# THE LIFE OF VERTEBRATES

J. Z. YOUNG

THIRD EDITION

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### Preface to the Third Edition

In the last twenty years there has been an immense addition of knowledge on nearly all aspects of vertebrate life, especially of physiology and ecology. In this new edition we have introduced much new detail, especially about the nervous and endocrine systems and behaviour. It has been found possible to incorporate many new facts within the original framework of the book and this has confirmed my belief that the best way to study animals is to look at all aspects of their lives. To understand the special features of the carpus or the cortex of an animal you need to know how it lives.

Fortunately there have not been great changes in knowledge of gross anatomy and we have kept the descriptions of skeletons and dissections of a few types, and the beautiful drawings made by the late Miss E.R. Turlington. The facts set out in these sections of the book are hard to obtain elsewhere. We have also retained the systematic classifications; even though controversial they provide a framework for which many workers may be grateful. We have not always followed recent cladistic revisions since we believe that classifications that emphasize grades of organization are useful, at least for the beginner.

The whole book is organized around the theme that mechanisms of homeostasis have become increasingly more complex during vertebrate evolution, allowing life to continue under conditions not possible before. Discussion of this involves questions of value about the aims of life and the meanings of 'higher' and 'lower'. Such topics are often avoided by scientists but no honest treatment of living organisms can avoid them. I believe that emphasis on the pervasive tendency to selfmaintenance (homeostasis), and its progressive evol-

ution, allows us to organize our study of the life of vertebrates and also provides a much-needed guiding light in considering the life of man.

A synoptic view of the lives of animals can perhaps be given only in a work produced by a single author, but this necessarily involves the limitations imposed by his ignorance, of which I have been acutely conscious. I must apologize to those scientists who find their work misquoted (or omitted altogether) and also to any students who are consequently misled. We have added many more bibliographical references so that readers can consult original sources.

In mitigating the dangers of inaccuracy I have been fortunate to have the advice of those listed on page vi on their special topics. Several of them found it hard to accept my point of view, but they have all helped to remove many errors; I alone am responsible for those that remain. It may be some consolation that a single author can provide his own point of view on controversial topics.

Above all I am grateful to Dr M. Nixon. Without her help this revision would not have been possible. She has sought out the most recent papers on an immense variety of topics and has undertaken all the laborious work of editing and correcting. We are both of us grateful to Miss P.R. Stephens for help in many ways, and also to R.M. Young who acts as our secretary.

As usual we have to thank all those at the Oxford University Press who have given us so much kindly help.

London May 1981 J.Z.Y.

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## From the Preface to the First Edition

THE history of textbooks is often dismissed by the contemptuous assertion that they all copy each other—and especially each other's mistakes. Inspection of this book will quickly confirm that this is true, but there is nevertheless an interest to be obtained from such a study, because textbooks embody an attitude of mind; they show what sort of knowledge the writer thinks can be conveyed about the subject-matter. It may be that they are more important than at first appears in furthering or preventing the change of ideas on any theme.

The results of the studies of scholars on the subject of vertebrates have been summarized in a series of comprehensive textbooks during the past hundred years. Most of these works are planned on the lines laid down by the books of Gegenbaur (1859), Owen (1866), and Wiedersheim (1883), lines that derive from a pre-evolutionary tradition. This partly explains the curiosity that in spite of the great importance of evolutionary doctrine for vertebrate studies, and vice versa, vertebrate textbooks often do not deal directly with evolution. They derive their order from something even more fundamental than the evolutionary principle. The essential of any good textbook is that it should be both accurate and general. As Owen puts it in his Preface: 'In the choice of facts I have been guided by their authenticity and their applicability to general principles.' The chief of the principles he adopted was 'to guide or help in the power of apprehending the unity which underlies the diversity of animal structures, to show in these structures the evidence of a predetermining Will, producing them in reference to a final purpose, and to indicate the direction and degrees in which organisation, in subserving such Will, rises from the general to the particular'. He confessed 'ignorance of the mode of operation of the natural law of their succession on the earth. But that it is an "orderly succession"-and also "progressive"-is evident from actual knowledge of extinct species."

These principles were essentially sound, and Owen's treatment was to a large extent the basis of the work that appeared after the Darwinian revolution. In English,

following the translation of Wiedersheim's book by W. N. Parker. (1886) we have H. J. Parker and Haswell's work, now in its 6th edition. The books of Kingsley and Neal and Rand are in essentially the same tradition, though they incorporate much new work, especially from the neurological studies of Johnston and Herrick. Further exact studies on these same general morphological lines made possible the books of Goodrich (1930) and de Beer (1935), which have provided the morphological background for the present work. Throughout these works on Comparative Anatomy the emphasis is on the evolution of the form of each organ system rather than on the change of the organization of the life of the animal as a whole.

Meanwhile many other treatises appeared dealing with the life and habits of the animals, rather than with morphological principles. Among these we may mention Bronn's Tierreich (1859 onwards), the Cambridge Natural History, and many works dealing with particular groups of vertebrates. The palaeontologists produced their own series of textbooks, mainly descriptive, such as those of Zittel and Smith Woodward, culminating in Romer's admirably detailed and concise book, to which the present work owes very much. The results of embryological work have been summarized by Graham Kerr (1919), Korscheldt and Heider (1931), Brachet (1935), Huxley and de Beer (1934), and Weiss (1939). among others. Unfortunately there has been little summarizing of what is commonly called the comparative physiology of vertebrates. Winterstein's great Handbuch der vergleichenden Physiologie (1912) covers much detailed evidence, but comes no nearer than do the comparative anatomists to giving us a picture of the evolution of the life of the whole organism.

All of these books deal in some way with the evolution of vertebrates, and yet curiously enough they speak of it very little. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that they leave the student to decide for himself what has been demonstrated by their studies. Huxley's *Anatomy of Vertebrated Animals* (1871) is an exception in that it deals with the animals rather than their parts, and at a

more popular level. Brehm's *Thierleben* (1876) gives a picture of the life of the animals, though in this case not of their underlying organization. Kükenthal's great *Handbuch der Zoologie* has the aim of synthesizing a variety of knowledge about each animal-group, and some of the volumes dealing with vertebrates make fascinating reading—notably that of Streseman on birds. But the size of the work and the multiplicity of authors make it impossible for any general picture of vertebrate life to appear from the mass of details.

The position is, then, that we have good descriptions of the structure, physiology, and development of vertebrates, of the discoveries of the palaeontologists and accounts of vertebrate natural history, but that there is no work that attempts to define the organization of the whole life and its evolution in all its aspects. Indeed, none of these works defines what is being studied or tries to alter the direction of investigation-all authors seem prepared to agree that biological study is adequately expressed through the familiar disciplines of anatomy, physiology, palaeontology, embryology, or natural history. In passing, we may note the extraordinary fact that there are no detailed works on the comparative histology or biochemistry of vertebrates-surely most fascinating fields for the future, as is, indeed, hinted by the attempts that have been made in older works, such as that of Ranvier (1878), and the newer ones of Baldwin (1937 and 1945).

The present book has gradually grown into an attempt to define what is meant by the life of vertebrates and by the evolution of that life. Put in a more old-fashioned way, this represents an attempt to give a combined account of the embryology, anatomy, phy-

siology, biochemistry, palaeontology, and ecology of all vertebrates. One of the results of the work has been to convince me more than ever that these divisions are not acceptable. All of their separate studies are concerned with the central fact of biology, that life goes on, and I have tried to combine their results into a single work on the way in which this continuity is maintained.

A glance through the book will show that I have not been successful in producing anything very novel—others will certainly be able to go much farther, and in particular to introduce to a greater extent facts about the evolution of the chemical and energy interchanges of vertebrates, here almost omitted! However, I have very much enjoyed the attempt, which has provided the stimulus to try to find out many things that I have always wanted to know.

For any one person to cover such a wide field is bound to lead to inexactness and error in many places. I have tried to verify from nature as often as possible, but a large amount has been copied, no doubt often wrongly. Throughout, the aim has been to provide wherever possible an idea of the actual observations that have been made, as well as the interpretations placed upon them. A proper appraisal of general theories can only be reached if there is first a knowledge of the actual materials, which is the characteristic feature of scientific observation. A book such as the present has value only in so far as it leads the reader to make his own observations and helps him to know the world for himself.

J.Z.Y.

1950

## Contents

Chapter 1 Evolution of life in relation to climatic and geological change	<ul><li>25.2. The end of the Mesozoic</li><li>25.3. Cenozoic climates</li></ul>	27
	26. Correlations of climate and evolutionary	
1. The need for generality in zoology	change	30
2. What is evolution?	27. Summary	31
3. Questions about evolution		
4. Is variation between demes the basis of evolution?	Chapter 2 The general plan of chordate organization: Amphioxus	
5. Genetic drift	1. The variety of chordate life	32
6. Can microevolution alter basic organization	2. Classification of chordates	32
	3. Amphioxus, a generalized chordate	33
7. Is the evolution of molecules adaptive? The	Muscle fibres and movement	34
	5. Skeletal structures	35
	6. Skin	
9. Methods of measuring rate of evolutionary		36
	7. Mouth and pharynx and the control of feeding	37
	8. Circulation	
9.2 Rates of change of molecules. Do they		40
provide an evolutionary clock?	9. Excretory system 10. Nervous system	41
		41
	11. Gonada and development	46
1.1	12. The basic chordate organization	49
11. Do species originate gradually?	The contract of the contract o	
12. Classification 1	Chapter 5 The origin of chordates from	
13. What do we mean by 'higher' and 'lower'	filter feeding animals	
animals?	Invertebrate relatives of the chordates	50
14. Colonization of new habitats	2 Subphylum Hemichordata	
15. The increasing complexity of life	(- Stomochordata)	52
16. The progression of life from the water to more	3. Class Pterobranchia	56
difficult environments	4. Subphylum Tunicata (= Urochordata)	57
17. The changing surface of the earth	5. Development of ascidians	62
18. Components of the earth	6 Various forms of tunicate	63
19. The earth's magnetic field	7 Class Ascidiacea	63
20. Plate tectonics and continental drift	8 Class Thaliacea	64
21. Evolution of the continents	9. Class Larvacea	67
22. Changes of climate	10 The formation of the chardates	69
23. Changes in solar output and events in the		
galaxy 24	Chapter 4 The vertebrates without jaws.	
24. Changes in the earth's orbit	OFFICE	
25. A summary of climatic history		75
25.1 Palaeozoic and Mesozoic periods		75

