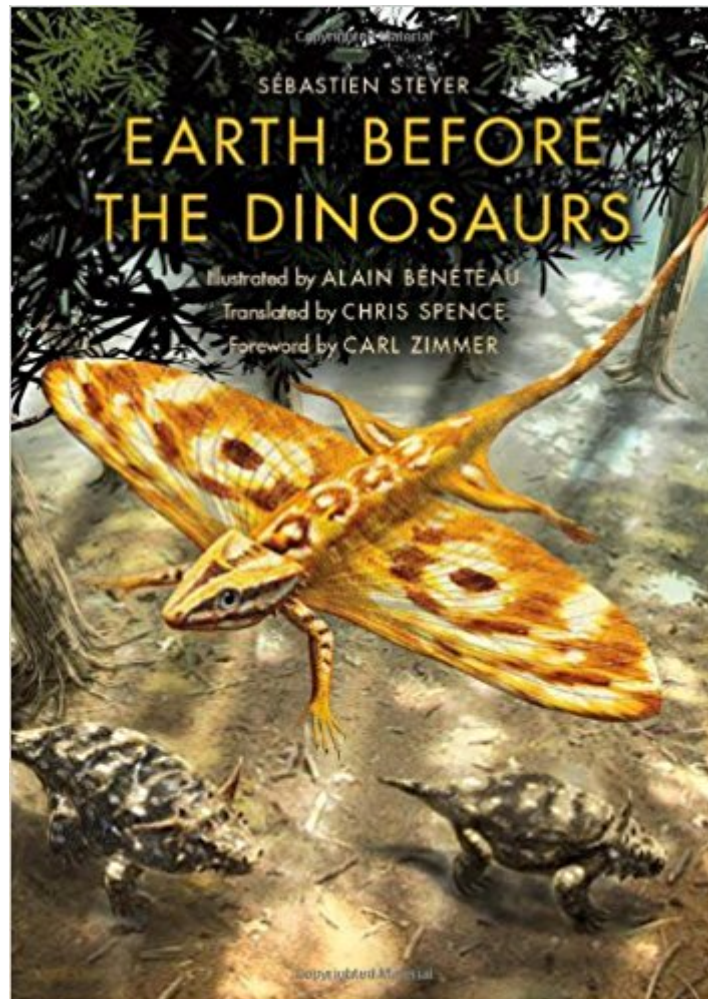


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Earth Before The Dinosaurs (Life Of The Past)



Synopsis

This beautiful volume introduces the incredible animals that populated the planet before the Age of the Dinosaurs. Readers voyage to a time, beginning about 370 million years ago, when the first four-footed vertebrates appeared, and ending 200 million years later at the moment when the dinosaurs begin their ascent. During this time, vertebrates emerge from the sea and there appears a parade of animals, each more astonishing than the last. On this expedition, we learn how paleontologists become detectives to understand the history of life and we discover that many widely held ideas about the evolution of species are completely false. Earth before the Dinosaurs is an entertaining and informative guide to an astonishing and little-known world.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book, which covers the origins and early radiation of tetrapods through the Triassic period, is marred by an inept translation. The errors are of three types. First there are just plain mistakes, for example "New Scotland" instead of Nova Scotia. Secondly, the translator seems to have simply guessed at the English equivalents of numerous French scientific terms (as "amnios" for amnion, e.g.). Finally, issues of word order and comma placement have led to many confusing or even self-contradictory passages of the "eat, shoots, and leaves" variety. Even stripping away the translation problems, this book is far from an ideal introduction to its subject. Steyer can't seem to decide as to the level of prior knowledge his readers should have. On the one hand, he assumes they know nothing about paleontology as a profession, while on the other he assumes they will have more than a passing familiarity with all the different bones of the basic tetrapod cranium (which are

far more numerous than in the human skull). The focus of Steyer's interest clearly lies with the amphibians, and when he gets to the reptiles his coverage becomes scattershot and incomplete. His clumsy attempts to be chummy and humorous simply get in his way. On the plus side, the book is excellently illustrated, with outline skeletons and full-color life reconstructions of a great many species, including many not previously covered in this way--at least to the best of my knowledge. My one cavil is that Tiktaalik, Acanthostega, and Ichthyostega are depicted without the bushy external gills they are known to have had.

This is a wonderful subject -- tetrapods before the dinosaurs -- which sorely needs more books. This particular attempt has some nice virtues, but is overall marred by a couple of really peculiar problems. The translation did not bother me so much as it did the other reviewer, and I was relatively amused by the incredibly French and comedic tone of the author. The real problems for me are structural. The author spends a great deal of time on amphibians (or "stegocephalians"), as he terms the clade. But he addresses them as a hodgepodge, rather than in a systematic way. When he eventually gets to amniotes, everything collapses, and he gives a totally scattershot and random discussion of some relatively obscure diapsids, along with a brief nod to synapsids. Really? This is your discussion of amniotes before the dinosaurs? Amazing. On the other hand, I like the genuinely scientific tone he adopts; he feels free to discuss complicated scientific issues, and gets right into interesting points even if they are rather complex. He strikes a really nice balance between scientific detail and popular appeal, in my opinion. There are a lot of useful graphs and information, and his discussion of developmental science is well done. The graphs and technical illustrations are somewhat like a college textbook, and for that reason very helpful. By contrast, whoever the main "artistic" illustrator is, he is a relatively mediocre artist; the life renderings are just okay. Well, maybe someday my dream will come true and we will get a superb, glossy book on this subject, akin to the fabulous "Dawn of the Dinosaurs: Life in the Triassic." Or, please oh please, a volume on non-dinosaur archosaurs. Or a volume devoted to mammal-like reptiles, a subject which currently is only addressed by specialist tomes, most way out of date. Make this happen!

This work covers the groups of animals that existed prior to the more familiar dinosaurs. Many of these lineages are extinct, having been wiped out by the end Permian event, and most are generally less well publicized than the animals that came to rule the world later. The book is extremely well illustrated and brings out the diversity of forms that these groups exhibited. Even a quick browse will excite the readers with a wide range of swimming, crawling, running and gliding

animals. Highly enjoyable and well worth adding to any collection on prehistoric animals.

I'm an avid "Dinophile" and have read dozens of books about them and paleontology and geology in general. In recent times I have been intrigued by the discoveries in the advent of tetrapods adapting from aquatic existence to terrestrial life. This has been a fairly unknown and understudied area until recently. The discovery of Tiktaalik and other related "tetrapodomorphs" has done much to clarify this area of study and shows it to be a fascinating area of research. I read with great interest J. Clack's "Gaining Ground" and she now has a second edition in print. This whole field has suddenly become a scene of intense interest. For that reason Dr. Steyer's book is of great use for the devoted amateur that gives us an overview of some of the confusing recent findings. He spends much time in discussing the proposed evolution of tetrapodomorphs to tetrapods and why the distinction is made. This is the key value of the book and has at least given his readers a background for works to come. The rest of the book gives light to a mostly ignored area of terrestrial life; early tetrapods, amphibians and early, often highly specialized, little reptiles before the big dinos took over. As another reviewer noted you will need to refer to your Comparative Anatomy books for reference to this bone and that digit, but that's part of the fun of reading science books after all. Yes some of the opinions expressed by the author I think are challengeable and no doubt will be altered. (How many times has this occurred in Paleontology?) But I loved the book and will refer to it often. The illustrations are really great; color, sketches, diagrams and the "live" pictures take you there and are beautifully done.

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