BOOK REVIEWS

ELIZABETH COWLES, DEPARTMENT EDITOR

ANIMALS


If you have ever wondered about the incredible biology and “why” of flyingfish, this is most assuredly the book that you must obtain, read, and enjoy. Howell provides many interesting facts and demystifies one of the ocean’s most interesting creatures. Bridging the interface between water and sky, the flyingfish (please note that it is one and enjoy. Howell provides many interesting facts and “why” of flyingfish, this is most assuredly the book that you must obtain, read, and enjoy. Howell provides many interesting facts and demystifies one of the ocean’s most interesting creatures. Bridging the interface between water and sky, the flyingfish (please note that it is one word, not two) has long been one of those creatures that people are in awe of. Howell succinctly introduces, delves to the depths of, and then soars over the biology of the species.

While the book does an incredible job of describing the biology and lifestyle of this animal, the reader is easily distracted by photography that is nothing short of stunning. Though small in stature, the flyingfish is a giant in the world of coloration, markings, and adaptations. Humankind stands in the shadow of this marvel of biological engineering and genuflects to its incredible beauty. Howell is quite obviously obsessed with these “marine missiles,” and his passion for the topic and the species rings true in his writing. The book is perfectly suited for the classroom, addressing the “who, what, where, and why” that I have often wondered about these creatures. From the brilliant coloration of the cover specimen to the last picture, the book gives an excellent description of what this amazing creature is capable of. While “flyingfish” is a common moniker, they are abundantly diverse and infinitely interesting with regard to their biology.

My only hope is that Howell is similarly interested in other species and can, in the near future, pay homage to other organisms that have entranced the weary sailor or the casual observer. Given his attention to detail and enjoyable style, he would be well served in continuing to write about each and every specimen that intrigued me as a child. After 22 years in the classroom, it was refreshing to pick up a book that was able to educate me so thoroughly in one session of reading.

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Everyone to whom I have shown this book has opened it and found themselves drawn in, fascinated by its wonderful pictures and informative text. Even those who are known ophiophobes cannot resist the book because of the artful and fascinating way these “frightful” animals are portrayed and described by Lillywhite. How Snakes Work can serve either as a book to read from cover to cover or as a valuable reference, full of well-documented scientific information. It also provides long lists of additional reading for those seeking more in-depth information on topics covered in the chapters.

Besides the great photographs of snakes, the book focuses on presenting up-to-date insights into the physiology of snakes. The nine chapters cover topics such as evolutionary history, eating, locomotion, thermal control, structure and function of the skin, the circulatory and respiratory systems, how snakes perceive their world, sound production, courtship, and reproduction. One topic of particular interest and curiosity is the locomotion of snakes. Snakes can climb straight up and down the trunks of large-diameter trees! They can fly through the air, which is referred to as “gliding” – a type of controlled flight. Some species of snakes can jump during certain defensive actions.

Although the book is full of well-researched information, the author candidly discusses the current state of knowledge and its shortcomings, stating where knowledge is lacking or where there is disagreement among herpetologists. He makes it clear that scientists still have a great deal to learn about snakes, thus perpetuating the mystic aura that surrounds snakes. We learn much about how snakes work in this book, but there is still so much more left to discover.

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