X	C	0	n	le	ni	S

5. Skeleton of lampreys 6. Alimentary canal of lampreys 7. Blood system of lampreys 8. Exeretory system and osmoregulation in lampreys 9. Reproductive system of lampreys 10. Nervous system of lampreys 11. The pineal eyes 12. Pituitary body and hypophysial sac 13. Adrenal tissue in lampreys 14. Lateral line organs of lampreys 15. Vestibular organs of lampreys 16. Paired eyes of lampreys 17. Skin photoreceptors 18. Habits and life history of lampreys 19. The ammocoete larva 10. Paired species of lampreys 19. The ammocoete larva 10. Paired species of lampreys 10. Introduction: the success of the systematics 10. Introduction: the success of the shese 10. Introduction: the success of the 2. The trout 10. The rout 10. Swim-bladder 10. Swim-bladder 10. The swimming of fishes 10. Skin of elasmobranchs 11. The pine of the sound and salmon and breeding habits 11. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. The swiff and branchial arches 14. The pictulatory system 15. Vestibular organs of lampreys 16. Paired species of lampreys 17. Skin photoreceptors 18. Habits and life history of lampreys 19. Paired species of lampreys 10. Vestibular organs of lampreys 10. The mastery of the fishes 10. Introduction: the success of the 2. The rout 10. The skull of bony fishes 10. Skin of elasmobranchs 11. The elasmobranchs 12. Pituitary gland 13. Other endocrine glands 14. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 15. Receptors for life in the water 16. Eyes 17. Lateral increvous system 18. Endocrine glands 18. Subclass 2 Actinopterygii; Infra 19. Nervous system 19. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 19. Nervous system 19. Skin of clasmobranchs 19. Subclass 2 Actinopterygii; Infra 10. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 10. Infraclass 2: Holostei 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Pituitary gland 13. Other endocrine glands 14. Lateral glands 15. Lateral glands 16. Chapter 7 The mastery of the fishes 17. Th		Agnatha	76	of Chandrichthyas	tion
6. Alimentary canal of lampreys 7. Blood system of lampreys 8. Excretory system and osmoregulation in lampreys 9. Reproductive system of lampreys 10. Nervous system of lampreys 11. The pineal eyes 12. Pituitary body and hypophysial sac 13. Adrenal tissue in lampreys 14. Lateral line organs of lampreys 15. Vestibular organs of lampreys 16. Paired eyes of lampreys 17. Skin photoreceptors 18. Habits and life history of lampreys 19. The ammocoete larva 20. Paired species of lampreys, a problem in systematics 21. Hag fishes, order Myxinoidea 22. Fossil Agnatha, Heterostraci, the earliest known vertebrates 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids  Chapter 5 Fishes 1. Gnathostomata 2. The elasmobranchs: introduction 3. The swimming of fishes 4. Respiration 5. Vertebral column and fins of bo exterbral column and fins of bo extrebral column and fins of bo exterbral plants 11. The cases of trout and salmon and breeding habits 12. Pituitary gland 13. The swill and branchial arches 14. The brain of bouy fishes 15. Receptors for life in the water expenses 16. Eyes 17. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 18. Expertation 18. Subclass 2: Actinopterygii; Infra 19. Chemical system 19. The cannal nerves of elasmobranchs 110. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 1110. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 1121. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 1122. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 1123. Under 1: Palaeoniscoidei 1124. Light exterbrate in the value of the subclass			76	of Chondrichthyes	
8. Excretory system and somoregulation in lampreys  9. Reproductive system of lampreys  10. Nervous system of lampreys  11. The pineal eyes  12. Pituitary body and hypophysial sac  13. Adrenal tissue in lampreys  14. Lateral line organs of lampreys  15. Vestibular organs of lampreys  16. Paired eyes of lampreys  17. Skin photoreceptors  18. Habits and life history of lampreys  19. The ammocoete larva  20. Paired species of lampreys, a problem in systematics  21. Hag fishes, order Myxinoidea  22. Fossil Agnatha, Heterostraci, the earliest known vertebrates  23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids  Chapter 5 Fishes  1. Gnathostomata  2. The elasmobranchs: introduction  3. The swimming of fishes  1. Gnathostomata  2. The elasmobranchs  5. Vertebral column and fins of boo him with the production in Reproduction  10. Reproduction  11. Races of trout and salmon and breeding habits  12. Pituitary gland  13. Other endocrine glands  14. The brain of bony fishes  15. Receptors for life in the water flow in the w				1. The early gnathostomes	150
8. Excretory system and osmoregulation in lampreys 10. Nervous system of lampreys 11. The pineal eyes 12. Pituitary body and hypophysial sac 13. Adrenal tissue in lampreys 14. Lateral line organs of lampreys 15. Vestibular organs of lampreys 16. Paired eyes of lampreys 17. Skin photoreceptors 18. Habits and life history of lampreys 19. The ammocoete larva 20. Paired species of lampreys, a problem in systematics 21. Hag fishes, order Myxinoidea 22. Fossil Agnatha, Heterostraci, the earliest known vertebrates 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids  Chapter 5 Fishes 1. Gnathostomata 2. The elasmobranchs: introduction 3. The swimming of fishes 4. The hydromechanics of fish propulsion 5. Equilibrium of fishes in water; the functions of the fins 6. Skin of elasmobranchs 7. The skull and branchial arches 8. The jaws 9. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 14. The criculatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Equilibrium of fishes 18. The jaws 19. Skates and rays 20. Chemical especies in elasmobranch ever fishes 21. Introduction: the success of the 2. The trout 22. The trout 23. The swill and anaspids 24. Respiration 25. Vertebral column and fins of bo 6. Alimentary canal 26. Vertebral column and fins of bo 6. Alimentary canal 27. Swim-bladder 28. Circulatory system 29. Kingva and osmoregulation 29. Vertebral column and fins of bo 6. Alimentary canal 20. The trout 21. The delasmobranchs 22. Pituitary gland 23. Other endocrine glands 24. The brain of bony fishes 25. Receptors for life in the water 26. Eyes 27. Touch and temperature senses 28. Skates and rays 29. Paradyodont (:= Holocephali) 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Touch and temperature senses 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Dehaviour patterns of fishes 24. Characteristics of elasmobranchs 25. Infraclass 2. Actinopterygii; Infra 27. Chapter 8 The evolution of th				2. Classification	150
Reproductive system of lampreys 9. Reproductive system of lampreys 10. Nervous system of lampreys 11. The pineal eyes 12. Pituitary body and hypophysial sac 13. Adreal tissue in lampreys 14. Lateral line organs of lampreys 15. Vestibular organs of lampreys 16. Paired eyes of lampreys 17. Skin photoreceptors 18. Habits and life history of lampreys 19. The ammocoset larva 20. Paired species of lampreys, a problem in systematics 21. Hag fishes, order Myxinoidea 22. Fossil Agnatha, Heterostraci, the earliest known vertebrates 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids 24. The rout 25. The stable of bony fishes 26. Gradian of the fins 27. The elasmobranchs: introduction 28. The swimming of fishes 29. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 29. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 29. The gaun of elasmobranchs 20. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 21. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 22. Respiration 23. The gut of elasmobranchs 24. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 25. The jaws 26. Skin of elasmobranchs 27. The skull and branchial arches 28. The jaws 29. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 29. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 29. Respiration 29. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 20. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 21. Touch and temperature senses 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. Chapter 8 The evolution of be chapted in fishes 25. Chapter 8 The evolution of be chapted in fishes 26. Chapter 8 The evolution of be chapted in fishes 27. Chapter 8 The evolution of be chapted in fishes 28. Skates and rays 29. Bradyodonti (= Holocephali) 20. Tendencies in elasmobranch evolution: the success of the fishes 21. Introduction: the success of the fishes 22. The trout 23. The skull of bony fishes 24. Respiration 25. Vertebral column and fins of bo exidute the fishes 26. Circulatory system 27. Swim-bladder 28. Circulatory system 28. The industry gland 29. Fituitary gland 21. The brain of bony fishes 21. The train of bony fishes 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. Chapt			82	3. Placodermi	152
9. Reproductive system of lampreys 10. Nervous system of lampreys 11. The pineal eyes 12. Pituitary body and hypophysial sac 13. Adrenal tissue in lampreys 14. Lateral line organs of lampreys 15. Vestibular organs of lampreys 16. Paired eyes of lampreys 17. Skin photoreceptors 18. Habits and life history of lampreys 19. The ammocoete larva 10. Paired species of lampreys, a problem in systematics 10. Hag fishes, order Myxinoidea 11. Introduction: the success of the shess 11. Introduction: the success of the success of the systematics 12. Fossil Agnatha, Heterostraci, the earliest known vertebrates 12. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids 13. The skill of bony fishes 14. The hydromechanics of fish propulsion 15. Equilibrium of fishes in water; the functions of the fins 16. Skin of elasmobranchs 17. The skull and branchial arches 18. The jaws 19. Skin of elasmobranchs 10. The oranial nerves of elasmobranchs 11. Introduction: the success of the success o			0.0	4. Characteristics of elasmobranchs	152
10. Nervous system of lampreys 11. The pineal eyes 12. Pituitary body and hypophysial sac 13. Adrenal tissue in lampreys 14. Lateral line organs of lampreys 15. Vestibular organs of lampreys 16. Paired eyes of lampreys 17. Skin photoreceptors 18. Habits and life history of lampreys 19. The ammocoete larva 20. Paired species of lampreys, a problem in systematics 21. Hag fishes, order Myxinoidea 22. Fossil Agnatha, Heterostraci, the earliest known vertebrates 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids 24. The elasmobranchs: introduction 25. The elasmobranchs: introduction 26. Alimentary canal 27. Widneys and osmoregulation 28. The skull of bony fishes 29. Kidneys and osmoregulation 29. Pituitary gland 20. Paired species of lampreys, a problem in systemsatics 21. Hag fishes, order Myxinoidea 22. Fossil Agnatha, Heterostraci, the earliest known vertebrates 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids 24. The elasmobranchs: introduction 25. Fossil Agnatha, Heterostraci, the earliest known vertebrates 26. Circulatory system 27. Kidneys and osmoregulation 28. Fossil aphatis 29. Kidneys and osmoregulation 29. Fituitary gland 20. Pituitary gland 21. The pro-diction and salmon and breeding habits 21. The skull and branchial arches 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 24. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 25. The skull and branchial arches 26. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 27. The circulatory system 28. Sepiration 29. Pro-otic somites and eye muscles 21. Touch and temperature senses 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. The circulatory system 25. Introduction: the success of the fishes 26. Alimentary canal 27. The skull of bony fishes 28. Katates and rays 29. Provous system 29. Kidneys and osmoregulation and excetory system 21. Touch and hermodocine in fishes 21. Touch and hearing of fishes 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. The patent patterns of fishes 25. Infraclass 2: Holostei 26. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 27. Chapter 8.		A. U		5. Palaeozoic elasmobranchs. Cladoselachii	152
11. The pineal eyes 12. Pituitary body and hypophysial sac 13. Adreand tissue in lampreys 14. Lateral line organs of lampreys 15. Vestibular organs of lampreys 16. Paired eyes of lampreys 17. Skin photoreceptors 18. Habits and life history of lampreys 19. The ammocoete larva 20. Paired species of lampreys, a problem in systematics 21. Hag fishes, order Myxinoidea 22. Fossil Agnatha, Heterostraci, the earliest known vertebrates 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids 24. The elasmobranchs: introduction 25. The swill of bony fishes 26. Alimentary canal 27. Swim-bladder 28. The elasmobranchs: introduction 38. The swimming of fishes 49. Kidneys and osmoregulation 40. The hydromechanics of fish propulsion 40. Equilibrium of fishes in water; the functions of the fins 40. Skin of elasmobranchs 40. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 41. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 42. Respiration 43. The sut of elasmobranchs 44. The circulatory system 45. Immunology in fishes 46. Osmoregulation and excretory system 47. Genital system 48. Skates and rays 49. Bradyodonti (= Holocephali) 40. Tendencies in elasmobranch exc 46. Hothery of the fishes 41. Introduction: the success of the fishes 41. Introduction: the success of the fishes 42. The skull of bony fishes 43. The skull of bony fishes 44. Respiration 45. Swim-bladder 46. Circulatory system 46. Alimentary canal 47. Swim-bladder 48. Circulatory system 49. Kidneys and osmoregulation 49. Kidneys and osmoregulation 40. The brain of bony fishes 41. The brain of bony fishes 42. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 43. Sound production in fishes 44. The circulatory system 45. Immunology in fishes 46. Chemoreceptors for life in the water 47. Swim-bladder 48. Circulatory system 49. Kidneys and osmoregulation 40. The brain of bony fishes 41. The brain of bony				6. Mesozoic sharks. Selachii	154
12. Pituitary body and hypophysial sac 13. Adrenal tissue in lampreys 14. Lateral line organs of lampreys 15. Vestibular organs of lampreys 16. Paired eyes of lampreys 17. Skin photoreceptors 18. Habits and life history of lampreys 19. The ammocoete larva 10. Paired species of lampreys, a problem in systematics 21. Hag fishes, order Myxinoidea 22. Fossil Agnatha, Heterostraci, the earliest known vertebrates 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids  Chapter 5 Fishes 1. Gnathostomata 2. The elasmobranchs: introduction 3. The swimming of fishes 1. Gnathostomata 2. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The gut of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. Other endocrine glands 14. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Eyes 22. Ears 23. Behaviour of sharks 24. Infraclass 2: Telosotei				7. Modern sharks	150
13. Adrenal tissue in lampreys 14. Lateral line organs of lampreys 15. Vestibular organs of lampreys 16. Paired eyes of lampreys 17. Skin photoreceptors 18. Habits and life history of lampreys 19. The ammocoete larva 20. Paired species of lampreys, a problem in systematics 21. Hag fishes, order Myxinoidea 22. Fossil Agnatha, Heterostraci, the earliest known vertebrates 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids 24. The elasmobranchs: introduction 25. The swimming of fishes 26. The hydromechanics of fish propulsion 27. The swimming of fishes 28. The jaws 29. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 29. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 20. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 21. The gut of elasmobranchs 22. Respiration 23. Descentation of the vertebrate head 24. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 25. The gut of elasmobranchs 26. Respiration 27. The sun dearnooptic fishes 28. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 29. Respiration 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Introduction: the success of the fishes 21. Introduction: the success of the services of the fishes 22. The trout 23. The skull of bony fishes 24. Respiration 25. Vertebral column and fins of boto Alimentary canal 26. Alimentary canal 27. Swim-bladder 28. Circulatory system 29. Kidneys and osmoregulation 29. Receptors for unt and salmon and breeding habits 21. Pituitary gland 21. The brain of bony fishes 22. Receptors for life in the water 23. Sound production in fishes 24. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 25. Receptors for life in the water 26. Eyes 27. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 28. The just of elasmobranchs 29. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 29. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 29. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 29. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Touch and temperature senses 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. Chapter 8 The evolution of but a Chapter of the fishes 25. The samble of the fishes 26. Chapter 3 The evolution of but a Chapter of the fishes 27. Tou			92	8. Skates and rays	15
13. Adrenal tissue in lampreys 14. Lateral line organs of lampreys 15. Vestibular organs of lampreys 16. Paired eyes of lampreys 17. Skin photoreceptors 18. Habits and life history of lampreys 19. The ammocoete larva 20. Paired species of lampreys, a problem in systematics 21. Hag fishes, order Myxinoidea 22. Fossil Agnatha, Heterostraci, the earliest known vertebrates 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids  Chapter 5 Fishes 1. Gnathostomata 2. The elasmobranchs: introduction 3. The swimming of fishes 4. The hydromechanics of fish propulsion 5. Equilibrium of fishes in water; the functions of the fins 6. Skin of elasmobranchs 7. The skull and branchial arches 8. The jaws 9. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. Interduction; the success of the 2. The trout 3. The skull of bony fishes 4. Respiration 5. Vertebral column and fins of bo 6. Alimentary canal 7. Swim-bladder 8. Circulatory system 9. Kidneys and osmoregulation 10. Reproduction 11. Races of trout and salmon and breeding habits 12. Pituitary gland 13. Other endocrine glands 14. The brain of bony fishes 15. Receptors for life in the water 16. Eyes 17. Ear and hearing of fishes 18. Sound production in fishes 19. The lateral line organs of fishes 20. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 21. Touch and temperature senses 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. Chapter 8 The evolution of b 25. Lolassification 26. Chapter 8 The evolution of b 27. Chapter 8 The evolution of b 28. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 39. Nervous system 30. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 31. Order 1: Palaeoniscoidei 31. Order 2: Acipenseroidei 31. Order 2: Acipenseroidei 31. Indrealass 2: Holostei 32. Infraclass 3: Teleostei			93		158
14. Lateral line organs of lampreys 15. Vestibular organs of lampreys 16. Paired eyes of lampreys 17. Skin photoreceptors 18. Habits and life history of lampreys 19. The ammocoete larva 20. Paired species of lampreys, a problem in systematics 21. Hag fishes, order Myxinoidea 22. Fossil Agnatha, Heterostraci, the earliest known vertebrates 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids 24. The swimming of fishes 25. The elasmobranchs: introduction 26. The swimming of fishes 27. The skull and branchial arches 28. The jaws 29. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 29. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 20. The gut of elasmobranchs 20. Chemoreceptors of lampreys 21. The gut of elasmobranchs 22. Respiration 23. The gut of elasmobranchs 24. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 25. The gut of elasmobranchs 26. Osmoregulation and excretory system 27. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 28. The gut of elasmobranchs 29. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 21. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 21. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 22. Respiration 23. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 24. The brain of bony fishes 25. Chapter 8 The evolution of brain of bony fishes 26. Chapter 8 The evolution of brain of bony fishes 27. Chapter 8 The evolution of brain of bony fishes 28. Chapter 8 The evolution of brain of bony fishes 29. Chapter 8 The evolution of brain of bony fishes 20. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme can be added to the control of the evolution of brain of bony fishes 29. Chapter 8 The evolution of brain of bony fishes 20. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme can be added to the control of the evolution of brain of bony fishes 21. Classification 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour of sharks 24. Infraclass 3: Teleostei	13. /	Adrenal tissue in lampreys	96		159
