

Book reviews

Space does not allow the deserved mention of all the contributors whose effective writings have presented a flawless account of birds and their watchers. The reader will enjoy this book; but, more importantly, he or she will identify and understand countless ways of enjoying *birds*.

That this remarkable book is now being offered free to new BTO members makes it the most sumptuous and enticing recruitment brochure in the history of this or any other of man's obsessions.

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Our Wildlife in Peril

Endangered Species Committee of the Total Environment Centre

A.H. and A.W. Reed, Pty Ltd, Sydney, 1983, £12.95, A\$19.95

This useful book surveys Australia's endangered species (and subspecies), stating where each lives and why it is endangered. It is well printed and attractively organised, and Dorothy Dunphy's black-and-white drawings are both accurate and aesthetically pleasing.

For most of us, a phrase such as 'wildlife in peril' conjures up pictures of rhinos and condors; the incorporation of '... and Flora' into our society's name forces us to bethink ourselves of redwoods as well. Though dealing with animals only, it is one of the benefits of this book that it goes beyond mammals and birds, and has sections on reptiles, amphibians and fish too, and even has a go at listing endangered invertebrates. As the text acknowledges, 'Most invertebrates are endangered to the extent that their habitat is endangered' (page 156), and despite the existence of the bush vandal crowd, who delights in killing for its own sake, in Australia as everywhere else, this comment could very largely be taken to apply to all animals.

Inevitably, errors and gremlins have crept in; mostly not very serious ones, though. On page 34 you will find it stated that the last known thylacine (Tasmanian 'wolf' or 'tiger') died in Hobart Zoo in 1934. There is in fact no Hobart Zoo; a private collection, known as Beaumaris Zoo, was taken over by Hobart City Council on its owner's death

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in 1921, and there died the last thylacine, two years later than the book says (on 7 September 1936). One other deficiency, at least, turns out not to be the compilers' fault: on page 38 you will find '*Petrogale* sp. undescribed, proserpine rock-wallaby': this species was in fact described in a paper by Maynes dated 10 May 1982, as *Petrogale persephone* (and a highly distinctive, as well as highly endangered, species it is). It has been explained to me that, though the book was published late last year, it had been ready for the press long before that, but was delayed by the vicissitudes of publishing during which no updates could be made. What a pity: a conservation book, above all, should be bang up to date.

The non-Australian conservationist will find much of interest here. The devastation wreaked by introduced species has been astounding: so many formerly widespread species have been swept off their entire mainland ranges by competition from the introductions, surviving only if their ranges happened to include offshore islands which were not reached by rabbits, hares, foxes, feral cats, introduced rats and mice, goats, donkeys, horses, camels, buffaloes, sparrows, starlings, blackbirds. . . The distribution maps in the book make this quite clear: look at the map on page 57 for *Leporillus conditor*, the greater stick-nest rat, with its vast 'former range' a shadowy grey, and a tiny orange spot to indicate Franklin Island where 1000 or so survive; and then look on the next page for the map of the lesser stick-nest rat, *L. apicalis*, which included no offshore islands in its range—the map has only grey on it. The text perhaps does not make quite enough of this point: although half or more of the species surveys talk of habitat alteration and competition from exotics, the same point could probably be made for every one of them!

The non-Australian, accustomed to thinking of Australian mammals as entirely marsupials and monotremes, will be reminded of the presence of indigenous rodents and bats, and will learn that while neither of the two monotreme species is endangered, proportionally more rodent species than marsupials are in the most highly endangered category.

At the end of the book is a summary chart of

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regional distributions of the species that have been described. Given what I have just stressed, this could be seen as the most important part of the whole book, as it identifies habitats. The eye will run down the list of species and see that probably more, proportionally, live in region 20, the 'Townsville-Cooktown rainforest area', than any other. The table will not tell you, unfortunately, that there are two divisions in this region: a southern one (Atherton Tablelands and Bellenden Ker range), and a northern one (Daintree/Bloomfield forests). Some of region 20's species are found in both; others, such as the two species of tree-kangaroo, are restricted to one or the other. The Daintree/Bloomfield forests, despite being in part included in the Cape Tribulation National Park, are at present under threat. Australia, as the book's introduction indicates—though this may not be made sufficiently explicit for foreigners—suffers from a stultifying federal system, with divisions of responsibility between the Federal Government and the State Governments. At the last federal election, the balance was probably swung Labour's way by that party's promise to take on the Tasmanian (State) Government and save the wild Franklin River from being dammed. Now another federal election is due, and another conservation issue has arisen; but this time, Labour is in power, and if it wants to save the Daintree forests it must take on the powerful Queensland State Government, and could lose more seats in Queensland than it would gain elsewhere . . .

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Extinct and Endangered Plants of Australia

J. Leigh, R. Boden and J. Briggs
The MacMillan Company of Australia PTY Ltd and World Wildlife Fund, 1984, Australian \$49.95*

It is rather disturbing that books on extinct and endangered plants should now assume the proportions of a major systematic monograph. By any standards this new work is a masterly treatment. Not only Captain Cook will be remembered at Australia's bicentenary in 1988 but the

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appearance of this study will commemorate the 78 species presumed extinct and remind us of the 201 species that have become endangered as a direct result of the 200 years' worth of colonisation of Australia by Europeans.

The bulk of the text (240 pages) describes, in a series of formal case histories, each rare and endangered plant species, with additional notes about the group to which it belongs, its conservation status and geographical distribution. Most importantly it also gives an account of Australian attitudes to plants—both historical and modern—the role of plants, a description of extinction, a superb account of vegetation types, a very positive tabular account of the threats and an account of the conservation strategies that might be applied to save plants. The style of the layout follows the very popular 'Reed books' on Australian plants. Especially good are the many excellent photographs highlighting different habitats and those species most at risk.

As one might expect, the areas that have come off worst are those that are best known botanically with the richest, most diverse floras near urban conurbations. At the worst end of the scale the greatest number of extinct and endangered species occurred, or still occur, in the south-west of Western Australia and south-east Queensland. The most obvious threats are vividly demonstrated to be urbanisation, agriculture and pastoralism. Those areas least disturbed, with apparently no extinctions or real threats, occur within the arid zones of Central Australia. This probably reflects the relatively small disturbances, but also underlines the poor state of botanical knowledge of these areas. All but one of the presumed extinct species and all but four of the endangered taxa (some 197) were or are endemic to Australia.

Although it seems to me that some of the accounts are over-pessimistic, when we know that some rare species are truly rare, the message is quite clear. If the present practices of wide-scale clearing, overgrazing, mining, urban development, man-made forest fires and the introduction of exotic competitors continues at the present rate the relatively small figures (between one and two per cent of the total flora) can only get a lot bigger.

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