
Description: This large-format book documents the current nomenclatural status of more than 3800 species and genus-group names for the Sphingidae. Kitching and Cadou recognize 203 genera and 1272 species as valid, and include all known available and unavailable synonyms in the checklist. The authors are to be congratulated for their encyclopedic scholarship in updating and correcting sphingid nomenclature and their comprehensive and critical review of the status of species and generic names. Nevertheless, as the authors acknowledge, there is still much work to be done on this charismatic moth family, including a full revision and a thorough phylogenetic analysis.


The checklist is organized in nested alphabetical order, first by genus, then by species within each genus, then by subspecies within species. Synonyms, infraspecific names, and nomina nuda are listed beneath the valid species or subspecies name to which they correspond. Author and year of publication are given for each name, and all original descriptions are included in the References Cited section. There are eight good-quality color plates: six illustrate pinned specimens of 48 species (including six holotypes, two paratypes, and two lectotypes), and two show photos of living specimens at rest in the wild. The latter are slightly grainy and the color reproduction seems a bit saturated. The dust jacket is illustrated with rather dark images of five species named after either Cadou or Kitching which are not reproduced elsewhere in the book.

The bulk of the text comprises 627 nomenclatural notes. These range from short reports on lepidopterous designations, transcription of data labels and other rather dry taxonomic minutiae, to long and sometimes fascinating detective stories surrounding cases of mistaken identity, nomenclatural squabbles that are reminiscent of Francis Hemming's pronouncements (Hemming 1967, The generic names of the butterflies and their type-species (Lepidoptera: Rhexopoece), Bull. BM(NH) Ent. Suppl. 9:1-509), and philosophical explorations of the ICZN Code (1985, International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature, International Code of Zoological Nomenclature, International Trust for Zoological Nomenclature and the British Museum (Natural History), London,) and its relation to species concepts.

The book concludes with a comprehensive Literature Cited section, descriptions of two newly-recognized species and two new subspecies, a one-page Addenda section, and good subject and taxonomic indices. Two of the four descriptions of new taxa are nomenclatural corrections of discrepancies between current concepts and old nominal types, the third gives a different, graphical form of species-specific status and the last is a previously unrecognized species. Only two of the new taxa are illustrated.

In general, the book seems well-organized and error-free. I noticed only one error (a misnumbered footnote reference), which is quite remarkable given the complex cross-referencing between the checklist and the notes.

Two Criticisms: As the authors state (p. 24), "Sphingidae Mundi [d'Abreca 1985, op. cit.] remains the only readily available color guide to adult hawkmoths on a global basis... and will continue to be used to identify these moths." They justify their checklist as a means to correct the numerous nomenclatural and identification errors in that work, as well as a means to forestall entry into the literature of the "almost 1000 errors" in the Bridges [1963, op. cit.] catalog. Although it exhibits impressive scholarly rigor, in my view Kitching and Cadou's book will not be of much use or interest to the casual reader, or even to the serious amateur, because the practical information it contains is almost completely inaccessible, buried in the midst of a jumble of nomenclatural notes that are arranged in the alphabetical order of the checklist. For example, suppose you identify a specimen as Oxyambulyx placida Moore by comparing it to the pictures in d'Abreca's book. To discover that d'Abreca's specimen was misidentified, you would need to stumble upon Kitching and Cadou's footnote 56 (to Ambulyx semiplacidula Innes), which is not cross-referenced to either the synonym Oxyambulyx Rothschild & Jordan, or the species A. placida (Moore). Given the authors' acknowledgment of the continuing importance of d'Abreca's book to sphingid workers, two extremely practical sections to have included in Kitching and Cadou would have been, 1) a concise list of correspondents to d'Abreca's nomenclature and identifications, and 2) supplemental illustrations of the 200+ taxa d'Abreca excluded from Sphingidae Mundi.

A sign of our mercenary times is the Natural History Museum's promotion of what is essentially a rather narrowly-focused monograph as a trade book. The inclusion of color plates (and of the term, "Illustrated" on the glossy dust jacket) is a lure that will entice many hawkmoth fanciers to buy this book, but I suspect that most of them will find its contents largely impenetrable. Once upon a time, the British Museum (Natural History) published scholarly nomenclatural works in its Bulletin (e.g., Hemming 1967), and distributed them free of cost. Nowadays, the more revenue-oriented Natural History Museum encourages its systematists to produce marketable products: another recent example is Malcolm Scothe's geometrid catalog (1999, Geometrid Moths of the World: a catalogue, CSIRO Publications, Melbourne, 1400 pp., $385). I can think of no better way to prolong the lepidopterological imperialism of wealthy western nations than by publishing catalogs and checklists of global faunas in prohibitively expensive formats that the researchers from countries where most of the taxa occur generally cannot afford. It is onerous enough for Ecuadorian lepidopterists to have to go to London to see the holotypes of Ecuadorian moths. The least the Natural History Museum could do is to give something back to the "type locaters" by making the knowledge derived from its holdings accessible at moderate cost, or better yet, free on the WWW.

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