16. Paired eyes of lampreys 17. Skin photoreceptors 18. Habits and life history of lampreys 19. The ammocoete larva 20. Paired species of lampreys, a problem in systematics 21. Hag fishes, order Myxinoidea 22. Fossil Agnatha, Heterostraci, the earliest known vertebrates 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids 25. Fossil Agnatha, Heterostraci, the earliest known vertebrates 26. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids 27. Fishes 28. Chapter 5 Fishes 29. Chapter 5 Fishes 29. Chapter 5 Fishes 29. Chapter 6 Fishes 20. Chapter 7 The mastery of the fishes 20. Introduction: the success of the 2. The trout 2. The trout 2. The trout 2. The trout 2. The spirition 5. Vertebral column and fins of both Alimentary canal 7. Swim-bladder 8. Circulatory system 9. Kidneys and osmoregulation 10. Reproduction 11. Racces of trout and salmon and breeding habits 11. Pituitary gland 11. Pituitary gland 11. Pituitary gland 11. The brain of bony fishes 11. The brain of bony fishes 11. The brain of bony fishes 11. Fair and hearing of fishes 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 11. Fair and hearing of fishes 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 11. The criculatory system 11. The criculatory system 11. Imtroduction: the success of the 2. The trout 2. The trout 3. The skill of bony fishes 11. Chapter 8 The mastery of the sheap 12. The cube of the criculatory system 12. Pituitary gland 13. The study of fishes 12. Pituitary gland 13. Other endocrine glands 14. The brain of bony fishes 15. Receptors for life in the water 16. Eyes 17. Ear and hearing of fishes 18. Sound production in fishes 19. The lateral line organs of fishes 19. The lateral line organs of fishes 20. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 21. Touch and temperature senses 11. The criculatory system 11. Classification 11. Classification 11. Classification 11. Classification 11. Classification 11. Classification 11. Cla	14. I	Lateral line organs of lampreys	97		17.3
17. Skin photoreceptors 18. Habits and life history of lampreys 19. The ammocoete larva 20. Paired species of lampreys, a problem in systematics 21. Hag fishes, order Myxinoidea 22. Fossil Agnatha, Heterostraci, the earliest known vertebrates 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids 24. The clasmobranchs: introduction 25. The elasmobranchs: introduction 26. The elasmobranchs: introduction 27. The swimming of fishes 28. The hydromechanics of fish propulsion 29. Equilibrium of fishes in water; the functions of the fins 29. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 20. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 21. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 22. Respiration 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids 24. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 25. Infraclass 2: Hoolstei 26. Chemical system 27. Genital system 28. Endocrine glands 29. Lintroduction: the success of the 29. The trout 20. The trout 21. Introduction: the success of the 22. The trout 23. The skull of bony fishes 4. Respiration 24. Circulatory system 25. Kidneys and osmoregulation 26. Alimentary canal 27. Swim-bladder 28. Circulatory system 29. Kidneys and osmoregulation 29. Ptiuitary gland 20. Other endocrine glands 21. The brain of bony fishes 22. Fac and hearing of fishes 23. Sound production in fishes 24. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 25. Lemoreceptors. Taste and sme 26. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 27. Touch and temperature senses 28. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 29. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 21. Touch and temperature senses 21. Touch and temperature senses 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. Chapter 8. The evolution of both in the study of the st	15. 1	Vestibular organs of lampreys	97		
17. Skin photoreceptors 18. Habits and life history of lampreys 19. The ammocoete larva 20. Paired species of lampreys, a problem in systematics 21. Hag fishes, order Myxinoidea 22. Fossil Agnatha, Heterostraci, the earliest known vertebrates 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids 24. The clasmobranchs: introduction 25. The elasmobranchs: introduction 26. The elasmobranchs: introduction 27. The swimming of fishes 28. The hydromechanics of fish propulsion 29. Equilibrium of fishes in water; the functions of the fins 29. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 20. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 21. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 22. Respiration 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids 24. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 25. Infraclass 2: Hoolstei 26. Chemical system 27. Genital system 28. Endocrine glands 29. Lintroduction: the success of the 29. The trout 20. The trout 21. Introduction: the success of the 22. The trout 23. The skull of bony fishes 4. Respiration 24. Circulatory system 25. Kidneys and osmoregulation 26. Alimentary canal 27. Swim-bladder 28. Circulatory system 29. Kidneys and osmoregulation 29. Ptiuitary gland 20. Other endocrine glands 21. The brain of bony fishes 22. Fac and hearing of fishes 23. Sound production in fishes 24. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 25. Lemoreceptors. Taste and sme 26. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 27. Touch and temperature senses 28. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 29. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 21. Touch and temperature senses 21. Touch and temperature senses 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. Chapter 8. The evolution of both in the study of the st	16. I	Paired eyes of lampreys	98	Chantar 7 The meeters of the water De	
18. Habits and life history of lampreys 19. The ammococte larva 20. Paired species of lampreys, a problem in systematics 21. Hag fishes, order Myxinoidea 22. Fossil Agnatha, Heterostraci, the earliest known vertebrates 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids 24. The clasmobranchs: introduction 25. The elasmobranchs: introduction 26. The elasmobranchs: introduction 27. The elasmobranchs introduction 28. The swill ind branchial arches 29. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 20. The skull and branchial arches 21. The skull and branchial arches 22. The skull and branchial arches 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids 24. The playmore definition of the vertebrate head 25. The elasmobranchs 26. Skin of elasmobranchs 27. The skull and branchial arches 28. The jaws 29. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 20. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 21. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 22. Respiration 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids 24. The lateral line organs of fishes 25. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 26. Alimentary canal 27. Swim-bladder 28. Circulatory system 29. Kidneys and osmoregulation 29. Kidneys and osmoregulation 20. Other endocrine glands 21. The brain of bony fishes 21. The brain of bony fishes 22. Ears 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids 24. The brain of bony fishes 25. Receptors for life in the water 26. Eyes 27. Ear and hearing of fishes 28. Sound production in fishes 29. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 29. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 29. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 20. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 21. Touch and temperature senses 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. Chapter 8. The evolution of head of the condition of the con					ліу
19. The ammocoete larva 20. Paired species of lampreys, a problem in systematics 21. Hag fishes, order Myxinoidea 22. Fossil Agnatha, Heterostraci, the earliest known vertebrates 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids  Chapter 5 Fishes  1. Gnathostomata 2. The elasmobranchs: introduction 3. The swimming of fishes 4. The hydromechanics of fish propulsion 5. Equilibrium of fishes in water; the functions of the fins 6. Skin of elasmobranchs 7. The skull and branchial arches 8. The jaws 9. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 14. The circulatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Eyes 22. Ears 23. Behaviour of sharks 24. Infraclass 2: Holostei 25. Infraclass 3: Teleostei			99		
20. Paired species of lampreys, a problem in systematics 21. Hag fishes, order Myxinoidea 22. Fossil Agnatha, Heterostraci, the earliest known vertebrates 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids  Chapter 5 Fishes  1. Gnathostomata 2. The elasmobranchs: introduction 3. The swimming of fishes 4. The hydromechanics of fish propulsion 5. Equilibrium of fishes in water; the functions of the fins 6. Skin of elasmobranchs 7. The skull and branchial arches 8. The jaws 9. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 14. The circulatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Eyes 22. Ears 23. Behaviour of sharks 24. Infraclass 2: Holostei 25. Infraclass 3: Teleostei				1. Introduction: the success of the bony fishes	161
systematics 21. Hag fishes, order Myxinoidea 22. Fossil Agnatha, Heterostraci, the earliest known vertebrates 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids  24. The elasmotrachs: introduction 25. The elasmobranchs: introduction 26. The hydromechanics of fish propulsion 27. The skull and branchial arches 28. The jaws 29. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 20. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 21. The circulatory system 22. Respiration 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids 24. The elasmobranchs 25. The swimming of fishes 26. Skin of elasmobranchs 27. The skull and branchial arches 28. The jaws 29. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 20. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 21. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 22. Respiration 23. The skull and branchial arches 24. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 25. The jaws 26. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 27. Touch and temperature senses 28. The circulatory system 29. Subclass 1. Acanthodii 20. Chemical system 21. Genital system 21. Classification 21. Classification 22. Subclass 1. Acanthodii 23. Subclass 2. Actinopterygii; Infra- 24. Infraclass 2: Holostei 25. Infraclass 3: Teleostei 26. Alimentary canal 27. Swim-bladder 28. Circulatory system 21. Reaces of trout and salmon and breeding habits 29. Fetulatry gland 21. The brain of bony fishes 21. The brain of bony fishes 22. Autonomic nervous fishes 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. The brain of bony fishes 25. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 26. Chapter 8 The evolution of bony fishes 27. The skull and branchial arches 28. The jaws 29. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 30. The skull and branchial arches 31. The gut of elasmobranchs 31. The gut of elasmobranchs 31. The jaws and osmoregulation 31. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 31. The brain of bony fishes 31. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 31. The decoration of fishes 31. Classification 31. Classification 32. Subclass 1. Acanthodii 33. Subclass 2. Actinopterygii; Infra- 34. Infraclass 2: Holostei 34. Infraclass 3: Teleostei				2. The trout	161
21. Hag fishes, order Myxinoidea 22. Fossil Agnatha, Heterostraci, the earliest known vertebrates 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids  Chapter 5 Fishes  1. Gnathostomata 2. The elasmobranchs: introduction 3. The swimming of fishes 4. The hydromechanics of fish propulsion 5. Equilibrium of fishes in water; the functions of the fins 6. Skin of elasmobranchs 7. The skull and branchial arches 8. The jaws 9. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The circulatory system 12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 14. The circulatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 19. Chapter 8 The evolution of his Chapter 8 The evolution of			103	3. The skull of bony fishes	163
22. Fossil Agnatha, Heterostraci, the earliest known vertebrates 23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids  23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids  Chapter 5 Fishes  1. Gnathostomata 2. The elasmobranchs: introduction 3. The swimming of fishes 4. The hydromechanics of fish propulsion 5. Equilibrium of fishes in water; the functions of the fins 6. Skin of elasmobranchs 7. The skull and branchial arches 8. The jaws 9. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 14. The circulatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 100. Alimentary canal 107. Swim-bladder 108. Circulatory system 119. Kidneys and osmoregulation 109. Reproduction 110. Reproduction 111. Races of trout and salmon and breeding habits 112. Pituitary gland 113. Other endocrine glands 114. The brain of bony fishes 115. Receptors for life in the water 120. Leyes 121. Ear and hearing of fishes 122. Ears 123. Behaviour patterns of fishes 124. Chapter 8 The evolution of hamade in the condition of the substitution of the				4. Respiration	164
known vertebrates  23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids  Chapter 5 Fishes  1. Gnathostomata 2. The elasmobranchs: introduction 3. The swimming of fishes 4. The hydromechanics of fish propulsion 5. Equilibrium of fishes in water; the functions of the fins 6. Skin of elasmobranchs 7. The skull and branchial arches 8. The jaws 9. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 14. The circulatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Eyes 22. Behaviour of sharks 23. Behaviour of sharks 24. Infraclass 2: Holostei 25. Infraclass 3: Teleostei			103	5. Vertebral column and fins of bony fishes	165
23. Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids  109  7. Swim-bladder  8. Circulatory system  9. Kidneys and osmoregulation  10. Reproduction  11. Races of trout and salmon and breeding habits  12. Pituitary gland  13. Other endocrine glands  14. The hydromechanics of fish propulsion  15. Equilibrium of fishes in water; the functions of the fins  16. Skin of elasmobranchs  17. The skull and branchial arches  18. The jaws  19. Segmentation of the vertebrate head  10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles  11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs  12. Respiration  13. Other endocrine glands  14. The brain of bony fishes  15. Receptors for life in the water  16. Eyes  17. Ear and hearing of fishes  18. Sound production in fishes  19. The lateral line organs of fishes  20. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme  21. Touch and temperature senses  22. Autonomic nervous system  23. Behaviour patterns of fishes  16. Osmoregulation and excretory system  17. Genital system  18. Endocrine glands  19. Nervous system  20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs  11. Classification  12. Classification  13. Classification  14. The evolution of be  15. Receptors for life in the water  16. Eyes  20. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme  21. Touch and temperature senses  22. Autonomic nervous system  23. Behaviour patterns of fishes  24. Chapter 8 The evolution of be  25. Subclass 1: Acanthodii  26. Subclass 2 Actinopterygii; Infrational Subclass			107		166
Chapter 5 Fishes  1. Gnathostomata 2. The elasmobranchs: introduction 3. The swimming of fishes 4. The hydromechanics of fish propulsion 5. Equilibrium of fishes in water; the functions of the fins 6. Skin of elasmobranchs 7. The skull and branchial arches 8. The jaws 9. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 14. The brain of bony fishes 15. Receptors for life in the water 16. Eyes 17. Ear and hearing of fishes 18. Sound production in fishes 19. The lateral line organs of fishes 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 14. The circulatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 10. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 11. Classification 11. Races of trout and salmon and breeding habits 12. Pituitary gland 13. Other endocrine glands 14. The brain of bony fishes 15. Receptors for life in the water 16. Eyes 17. Ear and hearing of fishes 18. Sound production in fishes 19. The lateral line organs of fishes 20. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 21. Touch and temperature senses 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. Chapter 8 The evolution of habits 25. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 26. Eyes 27. Autonomic nervous system 28. Subclass 2: Actinopterygii; Infrational Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 29. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Eyes 22. Corder 2: Acipenseroidei 23. Order 1: Palaeoniscoidei 24. Infraclass 2: Holostei 25. Infraclass 3: Teleostei					168
Chapter 5 Fishes  1. Gnathostomata 2. The elasmobranchs: introduction 3. The swimming of fishes 4. The hydromechanics of fish propulsion 5. Equilibrium of fishes in water; the functions of the fins 6. Skin of elasmobranchs 7. The skull and branchial arches 8. The jaws 9. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 14. The pit of elasmobranchs 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Chapter 8 The evolution of but in fishes 19. Chapter 8 The evolution of but in fishes 19. Chapter 8 The evolution of but in fishes 19. Chapter 8 The evolution of but in fishes 19. Chapter 8 The evolution of but in fishes 10. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 11. Classification 12. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 13. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 14. Subclass 2 Actinopterygii; Infrational in Chondrostei 15. Eyes 16. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 17. Genical senses of elasmobranchs 18. Subclass 2 Actinopterygii; Infrational	23.	Osteostraci. Cephalaspids and anaspids	109	8. Circulatory system	168
Chapter 5 Fishes  1. Gnathostomata 1. The elasmobranchs: introduction 3. The swimming of fishes 4. The hydromechanics of fish propulsion 5. Equilibrium of fishes in water; the functions of the fins 6. Skin of elasmobranchs 7. The skull and branchial arches 8. The jaws 9. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 13. The circulatory system 13. The circulatory system 14. The circulatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 10. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 10. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 10. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 11. Raccs of trout and salmon and breeding habits 12. Pituitary gland 13. Other endocrine glands 14. The brain of bony fishes 15. Receptors for life in the water 16. Eyes 17. Ear and hearing of fishes 18. Sound production in fishes 19. The lateral line organs of fishes 20. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 21. Touch and temperature senses 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. Chapter 8 The evolution of boundaries in the water 25. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 26. Eyes 27. Autonomic nervous system 28. The evolution of boundaries in the water 29. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 29. Chapter 8 The evolution of boundaries in the water 29. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 29. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Eyes 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Subclass 2: Actinopterygii; Infrational Chapterygii; I					168
Chapter 5 Fishes  1. Gnathostomata 2. The elasmobranchs: introduction 3. The swimming of fishes 4. The hydromechanics of fish propulsion 5. Equilibrium of fishes in water; the functions of the fins 6. Skin of elasmobranchs 7. The skull and branchial arches 8. The jaws 9. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 13. Immunology in fishes 14. The circulatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 10. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 11. Classification 12. Subclass 2 Actinopterygii; Infratal Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 13. Order 1: Palaeoniscoidei 14. The brain of bony fishes 15. Receptors for life in the water 16. Eyes 17. Ear and hearing of fishes 18. Sound production in fishes 19. The lateral line organs of fishes 20. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 21. Touch and temperature senses 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. Chapter 8 The evolution of both of the circulatory system 25. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 26. Chapter 8 The evolution of both of the circulatory system 27. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 28. The jaws 29. Subclass 2 Actinopterygii; Infratal Chapter 8 The evolution of both of the circulatory system 29. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Order 1: Palaeoniscoidei 21. Eyes 22. Ears 23. Behaviour of sharks 24. Infraclass 3: Teleostei					169
