

## Book Reviews

**The River People**, by Philip Wayre. Collins & Harvill Press, £3.95.

Philip Wayre has reared otters in his home and suffered the inevitable consequences, kept them in the Norfolk Wildlife Park, of which he is Director, travelled to SE Asia to study them in the wild, and, just recently, established a headquarters for the Otter Trust at Earsham in Norfolk where he plans to keep as many otter species as possible. He is a man whose enthusiasm for otters knows no bounds.

Remarkably little is known about otter behaviour and ecology. Even the more familiar species, such as our own, have received little serious attention from naturalists, the reason being only too obvious—that they are incredibly difficult to study in the wild. However, much can be learnt from studying them under controlled conditions, and the author has probably done this more extensively than anybody else. By rearing them from birth, watching their first introduction to water, studying their feeding behaviour and swimming with them in the rivers of Norfolk he has learned much about their way of life. *The River People* describes his adventures with the various species he has cared for and the detailed observations he has made of their breeding habits and mode of life. He also includes two vividly written chapters about his expedition to Malaysia to search for otters and to find out about the distribution and habitat preferences of the short-clawed and Indian smooth-coated species. Otters in Britain need all the help they can get, so it is relevant that the author should also describe how their conservation can be helped.

The book is well illustrated, thanks to the author's expertise as a photographer, and can be recommended as a lively and enjoyable contribution towards the understanding of these charming creatures.

ERNEST NEAL

**The Naturalist in Britain: A social history**, by D. E. Allen. Allen Lane, £9.

David Elliston Allen, author of a charming little book, *The Victorian Fern Craze* (1969), now explores a wider field in this erudite and elegantly written study of the natural history movement in Britain. His story begins in the 17th century with botanising rambles—precursors of the modern field course—organised by the Society of Apothecaries for its apprentices, and ends with the government-sponsored institutions of the present day, such as the Nature Conservancy Council. The significant trends throughout more than 300 years of natural history are ably described; the fashionable accumulation of cabinets of curiosa by the wealthy, the Spartan travels of Scottish naturalists, the impact of Darwin, the interaction between the professional and amateur, and the role of the universities and government. Then there are the effects of human technology on British wildlife; the devastating overkill which followed improvements in the design of the shotgun and the timely reaction in favour of binoculars and camera, the influence of mechanised transport, and the rise of the conservation movement.

The author tells us much about people, but more about institutions. The affairs of the numerous natural history societies during the 18th and 19th centuries make a fascinating story of dedication and acrimony, frustration and triumph, which might well provide a rich and virtually untapped source of background material for the historical novelist. He has a keen eye for the social nuances and nicely delineates the touch of self-conscious eccentricity which is so endearing in many naturalists, and the subtle ways in which this conflicted with the social tabus of the Victorian age.

Yet despite his learning the author is very selective, perhaps too much so. He writes excellently about botany, geology, entomology, ornithology and the foundations of marine biology. Some may deem this enough but one might have liked more

about the devotees of land and freshwater molluscs, of spiders, and of vertebrate groups besides birds. W. N. P. Barbellion is quoted twice, but somehow Mr Allen resists the temptation to tell us that he wrote that most moving of diaries, *The Journal of a Disappointed Man*, besides publishing (under his real name of B. F. Cummings) some pioneer experiments on the orientation of British amphibians. There is no proper bibliography and its absence is only partly relieved by a chapter of notes on sources.

The illustrations include interesting photos, reproductions of old drawings, and attractive contemporary black and white sketches. I found the print tiresomely small and grey. Unfortunately the price, excessive even by modern standards, will prevent many from obtaining this important and engrossing book.

A. d'A. BELLAIRS

**Nature in Trust: the history of nature conservation in Britain, by John Sheail.** Blackie, £5.95.

It is a sobering experience to see events in which you have taken part treated as history, and to find one's brief notes, penned following a field trip, used as historical documents. This has happened to me in reading John Sheail's chapters on the genesis of the Nature Conservancy and its national nature reserves, for, as secretary of the official committee whose report led to its formation, I took part in many of the field trips to verify that the proposed national nature reserves were still sufficiently unspoiled to be worth recommending.

In many ways this book complements David Allen's *The Naturalist in Britain*, reviewed above, for it leans heavily to the official side of the movement, whereas Allen's book is devoted almost entirely to the unofficial side. This is partly because the official side has left copious documentation about itself, while the documentation of the unofficial side, in so far as it exists, is widely scattered and much less accessible.

However, so far as possible, Dr Sheail covers the ground very thoroughly, from the first stirrings of the modern movement in the mid-19th century down to about 1970. Among other interesting items he disinters the prototype of the Council for Nature: the British Correlating Committee for the Protection of Nature, founded in 1924. This began by taking an interest in the wider world, no doubt under the aegis of the Society for the Preservation of the Wild Fauna of the Empire, and discussed 'the future of the dik-dik in Africa, whales and various migratory species.' However, it quickly repented of this incipient internationalism, which explains why the SPFE, now the Fauna Preservation Society and the second senior British conservation society (after the RSPB), does not merit even a mention by Dr Sheail.

Nevertheless, the book is a must for those engaged in or interested in the British conservation movement. The eye of a historian, who is himself not a biologist but a geographer, gives a refreshing new look at what we have been doing for the past fifty years or so.

RICHARD FITTER

**Rare, Disappearing and Lesser-Known Birds of the USSR**, edited by A. S. Rak. (in Russian) Oka State Nature Reserve and Central Laboratory for the Protection of Nature.

This interesting little book, published under the auspices of the Chief Administration for the Protection of Nature, Nature Reserves and the Hunting Economy of the Ministry of Agriculture of the USSR, consists of a three-page introduction and a collection of brief reports by Soviet ornithologists on thirty species of birds—rare, decreasing in numbers, or little known—including red-breasted goose, Siberian white crane, Ross's gull, Pallas's sandgrouse, the red-faced cormorant of the Kurile