

Book reviews

The Encyclopaedia of Mammals: 1

Edited by David Macdonald
Allen and Unwin, London, 1984, £25.00

Amongst the continuing flow of large-format, well illustrated natural history books there is perhaps a danger of any one being overlooked as yet another publisher's pot-boiler irrespective of its merits. In fact this one stands head and shoulders above all previous works in its field and breaks new ground as a unique and skilful blend of scientific review and popular presentation. It is the first of a two-volume set covering all groups of mammals, this volume dealing with the carnivores, all the marine animals, the primates, the tree shrews and the flying lemurs. It is the work of 89 contributors and seven advisory editors from around the world, all specialists in their fields, skilfully edited to produce a coherent whole while retaining the individuality of many of the contributions.

It is comprehensive in that every known species is detailed, with 20–100 words of basic data. But the bulk of the text is in the form of essays covering usually one to three double spreads dealing with the major groups and then either individual species or coherent groups of species such as the otters. Each essay aims to give a rounded picture of the way of life of the species or group, integrating ecology and behaviour as far as knowledge allows, and drawing extensively upon the results of latest research. Interspersed with these are entries dealing with more specific topics, for example the social system of African hunting dogs, the status and exploitation of the harp seals and the conservation of the lion tamarins.

There are coloured illustrations on almost every page—a mixture of superb photographs and original artwork. The attempt to picture the animals engaged in characteristic behaviour is on the whole successful although occasionally verging on the gimmicky as in the line of 12 different species of small cats arranged in a single sequence of spotting, stalking and capturing a mouse, with the species names rather too far away to be helpful. Most of the large species are illustrated in some form and a selection of the smaller ones, for example 15 out of 28 'small' cats

and 15 out of 32 marine dolphins (but all six porpoises).

Provided the data are accurate (and in this respect the standard appears high) a compilation like this is of great value to the specialist as well as the layman in view of the vast volume and fragmentation of the basic literature. As a critical reference work the shortcomings are the absence of reference to original sources (although there is a short bibliography of more specialised books) and the narrative style with few subheadings. But the corollary is an eminently readable text that will appeal to and inform readers with a very wide range of interest and previous knowledge.

Gordon G. Corbet, British Museum (Natural History)

Key Environments: Galapagos

Edited by Roger Perry
Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1984, £14.95, \$23.95

I cannot remember who christened the Galapagos 'the enchanted isles', but certainly their spell continues down the ages. One might have thought that so much had been written about them that yet another book would be superfluous. Yet this volume in an interesting new series sponsored by IUCN reminds one that old books are continually going out of date and that there is always something new to report.

No better editor could have been found than the former Director of the Charles Darwin Research Station, and he has assembled a team which includes most of those who have made major contributions to our knowledge of the archipelago during the 20 years since the Station was founded: among them, Simkin on geology, Houvenhagel on oceanography, Colinvaux on climate, Porter on flora, de Vries on the tortoises, Eibl-Eibesfeldt on the iguanas and sealions and Harris on seabirds. The editor himself writes on the history, and conservation problems are dealt with by Juan Black and our former council member G.T. Corley Smith, who was until quite recently Secretary of the Charles Darwin Foundation. The illustrations are black-and-white photographs.

Successive governments of Ecuador deserve

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great credit for the support they have given during the past 50 years to the concept of conservation in the Galapagos. They have been very conscious of being the guardians of a major element in the world's scientific heritage, and ensured that the islands were among the first four World Heritage sites. Their partnership with the international scientific community, as Corley Smith points out, is unique, just as the islands themselves are in many ways unique.

Altogether the book provides a most valuable summary of the history, natural history, ecology and conservation of the Galapagos, and is now the essential reference book on the islands.

Richard Fitter, Council Member, Charles Darwin Foundation

The Macmillan Guide to Britain's Nature Reserves

Jeremy Hywel-Davies and Valerie Thom
Macmillan, London, 1984, £30.00

Recent surges of interest in natural history have tempted many British publishers to flood the market with ill-conceived or redundant books not properly covering their purported fields and executed well below the professional standards that sophisticated readers are entitled to expect. One result has been a lack of funding adequate to do each job properly. Perhaps lessons are being learnt, and we can be glad to find here a real major need correctly assessed and competently filled at a price that, high as it may seem, gives good value. Covering some 2000 sites of wildlife interest to which the public have some form of access in England, Wales, and Scotland, it gives for each basic factual information on location, area, management, character, restrictions, available publicity and best seasons to visit. This is followed by at least a few lines of description of a creditably succinct and accurate form, accompanied by well-chosen pictures in colour and black-and-white, some of the former even greener than their natural subjects! Each county or region has a preface by a locally knowledgeable naturalist briefly reviewing its distinctive features, and a map, some of which are less informative than others.

As a comprehensive major work of reference this

merits a place in any good library, and although inevitably a bit heavy will be a valuable companion in travel. It is almost too thoroughly indexed—there are over 300 page references to oak alone—and has a useful glossary and address list of organisations. Apart from its value for reference at all levels, both in the library and in the field, it will be helpful even to those who are expertly and managerially involved as a con-spectus of the present state of play in our impressively successful efforts to multiply the number and coverage of protected sites, and as a guide to the outstanding gaps.

E.M. Nicholson, conservationist and author

Enjoying Ornithology: A Celebration of Fifty Years of the British Trust for Ornithology 1933–1983

Edited and compiled by Ronald Hickling
T. and A.D. Poyser, Calton, 1983, £13.00

Anyone who is interested in birds eventually reaches the point when he or she joins the BTO, or loses enthusiasm. The Trust has after its first 50 years involved itself in every aspect of ornithology, simply because as the supreme shepherd of this pervasive occupation it has enabled the birdwatcher to expand his or her enjoyment. It has done this by supplying him or her with the motivation and the methodology to keep records, and by applying those records in enlightened ways to reveal trends and changes in the status of birds in Britain.

From the contributions of many writers, Ronald Hickling has most smoothly contrived a clear and logical history of a half-century in which the science of ornithology has advanced at an astonishing rate. Max Nicholson's story of the BTO's birth is followed by Robert Spencer's assessment of its current role. Each of the Trust's major surveys is described in terms of its contribution to ecological knowledge and of its relevance to birdwatching as purely a hobby. In 'Our Changing Avifauna' the origins and status of Britain's bird life are a source of fascination exceeded only by the excitement of anticipating its future; this chapter, too, is by Robert Spencer, surely now the most skilful communicator of all writers about birds.

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