1. Gnathostomata 2. The elasmobranchs: introduction 3. The swimming of fishes 4. The hydromechanics of fish propulsion 5. Equilibrium of fishes in water; the functions of the fins 6. Skin of elasmobranchs 7. The skull and branchial arches 8. The jaws 9. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 14. The circulatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Chapter 8 17. Ear and hearing of fishes 20. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 21. Touch and temperature senses 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. Chapter 8 25. The evolution of be 26. Chapter 8 27. The caption of the vertebrate head 28. The jaws 29. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 20. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 21. Touch and temperature senses 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. Chapter 8 25. The evolution of be 26. Chapter 8 27. The caption of the vertebrate head 28. The jaws 29. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 29. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 20. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 21. Touch and temperature senses 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. The circulatory system 25. Infraclass 1: Acanthodii 26. Chapter 8 27. The lateral line organs of fishes 28 29. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 29. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 20. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 21. Touch and temperature senses 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. The circulatory system 25. Infraclass 2 Actinopterygii; Infraclass 2. Order 2: Acipenseroidei 28. The dearning of fishes 29. The lateral line organs of fishes 20. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 21. Classification 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. The circulatory system 25. Infraclass 2: Actinopterygii; Infraclass 2: Holostei 28. The dearning of fishes 29. The lateral line organs of fishes 29. The lateral line organs of fishes 29. The lateral line organs of fish	Char	nter 5 Fishes			103
2. The elasmobranchs: introduction 3. The swimming of fishes 4. The hydromechanics of fish propulsion 5. Equilibrium of fishes in water; the functions of the fins 6. Skin of elasmobranchs 7. The skull and branchial arches 8. The jaws 9. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 13. The circulatory system 14. The cranial system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 10. Oher endocrine glands 11. The brain of bony fishes 12. Receptors for life in the water 13. Secund production in fishes 14. Sound production in fishes 15. Receptors for life in the water 16. Eyes 17. Ear and hearing of fishes 18. Sound production in fishes 19. The lateral line organs of fishes 10. Chemical nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Touch and temperature senses 12. Autonomic nervous system 13. Behaviour patterns of fishes 13. Chapter 8 The evolution of bound in the water 13. Chapter 8 The evolution of bound in the water 14. The brain of bony fishes 15. Receptors for life in the water 16. Eyes 17. Ear and hearing of fishes 18. Sound production in fishes 19. The lateral line organs of fishes 19. The lateral line organs of fishes 10. Chemical temperature senses 11. Touch and temperature senses 122. Autonomic nervous system 132. Behaviour patterns of fishes 133. Behaviour patterns of fishes 144. Chapter 8 The evolution of bound in the water 155. Receptors for life in the water 165. Eyes 165. Eyes 176. Eyes 177. Ear and hearing of fishes 187. Chemical hearing of fishes 187. Touch and temperature senses 199. The lateral line organs of fishes 199. The late					170
3. The swimming of fishes 4. The hydromechanics of fish propulsion 5. Equilibrium of fishes in water; the functions of the fins 6. Skin of elasmobranchs 7. The skull and branchial arches 8. The jaws 9. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 14. The circulatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 10. Oher endocrine glands 14. The brain of bony fishes 15. Receptors for life in the water 16. Eyes 17. Ear and hearing of fishes 18. Sound production in fishes 19. The lateral line organs of fishes 20. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 21. Touch and temperature senses 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. The circulatory system 25. Immunology in fishes 26. Expertance 27. Touch and temperature senses 28. The evolution of heads of the second of the secon					171
4. The hydromechanics of fish propulsion 5. Equilibrium of fishes in water; the functions of the fins 6. Skin of elasmobranchs 7. The skull and branchial arches 8. The jaws 9. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 14. The circulatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Eyes 22. Ears 23. Behaviour of sharks 24. The roral in erves of elasmobranchs 25. Subclass 2 Actinopterygii; Infrail Chondrostei 26. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 27. The skull and branchial arches 28. The jaws 29. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme in the water 29. Chemoreceptors and temperature senses in the water 20. Chemoreceptors and temperature senses in the water 20. Chemoreceptors and temperature senses in the water 20. Chemoreceptors and senses in the water 20. Chemoreceptors and senses in the water 20. Chemoreceptors and senses in the water 21. Touch and temperature senses in the water 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. Chapter 8 The evolution of the temperature senses in the water 25. Subclass 1: Acanthodii in the water 26. Chapter 8 The evolution of the vertebrate and senses in the water 27. Chapter 8 The evolution of the vertebrate and senses in the water in the wa					172
5. Equilibrium of fishes in water; the functions of the fins 6. Skin of elasmobranchs 7. The skull and branchial arches 8. The jaws 9. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 14. The circulatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 19. Chapter 8 19. The lateral line organs of fishes 10. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 122. Autonomic nervous system 133. The gut of elasmobranchs 134. The circulatory system 135. Receptors for life in the water 16. Eyes 17. Ear and hearing of fishes 19. The lateral line organs of fishes 10. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 120 21. Touch and temperature senses 120 22. Autonomic nervous system 132 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 134 135. Immunology in fishes 146 15. Receptors for life in the water 16. Eyes 128 15. Receptors for life in the water 16. Eyes 129 17. Ear and hearing of fishes 19. The lateral line organs of fishes 120 22. Autonomic nervous system 132 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 134 135 136 137 138 139 139 130 130 131 131 132 133 133 134 135 135 136 137 137 138 138 139 139 130 130 131 131 131 132 133 133 134 135 135 136 137 137 138 138 139 139 139 130 130 130 131 131 131 132 133 133 134 135 135 136 137 137 137 138 138 139 139 139 130 130 130 130 130 130 130 130 130 130					
functions of the fins 6. Skin of elasmobranchs 7. The skull and branchial arches 8. The jaws 9. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 14. The circulatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 19. The lateral line organs of fishes 20. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 21. Touch and temperature senses 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. Chapter 8 The evolution of both 1. Classification 25. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 26. Eyes 27. Autonomic nervous system 28. The evolution of both 1. Classification 29. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Eyes 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. Chapter 8 The evolution of both 1. Classification 26. Chapter 8 The evolution of both 1. Classification 27. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 28. Subclass 2. Actinopterygii; Infrational 1. Chondrostei 29. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Eyes 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. Infraclass 2: Actinopterygii; Infrational 1. Classification 29. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Chapter 8 The evolution of both 1. Classification 21. Classification 22. Subclass 2: Actinopterygii; Infrational 1. Classification 23. Order 1: Palaeoniscoidei 24. Infraclass 2: Holostei 25. Infraclass 3: Teleostei			117		173
6. Skin of elasmobranchs 7. The skull and branchial arches 8. The jaws 9. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 14. The circulatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 13. The circulatory system 13. Immunology in fishes 13. Chapter 8 The evolution of heading and excretory system 13. Chapter 8 The evolution of heading and excretory system 13. Chapter 8 The evolution of heading and excretory system 14. Chapter 8 The evolution of heading and excretory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Chapter 8 The evolution of heading and excretory system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Chapter 8 The evolution of heading and excretory system 10. Chapter 8 The evolution of heading and excretory system 11. Classification 12. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 13. Subclass 2 Actinopterygii; Infraction and excretory system 14. Chondrostei 15. Infraction and excretory system 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Chapter 8 The evolution of heading and excretory system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Chapter 8 The evolution of heading and excretory system 19. Chapter 8 The evolution of heading and excretory system 10. Chapter 8 The evolution of heading and excretory system 11. Classification 12. Classification 13. Corder 1: Palaeoniscoidei 13. Order 1: Palaeoniscoidei 14. Infractass 2: Holostei 15. Infractass 3: Teleostei 16. Subclass 3: Teleostei					176
7. The skull and branchial arches 8. The jaws 9. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 14. The circulatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Sound production in fishes 19. The lateral line organs of fishes 120. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 121. Touch and temperature senses 122. Autonomic nervous system 123. Behaviour patterns of fishes 134. The circulatory system 135. Immunology in fishes 136. Chapter 8 The evolution of both 1. Classification 17. Genital system 18. Sound production in fishes 19. The lateral line organs of fishes 122. Autonomic nervous system 132. Behaviour patterns of fishes 133. Behaviour patterns of fishes 134. Chapter 8 The evolution of both 1. Classification 15. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 16. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 17. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 18. Sound production in fishes 19. The lateral line organs of fishes 129. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 120. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 121. Touch and temperature senses 122. Autonomic nervous system 132. Behaviour patterns of fishes 133. Behaviour patterns of fishes 134. The evolution of both 134. Classification 135. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 136. Sound production in fishes 147. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 148. Endocrine senses 148. Sound production in fishes 149. Touch and temperature senses 140. Chapter 8 The evolution of both 140. Chapter 8	f	functions of the fins	120		177
8. The jaws 9. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 14. The circulatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 19. The lateral line organs of fishes 20. Chemoreceptors. Taste and sme 21. Touch and temperature senses 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. Chapter 8 The evolution of be 25. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 26. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 27. Subclass 2: Actinopterygii; Infrae 28. Subclass 2: Actinopterygii; Infrae 29. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 29. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Eyes 22. Ears 23. Behaviour of sharks 24. Infraclass 2: Holostei 25. Infraclass 3: Teleostei			123		180
9. Segmentation of the vertebrate head 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 14. The circulatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. Touch and temperature senses 12. Autonomic nervous system 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 13. The circulatory system 13. Immunology in fishes 13. Chapter 8 The evolution of because of the evolution of the evolution of because of the evolution of the evolution of because of the evolution	7. 7	The skull and branchial arches	123		182
10. The pro-otic somites and eye muscles 11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 14. The circulatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Eyes 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. Chapter 8 The evolution of behaviour of sharks 21. Eyes 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. Chapter 8 The evolution of behaviour of behaviour of behaviour of behaviour of behaviour of behaviour of sharks 25. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 26. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 27. Subclass 2: Actinopterygii; Infraedia and temperature senses 26. Autonomic nervous system 27. Chapter 8 The evolution of behaviour of sharks 28. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 39. Subclass 2: Actinopterygii; Infraedia and the production of behaviour of behav	8. 7	The jaws	126		183
11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 14. The circulatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Eyes 22. Autonomic nervous system 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 23. Behaviour patterns of fishes 24. Chapter 8 The evolution of beaution of beauti	9. 5	Segmentation of the vertebrate head	126		184
11. The cranial nerves of elasmobranchs 12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 14. The circulatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 10. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 10. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 11. Classification 12. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 13. Subclass 2 Actinopterygii; Infrational 1 Chondrostei 14. The circulatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 19. Nervous system 19. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 19. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 10. Order 1: Palaeoniscoidei 11. Classification 12. Subclass 2: Acanthodii 13. Order 1: Palaeoniscoidei 14. The circulatory system 14. The circulatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Classification 18. Endocrine glands 18. Subclass 2: Acanthodii 19. Nervous system 19. Vervous system 19.	10.	The pro-otic somites and eye muscles	127		186
12. Respiration 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 13. The gut of elasmobranchs 13. The circulatory system 13. Immunology in fishes 13. Chapter 8 The evolution of h 13. Chapter 8 The evolution of h 13. Classification 13. Classification 14. Classification 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 10. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 11. Classification 12. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 13. Subclass 2 Actinopterygii; Infrat 14. The circulatory system 15. Infraclass 2 Holostei 16. Classification 17. Classification 18. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 19. Nervous system 19. Chondrostei 10. Order 1: Palaeoniscoidei 10. Order 2: Acipenseroidei 11. Classification 12. Subclass 2 Actinopterygii; Infrat 13. Chondrostei 14. The circulatory system 14. The circulatory system 15. Infraclass 2: Holostei 16. Chapter 8 The evolution of h 17. Classification 18. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 19. Nervous system 19. Chondrostei 10. Classification 10. Classification 11. Classification 12. Subclass 2: Acanthodii 13. Chondrostei 14. Chondrostei 14. Chondrostei 15. Infraclass 2: Foliostei 16. Chondrostei 17. Chondrostei 18. Chondrostei 19. Chondrost			129		186
13. The gut of elasmobranchs 14. The circulatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 10. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 10. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 11. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 12. Eyes 13. Order 1: Palaeoniscoidei 13. Order 2: Acipenseroidei 14. Infraclass 2: Holostei 15. Infraclass 3: Teleostei				23. Behaviour patterns of fishes	187
14. The circulatory system 15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Eyes 22. Ears 23. Behaviour of sharks 134 Chapter 8 The evolution of he condition of he condit					
15. Immunology in fishes 16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Eyes 22. Ears 23. Behaviour of sharks 136 1 Chapter 8 The evolution of be chapter 9 The evolution of be chapter					
16. Osmoregulation and excretory system 17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 10. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 11. Chondrostei 12. Eyes 12. Eyes 13. Order 1: Palaeoniscoidei 13. Order 2: Acipenseroidei 14. Infraclass 2: Holostei 14. Infraclass 3: Teleostei 14. Infraclass 3: Teleostei				Chapter 8 The evolution of bony fishes	
17. Genital system 18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 10. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Eyes 22. Ears 23. Behaviour of sharks 24. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 25. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 26. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 27. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 28. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 29. Subclass 1: Acanthodii 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 22. Ears 23. Behaviour of sharks 24. Infraclass 2: Holostei 25. Infraclass 3: Teleostei					189
18. Endocrine glands 19. Nervous system 10. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Eyes 22. Ears 23. Behaviour of sharks 24. Subclass 2 Actinopterygii; Infraction 1 Chondrostei 25. Infraction 27. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 26. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 27. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 28. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 29. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Eyes 22. Ears 23. Subclass 2 Actinopterygii; Infraction 1 Chondrostei 24. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 25. Infraction 27. Eleostei 26. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 27. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 28. Endocrine glands 29. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 29. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Eyes 22. Ears 23. Eleostei 24. Infractions 3: Teleostei 25. Infractions 3: Teleostei					190
19. Nervous system 20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Eyes 22. Ears 23. Behaviour of sharks 240 21. Eyes 241 251 262 273 284 286 286 287 288 288 288 288 288 288 288 288 288					130
20. Chemical senses of elasmobranchs 21. Eyes 1997 1997 1997 1997 1997 1997 1997 199					100
21. Eyes 1994 144 3.2. Order 2: Acipenseroidei 22. Ears 4. Infraclass 2: Holostei 23. Behaviour of sharks 147 5. Infraclass 3: Teleostei					190
<ul> <li>22. Ears</li> <li>23. Behaviour of sharks</li> <li>144</li> <li>4. Infraclass 2: Holostei</li> <li>5. Infraclass 3: Teleostei</li> </ul>					190
23. Behaviour of sharks 147 5. Infraclass 3: Teleostei		-			192
117 5. 111100100 5. 10100001					193
44. Autonomic nervous system 147 6. Analysis of evolution of the Act					193
147 O. Finallysis of evolution of the feet	24. /	Autonomic nervous system	147	6. Analysis of evolution of the Actinopterygii	197

