already did so for the *Butterflies of Lebanon* (1974), the *Butterflies of Egypt* (1990), and the *Butterflies of Kenya* (1991), for example, and now he adds his comprehensive *Butterflies of West Africa* to the list of his contributions. What makes his books so outstanding is the fact that, among others, Torben Larsen knows the butterflies himself from the field, and, incidentally, one can read about his field experience in his *Hazards of Butterfly collecting* (2004), a joyful and humorous reading. The Afrotropical region is home to about 4000 butterfly species, or 21% of the world fauna. However, a much higher proportion, 32%, of all lycaenid species occurs in this region and the Lipteninae (Lycaenidae), with 599 species, are endemic to this region. More than one third of the entire afrotropical butterfly fauna can be found in West Africa. These are about 1,450 butterfly species, which are treated by Torben Larsen in *Butterflies of West Africa*. The book starts with three pages of contents, which are necessary to use the book efficiently. This is followed by a foreword by Steve Collins, a preface by Dick Vane-Wright, an “About this Book” by the author, and three full pages of acknowledgements. The introduction starts with a detailed description of the geography of the area covered, which comprises 15 countries from the south of Mauritania in the West to the northwest of Cameroon in the East. For the same area, the biogeography, biodiversity, history of collecting, ecology, migration, threats and extinctions, as well as butterfly conservation issues are treated in detail. In addition to descriptions of the main habitats, the reader learns that the rain forests in West Africa declined to between 4 and 43% (average 13.2%) of their original area depending on country – but this was the state of the losses in 1986! Happily, Torben Larsen shows by his own observations that this habitat loss probably did not lead to the extinction of any butterfly species yet. However, further destruction would evidently increase the risk of extinctions. Monitoring this process is a necessary prerequisite to discover species that are in danger and to develop programmes for their conservation and that of their habitats. This requires expertise in *systematics*, which is the subject of the next chapter in *Butterflies of West Africa*: it starts with an introduction into terminology (unfortunately, the author still uses a numerical system for the wing venation) and a list of Afrotropical butterfly genera indicating the distribution of the species included in every genus as well as the number of species occurring in West Africa. Then, the taxa are treated hierarchically, from superfamily to genus, with the species in each genus arranged systematically. Each taxon is shortly described. For each supraspecific taxon the numbers of species and general distribution are indicated, and some diagnostic characters are given. For species the text is divided in sections on identification, habits, early stages, and distribution, with detailed information on the occurrence in West Africa, habitat preferences and behavior of the butterflies, and host plant records of early stages (altogether, about 2000 host plant records are given in the book). Sometimes a paragraph of additional information and illustrations, e.g. images of butterflies or genitalia structures, are included in the text. The text-volume is completed with the reference section, which contains about 600 references – an important pool for further study! – and an index to scientific names. The plate-volume starts with the contents of the 125 plates, which enables the reader to find the first plate of each subfamily, while generic and species group names can be found via the index at the end of this volume. About 1450 species (3900 specimens) are figured in colour, some of them for the first time! This book provides a unique, comprehensive, and illustrative source to the butterflies of West Africa. It enables the user to identify the species and to learn about their occurrence and host plants. It is perfectly suitable as a basic tool to study West African butterflies, but also to use butterflies as indicators for habitat management; hence, it is certainly worth its price. Let’s hope that it will find a wide distribution and use in favour of West African nature and particularly its butterflies.

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Autor(en)/Author(s): Nuß (auch Nuss) Matthias

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