

BOOK REVIEW

Miniature Lives – Identifying Insects in Your Home and Garden

Michelle Gleeson (2016)

CSIRO Publishing, Collingwood Victoria 3066,
ISBN: 9781486301379, 344 pp., RRP \$39.95 (Paperback).

This book is attempting a very difficult task – making insect identification easy for kids, gardeners, parents and teachers. It is one of the first insect identification books that I have read that goes against the standard key-style approach and instead allows the user to identify insects based on morphology, habitat or other structural clues that insects leave behind.

The book is divided into six chapters, with the first one key to read to enable you to get your bearings and to ‘pick a path’ in terms of identification. I like this idea in that if you find an insect on the path you base identification on morphology; find an insect in a particular habitat you use the habitat ID, or if you find a structure you use ‘Clever Clues’ identification.

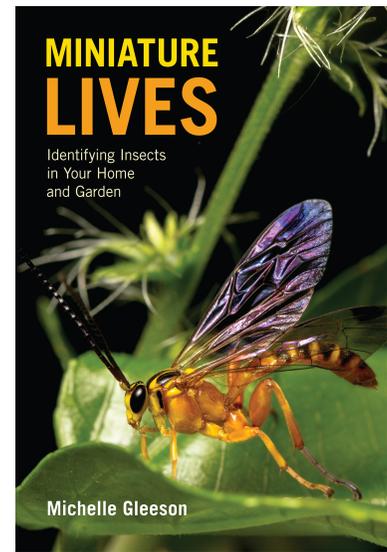
The book is written in a relaxed style to enable many people to read it without feeling overwhelmed with formal names and body parts. This obviously enables a wider range of people to engage with the book, but also means it is really difficult to get precise and be efficient with the wording of sections. A nice example of this is in the start of Chapter 2 on Insect basics when insect morphology is defined as (in the text and Fig 2.1) having the following traits: “six legs, three distinct body parts (the head, thorax, and abdomen) and a single pair of antennae”. This is very well for the adults, but many people come across larval forms in the garden, pantry and out about in the bush; based on this explanation they will not have any idea what they are looking at. You need to make it well into the key to determine differences between larvae and other arthropods.

18 Orders are covered in the book, with the more obscure or smaller orders omitted. This is fine, but then in the morphology section, there are details on ocelli, insect antennal sections, and even mouthparts, which a good hand lens/ microscope is essential. I was really quite surprised to see an eye pupil drawn onto the insect's head in Fig 2.4.

I'm always interested in how insect order identification keys are set up. Teaching insect identification to second year undergrad Entomology and third year Agronomy students, it's the introduction to keys that is always a difficult task – especially at the order/ suborder level when there is so much variation within the groups. The identification key here runs over 37 pages of the book – while it certainly is not overwhelming with detail... the number of queries and alternate statements make the key laborious. It would also help the reader to identify not only which questions to go to after making a decision, but the page number the question is on. After reading through the morphology key, I would like to see maybe a four page spread of all the line drawings before the key, so that readers could try and make a much quicker decision to go to part of the key that is relevant.

Chapter 4 goes into habitats of animals and identifies some key taxa that might be come across here. This is a really nice chapter and is really based around the habitat finder in Fig 4.1. It was nice to see the native cockroaches identified as ‘goodie’s’ and they are usually considered the same as the introduced species (baddies). To make this section easier to follow I think a colour code to pages would be useful – as for me it's the key section of the book and where it is most useful relative to other insect identification guides; and where most people will go first.

Chapter 6 on insect orders was not as easy to follow – the groups seemed to be arranged based on the first common name mentioned (bees, wasps, ants sawflies were first up), followed by beetles then booklice. To me this was a great example of where to not follow the Order taxonomy: if a gardener wants to identify a wasp, they would naturally go to ‘W’ (not B for bee), similarly for a moth M (not B for butterfly). I also do not think using ‘True Bugs’ is a good general term for the Hemiptera groups – best to divide between ‘aphids’, ‘cicadas’ and ‘bugs’. Each group has a nice overview and also what other taxa could be confused with it.



This is a nice resource with lots of great information. However as a resource for Identifying Insects in the home and garden, I am not convinced the format used has been fully perfected to take on this role. A clearer focus on morphology and habitat identification is where this book could really find a niche and be more regularly used on the coffee table or in the shed.

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