		Contents	X
Chapter 9 The adaptive radiation of bon	v	21. Urinogenital system	252
fishes a modera waste legge		22. Eggs	254
The same of the sa	200	23. Larvae	254
Swimming and locomotion     Various hady forms and swimming habits	200	24. Metamorphosis	254
Various body forms and swimming habits in teleosts	201	25. Paedogenesis (neoteny)	254
	201	26. Digestive system	255
3. Adaptations to various depths	203	27. Nervous system	255
4. Structure of mouth and feeding habits	204	28. Endocrine organs	261
of bony fishes	204	29. Skin receptors	263
5. Protective mechanisms of bony fishes	205	30. The eyes	263
6. Scales and other surface armour	205	31. The ear	264
7. Spines and poison glands	205	32. Behaviour	266
8. Electric organs	205	<ul> <li>Till — patriete in uite engagene tendockert</li> </ul>	200
9. Electroreceptors	207	Chapter 12 Evolution and adaptive	
10. Luminous organs	208	radiation of Amphibia	
11. Colours of fishes	209	A STATE OF THE PROPERTY OF THE	207
12. Colour change in teleosts	211	1. Classification	267
13. Aerial respiration and the swim-bladder	212	2. The earliest Amphibia. Labyrinthodontia	267
14. Buoyancy	213	3. The vertebrae of Palaeozoic Amphibia	268
15. Special reproductive mechanisms in		4. Order Temnospondyli	270
teleosts	215	5. Order Anthracosauria	270
		6. Subclass Lepospondyli	271
Chapter 10 Lung fishes		7. The origin of modern Amphibia	271
1. Classification	217	8. Tendencies in the evolution of fossil	
2. Sarcopterygii	217	Amphibia	271
3. Rhipidistia	217	9. Newts and salamanders. Order Urodela (=	
4. Coelacanths	219	Caudata)	271
5. Fossil Dipnoi	220	<ol><li>Frogs and toads. Order Anura (=</li></ol>	
6. Modern lung fishes	221	Salientia)	273
o. Modern rung usites	241	11. Order Apoda (= Gymnophiona =	
		Caecilia)	273
Chapter 11 First terrestrial vertebrates:		12. Adaptive radiation and parallel evolution	
Amphibia		in modern Amphibia	273
1. Amphibia	225	13. Can Amphibia be said to be higher animals	
2. The frogs	225	than fishes?	275
3. Skin	226		2/2
4. Colours	227	Chapter 13 Life on land: the reptiles	
5. Locomotion	229		
6. Evolution and plan of the limbs	230	1. Reptilia	276
7. Shoulder girdle	232	2. Temperature of reptiles	276
8. Pelvic girdle	234	3. Skin	277
9. The limbs	235	4. Posture, locomotion, and skeleton	277
10. The back and belly muscles	237	5. Feeding and digestion	280
11. The limb muscles	239	6. Respiration, circulation, and metabolism	281
12. The skull of Labyrinthodontia	242	7. Blood	282
13. The skull of modern Amphibia	244	8. Excretion	284
14. Respiration in Amphibia	247	9. Reproduction	285
15. Respiration in the frog	247	10. The brain	287
16. Respiratory adaptations in various	441	11. Receptors	289
amphibians	248	12. Endocrine glands	290
17. Vocal apparatus		13. Behaviour	290
18. Circulatory system	248 248		
19. Lymph vessels	250	Chapter 14 Evolution of the reptiles	
20. Blood			200
LV. DIOOU	252	1. Classification	292

