

## Two recent books celebrating the splendor of butterflies

*Queen Alexandra's Birdwing,*

by David K. Mitchell, Charles F. Dewhurst, W. John Tennent and William W. Page (2016).

Malaysia, Southdene SDN. BHD. 88 pp. <http://www.pemberleybooks.com/product/queen-alexandras-birdwing-butterfly-ornithoptera-alexandrae-rothschild-1907-a-review-and-conservation-proposals/30335/>

And

*The Large Sulphurs of the Americas,*

by James L. Monroe (2016).

Gainesville, The International Biodiversity Foundation. 109 pp. <https://www.bioquip.com/search/DispProduct.asp?pid=3650>

There is more than one way to skin a cat or celebrate the splendor of butterflies. One can dress as a butterfly (not when skinning the cat, of course, but when celebrating), watch butterflies through binoculars, pin and spread them, tweet about them, wear butterfly ties or earrings, and sequence their genomes. But, undoubtedly, the most accepted, in educated circles, way of paying tribute to something is writing a book.

Most authors, surprisingly, choose somewhat similar ways of writing books about butterflies, mostly focusing on the fauna of a particular place. Of course, this too is a highly variable genre, encompassing everything from field guides of different levels of accuracy and sophistication to reminiscences about collecting in a particular locality, island, country, or continent. All these ways of appreciating butterflies are acceptable, valuable, etc., but still they all have something in common: the geographic dimension.

I am currently holding in my hands two very similar-looking volumes: both about the size of a sheet of paper (slight variation reflects different metric systems rather than differences in tastes of the publishers, though one is laid out vertically and the other horizontally). Both are enclosed in white glossy hardcovers and about half-an-inch thick. My previous attempt at book reviews (Sourakov, 2012, *Trop. Lepid. Res.* 22(2): 119), where I referred to the use of selected books as doorstoppers and shelf decorators, would not be relevant here; both volumes will make a poor case for either use. Still, it gives me a great pleasure to hold them in my hands. Here is why.

The authors of these two volumes approached celebrating the splendor of butterflies from unconventional angles. While the authors of the first volume, as is evident from its title, devoted the book to just one species of butterflies (but what a species – worthy of the name of the Queen), the other book is celebrating similarities and differences within a compact group of pierid butterflies we call the Large Sulphurs (genera *Anteos*, *Phoebis*, *Rhabdodryas*, and *Aphrissa*). In other words, the authors take the time and trouble to zoom in on a species or a small group of species in a way these beautiful creatures deserve. They dedicate books to butterflies not as if they were a subset (although splendid) of an ecological community made up otherwise of hundreds of thousands if not millions of species, but on the level of individual species. Such books that have dealt with smaller subsets of Lepidoptera but in greater detail (e.g. a book on the genus *Anaea* (Comstock, 1961), Milkweed butterflies (Ackery and Vane-Wright, 1984), or the swallowtails

of Americas (Tyler *et al.*, 1994)) invariably have had great success and enjoyed continuous popularity for many decades. For me, personally, books that venture into detailed exploration of a narrower group, such as the Tiger moth book edited by Conner (2009) and the very recent splendid effort by Jiggins (2017) about *Heliconius*, are of the greatest value, as I use them for reference in my own work.

The Queen Alexandra book, while subtitled “a review and conservation proposal,” discusses *Ornithoptera alexandrae* (Rothschild, 1907) from angles of taxonomy, history of discovery, biology and distribution, and deals with issues surrounding conservation, trade and captive breeding of this endangered species. The book is very thoroughly referenced and beautifully illustrated.



