SEXUAL SELECTION: MATE CHOICE AND COURTSHIP IN NATURE. Number 29.

Everyone is interested in sex among humans, and many of us are interested in sex in the animal kingdom. A semipopular book on sexual selection therefore seems like a good bet, particularly given that recent volumes on physics for nonspecialists are quite popular. Sex should certainly sell better than subatomic particles. Unfortunately, we had trouble determining the audience for this book; it would make a poor textbook, given its factual errors and omissions, and a conceptual framework that is inconsistent with mainstream behavioral ecology. Is it directed at someone without any background in biology who likes nature shows on TV? Such a reader may be misguided by the book's idiosyncratic organization and terminology. These departures from common usage are more than minor quibbles; if we read a popular book on physics and want to discuss quarks with a physicist friend, we hope to do so without the physicist asking what a quark is. A reader of this book, however, might refer to a “sublease” mating system, to the puzzle of most behavioral ecologists. Conversely, Gould and Gould discuss the polygyny threshold, and game theory, without using the terms.

The book’s strong points are its breadth and its spectacular production quality. It includes examples from virtually all animal groups and some plants, and its beautifully executed illustrations showcase the most important points in sexual selection, including territoriality, sexual imprinting, experimental evidence for female choice, and much more. Some topics not immediately related to sexual selection, such as the evolution of sexuality or the advantage of two sexes, give the book added depth. However, these subjects are covered in lieu of more pertinent ones, most obviously the connection between differences in parental investment, and which sex invests more in courtship. Why are females choosy and males chosen?

Also absent are the names of scientists other than Darwin. We realize that it would be inappropriate to document each author, but how can runaway selection be discussed without mentioning Fisher, or parental investment without Trivers? The reason for naming these people is not simply aggrandizement; in many cases the idea is inseparable from its originator. Furthermore, we believe that describing science as a collection of facts without referring to the people responsible for establishing those facts gives a false image of the scientific enterprise to an already scientifically confused public.

In discussing sexual selection with general audiences, questions about human mate choice invariably pop up, so we applaud Gould and Gould for including a chapter on human mate selection. Unfortunately, the views expressed are antiquated, and ignore recent developments in evolutionary psychology. Finally, this and other chapters are rife with anthropomorphism. Giant water bugs are “vicious,” bark beetles “respectful.” There is a fine line to walk here, and we understand the desire to make behavior accessible to the public, but it must be done without giving the impression that biologists view animals as little people with fur, feathers, or chitin.

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