2. Skull types among the reptiles	293	23. Digestive system	349
3. The earliest reptile populations. Subclass		24. Circulatory system	351
Anapsida (without arches)	294	25. Larynx, syrinx, and song	352
3.1. Order Cotylosauria (= stem reptiles)	294	26. Respiration	353
3.2. Order Chelonia (turtles)	296	27. Excretory system	356
4. Subclass *Synaptosauria (connecting		28. Reproductive system	357
lizards)	300	29. The brain	358
4.1. Order *Protorosauria (dawn lizards)	300	30. Functioning of the brain	362
4.2. Order *Sauropterygia (lizard fins)	301	31. Learning in birds	362
4.3. Order *Placodontia (plate-like teeth)	302	32. Imprinting	363
5. Subclass *Ichthyopterygia (fish fins)	302	33. Releasing stimuli	363
6. Subclass Lepidosauria (scaly lizards)	303	34. Endocrine organs	364
6.1. Order *Eosuchia (dawn reptiles)	303	34.1 Pituitary	364
6.2. Order Rhynchocephalia (beak-headed)	303	34.2. Adrenals	365
6.3. Order Squamata (scaly ones)	304	. 34.3. Thyroids	365
6.3.1. Suborder Lacertilia (lizards)	305	34.4. Parathyroids	365
6.3.2. Suborder Amphisbaenia (both		34.5. Pancreas	365
ways)	309	34.6. Thymus, bursa of Fabricius, and	
6.3.3. Suborder Ophidia (snakes)	309	immunity	365
7. Subclass Archosauria (ruling reptiles)	312	35. The eyes	366
7.1. Order *Thecodontia (box teeth)	313	36. The ear and hearing	370
7.2. Order Crocodilia (crocodiles)	314	37. Other receptors	371
7.3. Order *Saurischia (lizard pelvis)	315	37. Other receptors	37
7.3.1. The 'terrible lizards', dinosaurs	315	Charter 16 Pi-d balanian	
7.3.2. Suborder *Theropoda	316	Chapter 16 Bird behaviour	
7.4. Order *Ornithischia (bird pelvis)	317	Habitat selection	374
7.5. Order *Pterosauria (wing lizards)	318	2. Food selection	374
8. Conclusions from study of evolution of the	310	3. Responses to predators and reliability of	
reptiles	321	communication	374
	321	<ol> <li>Recognition and social behaviour</li> </ol>	375
Chapter 15 Life in the air: the birds		<ol><li>Bird migration and homing</li></ol>	375
1. Features of bird life	323	6. The stimulus to migration	378
2. Numbers and variety	323	<ol><li>The breeding habits of birds</li></ol>	379
3. The skin and feathers	323	8. Courtship and display	379
4. Colours	326	9. Bird territory	382
5. The skeleton. Sacral and sternal girders	327	10. Mutual courtship	383
	329	11. Nest building	383
<ul><li>6. The sacral girder and legs</li><li>7. Skeleton of the wings</li></ul>	334	12. Shape and colour of the eggs	385
8. Wing muscles	335	13. Brooding and care of the young	385
	336	1 12 100 10	
9. Principles of flight		Chapter 17 The origin and evolution of	
10. Wing shape	336	birds	
11. Wing area and loading	336		204
12. Aspect ratio	337	1. Classification	386
13. Wing tips, slots, and camber	337	2. Origin of the birds	387
14. Flapping flight	339	3. Jurassic birds and the origin of flight	387
15. Hovering flight	339	4. Cretaceous birds	389
16. Take off and landing	339	5. Modern birds. Neornithes	391
17. Soaring flight	340	6. Flightless birds. Ratites	391
18. Soaring on up-currents	341	7. Some orders of modern birds	392
19. Use of vertical wind variations	345	7.1. Order 7. Posidipediformes. Grebes	392
20. Speed of flight	346	7.2. Order 8. Sphenisciformes. Penguins	392
21. The skull	346	7.3. Order 9. Procellariiformes. Petrels	392
22. The jaws, beak, and feeding mechanisms	346	7.4. Order 10. Pelecaniformes. Cormorants,	

