

Book reviews

craft and knowledge of wolf lore of these men.

One's confusion and sadness are heightened by the clarity with which Brown exposes the complexity of the web of social, economic and biological factors that led to the wolves' demise: wolf numbers probably expanded greatly with the advent of cattle ranching and it was their increased dependence on cattle that led to their extermination. It is the stark conflict between wildlife and man and its awful consequences that makes this book devastating. The aim to exterminate the wolf was explicitly stated by honourable men very recently, and was widely welcomed. One can still hear the echoes of their forceful arguments. Today, as we might lament the cost of their success, we can also ponder which elements of contemporary wildlife management will appal a generation fifty years hence. In the meantime we can reflect on Brown's concluding words, 'More than fifty years of constant effort finally destroyed the wolf. That it took that long is a fitting testimony to his tenacity.'

David W. Macdonald
Department of Zoology, University of Oxford

Seabirds: an identification guide

Peter Harrison

Croom Helm, 1983, £15.95

Bird field guides continue to pour from the presses, but here is one that sets a new standard. To start with it is probably the first such guide where the author (who is also the artist) has taken seven years off in order to prepare it. He even went to the length of working as a deck-hand in order to get nearer his subjects. The result was well worth the effort. To include all the necessary detail, however, he has had to produce a substantial book, too big to take conveniently into the field. This has enabled him to show all the important plumages of the gulls, for instance.

The format resembles early Peterson, with the illustrations separate from the text but with convenient summaries opposite them. And, better than early Peterson, the plates are all clumped at the beginning. The large size has enabled him to give a much more complete text than is possible in the standard field guide designed to be used in the field. And with seabirds this is a great

56

advantage, for most field guides (my own included) are forced by space considerations to be much too cursory about seabird plumages.

If I have a criticism, it is that several non-marine grebes have been included (presumably in order to give a complete conspectus of the grebes) at the expense of sea-going ducks and geese. It is slightly odd, for instance, to show the giant Atitlan grebe, confined to one lake in Guatemala, and another grebe known only from Lake Junin, Peru, but neither the mallard nor the brent goose, both regularly seen on the sea off the coasts of Europe and North America. I also wondered why the storm-petrel family had been changed from Hydrobatidae to Oceanitidae contrary to the taxonomic authorities quoted. Nonetheless this is a very good book and a must for future sea-watchers.

Richard Fitter

The Barn Owl

D.S. Bunn, A.B. Warburton and

R.D.S. Wilson

T. and A.D. Poyser, 1982, £12.60

Steeped as it is in folklore, the barn owl is one of the best known British birds of prey. After its sad decline in the 1950s and 1960s, due mainly to persistent chemical residues, such as DDT, there was optimism about an improvement in the 1970s, but this was short-lived. The recent acceleration in cereal growing has meant the disappearance of most of the open grassland, which is of vital importance to a species which feeds extensively on small mammals. Sadly it would also appear that the hoped for enlightenment of the shooting and game-rearing fraternity still has a long way to go, as persecution continues.

Death on the roads is a further hazard: of 320 birds ringed up until 1969, 12 per cent had died as road casualties and the extra speed and volume of traffic since then must have increased this danger. The natural factors in controlling populations are prolonged periods of hard weather and possibly diseases such as tuberculosis. Drowning is another unexplained problem especially for young birds and this is being further investigated.

The book amply covers classification of the world's barn owls and their subspecies, explains

Oryx Vol 18 No 1