

**Back From The Brink:** Successes in Wildlife Conservation, by **Guy Mountfort.** Hutchinson, £5.50

This is a timely and a cheering book, popularly written, too, which in this case means easily read, and well illustrated. So much of the conservation story is depressing. The negative factors are so often linked to inevitably advancing destructive processes arising from the proliferation of our own species that it must often seem to conservationists that they are in a losing game from the start. Therefore Mr Mountfort has put together a number of success stories. Sometimes these deal with particular animals—Arabian oryx, barasingha, vicuña, orang-utan, giant flightless grebe, nene, Asian lion, rhinoceros and tigers; sometimes with a particular place—Dudhwa National Park, Galapagos Islands, Aldabra, the Seychelles (especially Cousin Island); sometimes with special people—Peter Scott (who writes a foreword to the book), Ian Grimwood, Arjan Singh, Ann Labastille, Felipe Benavides—who have contributed a special motive force. An excellent idea. And in all the instances chosen the author himself has either played a part or at least been on the spot. He can describe the scene as seen with his own eyes, he knows the mammals and the birds, and he also knows the people who were, in a double sense of the words, principally concerned. This gives an immediacy and a conviction to his tales.

The author does not minimise the changes and has a final chapter: *The Task Ahead*. Yet I could have wished that, without in any way encouraging despair, he also emphasised the precariousness of every victory won. Using but little imagination, the reader can easily understand how quickly events such as a change of government in one case, a change of policy induced by commercial pressures in another, or just the termination of positive pressure by the ultimate disappearance of a particular individual enthusiast in yet another, could reverse all that has been gained, especially where the species rescued have been limited to one area. The price of conservation, like that of liberty requires eternal vigilance.

IVOR MONTAGU

**Wildlife in Britain and Ireland,** by **Richard Perry.** Croom Helm, £7.25.

Starting with the broad generalisation, 'Animals become extinct or decrease in numbers mainly because of the destruction of their habitat, or because they are unable to adapt to changes in this. . .' (the first sentence of the book), the author provides a fascinating and valuable survey of Britain's animal life from prehistoric times to the present day. He points out that man was making his 'first slight impact' on wildlife as early as the Old Stone Age, but it was not until about 100 or 75 BC that he began to make the first major impact with the agricultural activities of the Belgae, entailing extensive destruction of the forests, later to be intensified by the Saxons. It is unlikely, however, that extermination of the larger carnivores in Britain was delayed because they had to confine their clearing operations to the lighter forest, owing to the danger of malaria or ague in the 'waterlogged jungles on the heavy clay land'; the vector of the malaria parasite in this country, *Anopheles maculipennis atroparvus*, is mainly a coastal species.

With the help of a quite remarkable and extensive collection of quotations and references from early writings, the author gives interesting details of the status and fate through the centuries of most of our native fauna, from elks to insects, but with special emphasis on birds. Particularly interesting, if disturbing, is the well-researched account of the decline in birds of prey after the seventeenth century when, with the waning popularity of falconry, the protection previously given to falcons and hawks was relaxed, and the decline was accelerated by the enclosures, sheep farming and the preservation of the sportsman's game, which entailed the virtual extinction of all potential predators.

On a happier note the author describes the new habitats that 'came into existence during the latter half of the 18th century with the introduction to the landscape of plantations and gardens around gentlemen's houses'. More recently we have seen the return of species such as nesting redwings, fieldfares, firecrests and Cetti's warblers as

pleasant reverses of the usual trend. 'Conservation works!', says the author; he might have mentioned such bodies as the RSPB which has restored the avocet, black-tailed godwit and osprey, the Nature Conservancy Council and the county conservation trusts, which, by acquiring habitats before it is too late, are making it work.

The book, which is published in association with the World Wildlife Fund, is well illustrated with good monochrome photographs.

JOHN CLEGG

**Vanishing Birds**—their Natural History and Conservation, by **Tim Halliday**. Sedgwick and Jackson, £7.50.

Evolution inevitably entails the extinction of less well-adapted species, but the rate has increased drastically, with 217 species or local races of birds known to have vanished in the last 400 years. Dr Halliday describes how this happened—and discusses the many other birds at risk—with a wealth of historical detail and biological insight, illustrating many with his own attractive paintings and drawings. He shows how man, increasing in numbers and destructive capacity, has been the main cause of extinctions—through habitat destruction, the introduction of predators on islands, excessive hunting, and pesticides and other pollutants. He examines in detail four classic cases of extinction—the dodo, the solitaire, the great auk and the pink-headed duck, then looks at extinct and endangered birds in North America, New Zealand, Europe and Australia. A special chapter is devoted to birds on islands, the most vulnerable of all, accounting for 200 of the 217 cases of recent extinction. He does not attempt to deal with all extinct or endangered birds, and some examination of such species in Asia, Africa and South America—where the major habitat threat of the present time, the destruction of tropical forests, may lead (and perhaps has already done so) to the loss of species whose habits are largely unknown—would have added to the value of this fascinating survey.

In his final chapter, considering the conservation of endangered birds, he stresses the ecological arguments for conservation, which implies putting the main emphasis on the maintenance of diverse and healthy habitats, so providing for a satisfying variety of all species, as well as endangered ones. He also discusses briefly other modern techniques, from captive breeding to the imaginative transplanting experiments in New Zealand, which may be the last resort in critical cases. The outlook is not entirely bleak, for no bird is known to have become extinct since 1945 (and several thought to have vanished have been found again), while man is slowly learning to control some of his worst excesses. Little will avail, however, if an early halt is not called to the rape of major habitats.

STANLEY CRAMP

**A Field Guide to the Reptiles and Amphibians of Britain and Europe**, by **E.N. Arnold** and **J.A. Burton**, illustrated by **D.W. Ovenden**. Collins, £4.95.

This long-awaited book, which resembles the US field guides to amphibians and reptiles, very largely replaces Alfred Leutscher's 1962 translation of Walter Hellmich's 1956 work, in its own time useful on a semi-popular level for the keeper of European herpetofauna in vivaria. Written for UK-based field herpetologists, the guide places observations of species into the perspective of the European land mass. For the sake of simplification sub-specific taxonomy is not taken into account, and the authors wisely avoid confusion in a field guide of this scope by keeping firmly to the species level.

The general descriptions and introductory sections are obviously the result of sound academic and practical experience, as well as an enthusiasm for the subject. Neither casual field collection for its own sake nor the keeping of species as pets is encouraged, while observation in the wild and the annotation of records for future reference are. It is a pity that in this otherwise excellent field guide some of the colour plates (first class drawings) have been reduced to about one-third smaller than indicated in the authors' legends. On the other hand, it is very nice to have the range of colour variations for some widely distributed species.