		Contents	xii
pelicans, and gannets	392	13.2. The skull	416
7.5. Order 11. Ciconiiformes. Storks an		13.3. Vertebral column and limbs	417
herons	392	13.4. Reproduction	418
7.6. Order 12. Anseriformes. Ducks	392	13.5. Hair, and temperature regulation	418
7.7. Order 13. Falconiformes. Hawks	392	13.6. Urinogenital system	419
7.8. Order 14. Galliformes. Game birds		13.7. Receptors	420
7.9. Order 15. Gruiformes. Rails and	1002	13.8. The brain	420
cranes	393	13.9. Other features	420
7.10. Order 16. Charadriiformes. Wade		13.10. Specialized features	
		15.10. Specialized leatures	422
and gulls 7.11. Order 17. Gaviiformes, Divers or	393	Chapter 19 Marsupials	
loons	393	Marsupial characteristics	423
7.12. Order 18. Columbiformes. Pigeon	s 393	2. The skull	423
7.13. Order 19. Cuculii ormes. Cuckoos	393	3. Skeletal features	
7.14. Order 20. Psittacitormes. Parrots	393		424
7.15. Order 21. Strigiformes. Owls	394	4. Reproduction	424
7.16. Order 22. Caprimulgiformes.	11 17	5. The brain	426
Nightjars	394	6. Characteristic features	426
7.17. Order 23. Apodiformes. Swifts an		7. Classification	427
humming-birds	394	8. Opossums	427
7.18. Order 26. Coraciiformes. Bee-eate		9. Carnivorous marsupials	428
and kingfishers	394	10. Marsupial ant-eaters and other types	428
7.19. Order 27. Piciformes. Woodpecke		11. Kangaroos and phalangers	428
7.20. Order 28. Passeriformes. Perching		12. Significance of marsupial isolation	429
birds	394	Chapter 20 Evolution and classification	on of
8. Tendencies in the evolution of birds	395	placental mammals	
9. Darwin's finches	395	1. Eutherians at the end of the Mesozoic	431
10. Birds on other oceanic islands	399	2. The earliest eutherians	431
11. The development of variety of bird life	30%	Definition of a placental mammal	431
Chapter 18 The origin of mammals		(Eutheria)	431
	400	3.1. Placentation	431
1. Classification	402	3.2. Skeleton	
2. The characteristics of mammals	402		432
3. Mammals of the Mesozoic	404	Evolutionary trends of eutherians     Conservative eutherians	432
<ol> <li>Mammal-like reptiles, Synapsida (joined</li> </ol>			433
arches)	405	6. Divisions and classification of Eutheria	433
<ol><li>Order *Pelycosauria (= Theromorpha, mammal-like)</li></ol>	405	Chapter 21 Insectivores, bats, and ede	ntates
6. Order *Therapsida (= mammal-arched)		1. Insectivores	436
	400		
7. Mammals from the Triassic to the Cretaceous	400	1.1. Classification	436
8. Subclass *Prototheria	408	1.2. Modern insectivores. Suborder	
	409	Lipotyphla	436
8.1. Order *Multituberculata	409	1.3. Primitive insectivores. Suborder	
8.2. Orders *Triconodonta and	Tiene	Proteutheria	438
*Docodonta	409	1.4. Suborder. Macroscelididae	439
8.3. Therians of the Mesozoic	409	1.5. Suborder Dermoptera	439
9. Mammalian teeth	411	2. Chiroptera	439
10. Development of teeth and serial homolo		2.1. Classification	439
11. The chewing cycle	413	2.2. Bats	439
12. Functioning of the teeth	414	2.3. Microchiroptera	440
13. Subclass Prototheria	415	2.4. Megachiroptera	444
13.1. Egg-laying mammals. Order		3. Taeniodontia (= band teeth) and	
Monotremata (= one aperture)	415	Tillodontia (= tearing teeth)	444

arin:	Contante
XIV	Contents

xiv Contents			
4. Edentata	444	Chapter 26 Whales	
4.1. Classification	444	Classification	497
4.2. Armadillos	445	Characteristics of whales. Life in water	497
4.3. Ant-eaters and sloths	446		497
4.3.1. Ground sloths	446	3. Feeding habits	499
4.3.2. Ant-eaters of the New World	447	4. Respiration and metabolism	
4.3.3. Sloths	448	5. Brain and receptors	500
5. Order Pholidota: pangolins	449	6. Sound production and communication	500
o. Order r nondotta. parigonno		(whale song)	500
Chapter 22 Primates		7. Behaviour	501
	451	8. Reproduction	501
1. Classification	451	Evolution and diversity	501
2. Characters of primates	452	Chantan 27 Caminana	
3. Divisions of the primates	454	Chapter 27 Carnivores	
4. Lemurs and lorises	455	<ol> <li>Affinities of carnivores and ungulates:</li> </ol>	
5. Fossil Prosimians	458	Cohort Ferungulata	505
6. Tarsiers	459	2. Classification	506
7. Characteristics of Anthropoidea	461	3. Order Carnivora	506
8. New World monkeys, Ceboidea	463	4. The cats	507
AND AND AND ASSOCIATE MARKET AND ASSOCIATION OF THE PARTY		5. Early carnivores. Superfamily Miacidae	508
Chapter 23 Monkeys, apes, and men		6. Modern Carnivora. Superfamily Canoidea	508
1. Old World monkeys. Cercopithecoidea	465	7. Superfamily Feloidea	509
2. The earliest monkeys. Parapithecoidea	466	8. Suborder Pinnipedia	511
3. The great apes: Pongidae	466	9 Order *Creodonta (= flesh tooth)	512
4. Fossil apes	471		3,50
To policialisable total voludenti. M. c.	type.	Chapter 28 Protoungulates	
Chapter 24 The origin of man		1. Origin of the ungulates	514
1. Human characteristics	473	2. Ungulate characters	514
2. Brain of apes and man	473	3. Classification	517
3. Human posture and gait	473	4. Superorder Protoungulata	517
4. The limbs of man	474	*Order Condylarthra	517
5. The human skull and jaws	475	5. South American ungulates	518
6. Neoteny in the evolution of man	477	*Order Notoungulata	518
7. Growth of human populations	479	6. Order *Litopterna	519
8. The earliest hominids	479	7. Order *Astrapotheria	520
9. *Australopithecus (= southern ape)	480	8. Order Tubulidentata (= tube-teeth)	520
10. The earliest men?	481	o. Order rabandentata (= tabe-teeth)	520
11. *Homo erectus	482	CT	
12. Presapiens	483	Chapter 29 Elephants and related forms	
13. Homo sapiens sapiens	484	1. Subungulates, superorder Paenungulata	521
14. Rate of human evolution	484	2. Classification	521
15. Human cultures	485	3. Order Hyracoidea	522
		4. Elephants. Order Proboscidea	523
Summary of hominid evolution	486	5. Order *Pantodonta (Amblypoc a)	529
Chapter 25 Rodents and rabbits		6. Order *Dinocerata (= terrible horns)	529
	40.00	7. Order *Pyrotheria (= fire beasts)	529
Characteristics of rodent life	487	8. Order *Embrithopoda (= heavy feet)	529
2. Classification	487	9. Order Sirenia (= mermaids)	531
3. Order Rodentia			201
	488		
Suborder Sciuromorpha	490	Chanter 30 Perissed estyle	
5. Suborder Myomorpha	490 492	Chapter 30 Perissodactyls	
<ul><li>5. Suborder Myomorpha</li><li>6. Suborder Hystricomorpha</li></ul>	490 492 493	1. Perissodactyl characteristics	533
5. Suborder Myomorpha	490 492	-	533 534 534

		Contents	XV
4. Tapirs and rhinoceroses	535	7. Changes in endocrine systems	563
5. *Brontotheres (*Titanotheres)	537	8. Efficiency of the brain	564
6. *Chalicotheres (=*Ancylopoda)	538	9. Life strategies	566
7. *Palaeotheres	538	10. Efficiency of reproduction	567
8. Horses	539	11. Summary of mammalian advantages and	
9. Allometry in the evolution of horses	542	improvements	567
0. Rate of evolution of horses	542		
1. Conclusions from the study of the		Chapter 33 Conclusion. Evolutionary	
evolution of horses	543	changes of the life of the vertebrates	
Chantar 21 Antiodostula		<ol> <li>The life of the earliest chordates</li> </ol>	569
Chapter 31 Artiodactyls		<ol><li>Comparison of the life of early chordates</li></ol>	
1. Characteristics of artiodactyls	544	with that of mammals	570
2. Classification	546	<ol><li>Progress in vertebrate evolution</li></ol>	570
3. The earliest artiodactyls	547	<ol><li>Succession among fishes</li></ol>	571
4. Suborder Suiformes. Pigs and		<ol><li>Succession among Amphibia</li></ol>	573
hippopotomuses	547	<ol><li>The successive dynasties of reptiles</li></ol>	573
<ol><li>Suborder Ruminantia</li></ol>	550	7. Successive extinctions among mammals	577
<ol><li>Infraorder Tylopoda</li></ol>	550	8. The increasing complexity and variety of	
7. Camels	550	vertebrates	579
8. Infraorder Pecora	552	9. Vertebrates that have evolved slowly	580
<ol><li>Superfamily Traguloidea. Chevrotains</li></ol>	552	10. Successive replacement among aquatic	
<ol><li>Superfamily Cervoidea, Family</li></ol>		vertebrates	581
Palaeomerycidae. Ancestral deer	553	11. Successive replacement among land	
<ol> <li>Family Cervidae. Deer</li> </ol>	553	vertebrates	581
12. Family Giraffidae	555	12. Convergent and parallel evolution	581
<ol><li>Superfamily Bovoidea</li></ol>	555	13. Some tendencies in vertebrate evolution	583
		14. Summary. The direction of evolutionary	
Chapter 32 The efficiency of mamma	als	change	584
1. What is efficiency?	559	<ol><li>Evolutionary progress</li></ol>	585
2. Efficiency of temperature control	559		
3. Energy metabolism	561	References	586
4. The mechanics of locomotion	561	Author index	<b>607</b>
5. The efficiency of tooth replacement	561	Author index	607
6. The efficiency of digestion	562	Subject index	613

## 1 Evolution of life in relation to climatic and geological change

### 1. The need for generality in zoology

THE aim of any zoological study is to know about the life of the animals concerned. Our object in this book is, therefore, to help the reader to learn as much as possible about all the vertebrate animal life that has ever existed. Thinking of the great numbers of types that have lived since the first fishes swam in the Palaeozoic seas, one might well be appalled by such a task: to describe all these populations in detail would indeed demand a huge treatise. However, in a well-developed science it should be possible to reduce the varied subject-matter to order, to show that all differences can be understood to have arisen by the influence of specified factors operating to modify an original scheme. Animal and plant life is so varied that it has not yet proved possible to systematize our knowledge of it as thoroughly as we should wish. Thinking, again, of the variety of vertebrate lives, it may seem impossible to imagine any general scheme and simple set of factors that would include so many special circumstances. Yet nothing less should be the aim of a true science of zoology. Too often in the past we have been content to accumulate unrelated facts. It is splendid to be aware of many details, but only by the synthesis of these can we obtain either adequate means for handling so many data or knowledge of the natures we are studying. In order to know life - what it is, what it has been, and what it will be - we must look beyond the details of individual lives and try to find rules governing all. Perhaps we may find the task less difficult than expected. Even an elementary anatomical and physiological study shows that all vertebrates are built upon a common plan and have certain similarities of behaviour. Our object will be to come to know the nature of this plan of life, of structure, and action, to show how it is modified in special cases and how each special case is also an example of a general type of modification.

Since the problem arises from the variety of animals that have lived and live today, our central task is obviously to inquire into the reason for the existence of so much difference. If vertebrate life began as one single fish-like type, why has it not continued as such until

now? Why, instead of numerous identical fishes, are there countless different kinds, while descendants of most unfish-like form are found living out of the water and even in the air and under the ground?

To put it in a way more familiar, though perhaps less clear: what are the forces that have produced the changes of animal form? Knowing these forces, and the original type, it would be possible to construct a truly general science of zoology, with sure premisses and deductions. Even if we cannot reach this end, we should at least try, hoping that after investigation of the biology of vertebrates it will be possible to retain something more than a mass of detailed information. At the end of such a study, if we deal with the subject right, we should surely be better able to answer some of the fundamental biological questions. We should be able to say something about the nature of evolution and of the differences between types, to know whether there have been rhythms of change at work to produce these differences, and also - the acid test of any true science - to forecast how these changes are likely to proceed in the future.

#### 2. What is evolution?

The superficial answer to the question 'Why are there so many different vertebrates?' is that they have been generated by a process of Evolution. Unfortunately this much-used word is ambiguous and even the best biologists seem unwilling to define it. Darwin did not use it in the first edition of the *Origin*. Indeed it was used to refer to ontogeny (literally 'unfolding') until nearly the end of the nineteenth century.

A simple definition sometimes used is that 'Evolution is a change in the genetic make-up of populations'. But every population changes its genes from minute to minute as individuals are born and die. Is all this to be called 'evolution'? We more commonly use the word to talk about sequences of adult forms, that is of phenotypes, especially about the series of animals and plants revealed by palaeontology. What is the connection between these long-term alterations and changes of the genotype that are going on all the time?

Living things are improbable steady-state systems. They exist in environments that change from minute to minute, day to day and over the years and centuries. What enables them to continue on this unlikely course? Briefly, it is the information they inherit which allows them to take actions to prevent death. They can do this on various scales. Each individual is an agent selecting from minute to minute what is best to do in the changing circumstances. He can choose 'wisely' because his DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) provides him with receptors tuned to respond to changes that are likely to occur. With this information he sets in action the enzymes, muscles, glands, and many other organs that are provided by the DNA. How this system came into being is the question of the Origin of Life, which we cannot discuss here (see Introduction to the Study of Man). Its result is that every form of life, bacterium, plant, or animal, can continue to meet the demands of its varying environment if it shows adequate variety of actions and sufficient capacity to collect the information needed to act correctly. Each individual is able to do this by virtue of its particular range of sensory and motor capacities.

In this way survival is possible under a limited range of change of circumstances. But the information in the DNA also provides for *reproduction*, producing continually a series of slightly different individuals. This allows for life to continue much longer, by producing new types capable of meeting the situations that result from variations that occur in the climate or other factors (p. 23). This continual change of living organization is the process that we call evolution.

The basic 'cause' of evolution is therefore the tendency of all living things to strive to survive. They succeed in spite of varying conditions because every part inherits information that allows it to adapt to the circumstances it is likely to find. A bacterium can switch on production of a new enzyme, a muscle grows stronger with use and a brain learns a new response. The DNA provides every individual with many such ways of 'learning' during its lifetime. But information acquired in this way during life is not passed on to the next generation. The major changes in evolution depend upon differential survival of those genotypes that provide the best information.

The pressure to acquire better sources of information and ways to adapt is thus itself a factor making for change. We shall find evidence that animal types rarely remain stable, there has been a continuous series of extinctions and replacements throughout vertebrate history. These are partly due to the repeated alterations of climate and other conditions (p. 25). But at each stage there are signs that the new types had capacities that made them more efficient than the old. New means

of coping with the environment appear, involving greater complexity of organization. In particular vertebrates have developed increasing powers of *adapting* their tissues especially through their senses and nervous systems. This increase of information as to how to survive is the main sense in which there has been progress during evolution (p. 584).

#### 3. Questions about evolution

Nearly all biologists believe that evolution has been the result of some form of natural selection of hereditary variations as postulated by neo-Darwinism (Mayr 1976; Dobzhansky, Ayala, Stebbins, and Valentine 1977). But palaeontologists, who follow both the large and small changes of organisms, have long felt that some questions remain to be answered. Recently molecular biologists, geneticists, and ethologists have raised further problems. Everybody agrees that evolution has occurred, that living forms have changed, but there are still many questions about the agencies that have produced the change (Gould 1977; Stanley 1980). Study of the life of vertebrates should help to answer these questions. We may list them as follows:

- (1) We readily understand that evolution involves alteration of the genetic make-up of populations. But is *any* change 'evolution'?
- (2) Is all evolutionary change adaptive, or may some of it be due to random chance?
- (3) Can small microevolutionary changes explain macroevolution, large alterations of the whole plan, of organisms, as when fishes became amphibians or reptiles became birds?
- (4) At the opposite extreme can selection explain the numerous small differences that molecular biologists have found between proteins and other macromolecules?
- (5) Do the changes follow any clearly defined sequence or direction? Can we detect progress in evolution? What is meant by referring to 'higher' and 'lower' organisms?
- (6) As Gould asks, 'What is the tempo of organic change? Does it proceed gradually in a continuous and stately fashion, or is it episodic?'

We shall hope to find answers to some of these and other 'eternal questions' as we study each group of vertebrates in turn and try to understand the processes that have been at work, modifying the basic vertebrate organization.

## 4. Is variation between demes the basis of evolution?

Every species contains a number of distinct groups of inter-breeding individuals or demes, more or less isolated from each other by mere distance or physical barriers. Thus the western rattlesnake *Crotalus viridis* shows nine 'geographic races' (Savage 1977) (Fig. 1.1). They differ in body stripe, scales, and colour and where races meet there are intergradations. Endless examples of this sort could be given and often it is possible to identify the character of each deme as due to adaptation to local conditions. Sometimes a character changes gradually with distance and this is known as a 'cline'.

If a group formed by selection or in any other way remains isolated for a sufficient length of time its genetic make-up is likely to become incompatible with that of other demes; they become mutually infertile and a new species is formed. This may happen quite rapidly. Lake Nabugabob in Africa has been separated from Lake Victoria for less than five thousand years but contains five endemic species of the cichlid fish *Haplochromis*, each derived from a different parent species in the main

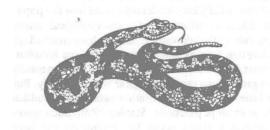




Fig. 1.1 Geographic variation in the Western rattlesnake (*Crotalus viridis*). (After Savage 1977.) (Narrow regions within broken lines indicate areas of intergradation of races.)

lake (Greenwood 1965). This rapid speciation may have occurred because the numbers are small. Conversely many species are the same on both sides of the Isthmus of Panama although the Caribbean and Pacific Oceans have been separated for 5–6 million years. This is especially true of the pelagic species, with numerous individuals. Many of the intertidal and shallow water animals have formed geminate (twin) species, slightly different on the two sides of the isthmus. Evidently isolation and small numbers are among the conditions that promote change. Clearly they are not the only factors determining the *direction* of change, if indeed can it be said to have a direction at all?

#### 5. Genetic drift

The orthodox neo-Darwinian adaptationist position is that natural selection decides which phenotypes and hence which genotypes shall survive. The varieties of organic form according to this view have been produced by the changing demands of the physical and biological environment upon each deme. This is still the basic assumption of the great majority of biologists, even including some who wish nevertheless to emphasize that other factors are also at work in determining organic organization (Gould and Lewontin 1979). These alternative agencies undoubtedly play a part, some in accelerating, others in retarding evolutionary change. The most thoroughly established of them is genetic drift. Isolated populations are often small and the first step to speciation may occur in them by pure chance without the action of any selective force at all (Wright 1931, 1968-1978; see Gould and Eldredge 1979). A deme founded by a small number of colonists may continue to maintain the characteristics of the founders and such random differences may persist if the group remains isolated and if there is no strong selection against any of them. Computer modelling has shown that distinctions between groups at least as great as those found in nature can occur purely by a Markov chain of random stochastic changes, that is a sequence where each event is partly dependent on the outcome of previous ones. Figure 1.2 shows how a sort of model trilobite, a 'triloboid', changed by random steps on a computer in five traits, two of its 'head', one of the 'thorax', and two of the 'tail'. If fossils like these were found it would be concluded that taxa A and B had been selected for large size, while absence of tail had evolved separately in C and D and so on. Such simulations do not show that evolution has been random, but they warn that the hypothesis of randomness needs to be carefully excluded by appropriate tests of its probability. Palaeontological series can sometimes be tested in this way, but it is not easy (Feller 1968).