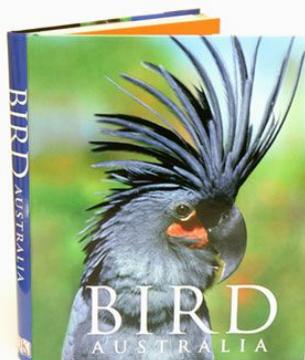


Some Recent Natural History Publications #13 August 2010

Bird Australia

Dorling Kindersley Publishers. 272 pages. RRP \$69.95



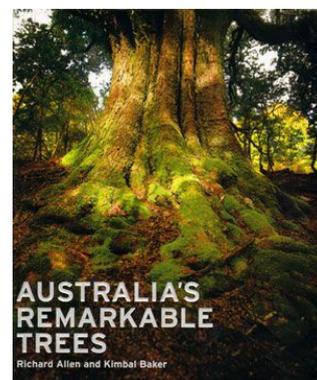
This is an undoubtedly lavish book with lots of lovely photos, but it's a somewhat curious chimera. In part it suffers from trying to do too much. There are three sections. The 'Introduction', 46 pages long, has sections on many aspects of anatomy, courtship, feeding, migration, conservation etc; with such an array of topics, inevitably each is covered very superficially. The second section is on Habitats, a two-page spread for each of 12 different habitats – again not much detail. Then there's a third section, with a brief coverage of virtually each Australian species, including a photo. Each account is of only around 100 words, including a description, so again is unlikely to add much to anyone's knowledge, though the family accounts (sub-family for passerines) certainly help. Some more informed editing would also have helped in places; eg under White-faced Robin we are told that its Queensland-New Guinea

distribution offers "yet more evidence that the two areas were once connected"; this is true of course, but it's hardly a contentious proposition that needs 'more evidence'! You will note that no authors are cited. However, more seriously *caveat emptor* – it's a chimera in another way too. It's really something of a cut and paste job of a world-wide version *Bird; the definitive visual guide*, which was published simultaneously in the Northern Hemisphere. (Hence too I assume the rather odd title.) The first two sections are identical in both versions; ie despite the implications of the name, the information on behaviour etc has no Australian slant and few Australian examples. Perhaps more frustratingly, the information on habitat is almost entirely not about Australia; this is fine in that such information should be of interest to us, but it needs to be made clearer to a potential buyer. Perhaps an interested child would benefit from this – though the promotion tells us the book is aimed at adults – but you might also look at other options for that many dollars.

Australia's Remarkable Trees

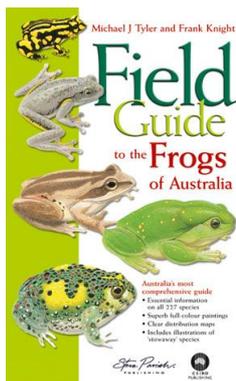
Richard Allen and Kimbal Baker. Miegunyah Press. 254 pages. RRP \$70

This is, at first blush, a coffee table book, based on the glossy large format and plethora of photos. However Miegunyah, an imprint of Melbourne Uni Press, doesn't generally do straight coffee-table pretties, though they do claim, with no noticeable excess of modesty, to publish "prestigious books of the highest printing and design quality at affordable prices". One might quibble about a definition of affordability, but this is a truly beautiful book and can be savoured once just for the superb photos, then read in detail for the thoroughly researched historical information, which I have to assume is accurate; I certainly don't see any apparent errors. Allen, a journalist, and Baker, photographer, have selected 50 magnificent trees from right across the country, on the basis (in various categories) of sheer splendour, of great antiquity, of historical significance or of sheer size. There are also a couple of more obscure categories (none of the six are defined anywhere nor, more significantly, are the criteria for inclusion of individual trees) of Private Trees and Foreign Invaders. Each tree gets at least a double-page photo spread, plus a page of very readable and informative text and at least one more full page photo and a smaller one. Many get another two pages, including a second full page photo, more text and smaller photos. Native 'original' trees, very much my own bias, account for 36 of the 50. I would now like to visit every one of these (and maybe even some of the others...). Meantime, if you feel like indulging yourself, you could spend \$70 in many less rewarding ways.



Field Guide to the Frogs of Australia

Michael Tyler and Frank Knight. CSIRO Publishing. 188 pages. RRP \$49.95

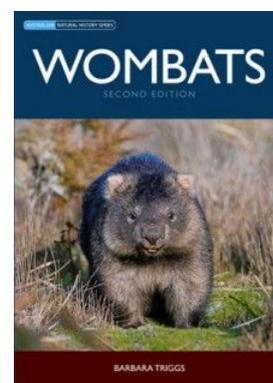


Michael Tyler, lab technician turned academic and media performer, Australia's best-known frogger, and Frank Knight, perhaps Australia's most versatile wildlife field guide illustrator, make a formidable team. And this is a formidable field guide, filling the last gap in Australian 21st century terrestrial vertebrate guides. Knight has already illustrated what is, to my mind, our premier bird field guide, and our only national mammals guide. Tyler has written several books about frogs, including co-authoring the last field guide, back in 1995. Since that guide some 20-30 frog species have been added to the Australian list; since the previous edition of that (in 1977) the number is closer to 80. This is what I want of a modern field guide; three or four species to a page, so the illustrations are large and clear, with enough space for some useful text, including distribution notes (in addition to a map), behaviour (which however really refers only to breeding biology), conservation status, habitat, call and similar species. Where relevant, top or bottom views are also shown, and colour variations as appropriate. You need this book.

Wombats; second edition

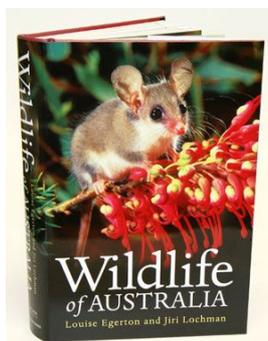
Barbara Triggs. CSIRO Publishing; Australian Natural History Series. 153 pages. RRP \$39.95

You know a series has come of age – as if this one had not already long ago done so! – when revised editions of earlier titles start appearing. (Actually the 1996 edition was already reprinted from 1988, but I don't recall that it was much revised.) Barbara Triggs is again the author; while perhaps not an academic researcher, she is very well respected (and perhaps better known as the author of *Tracks, Scats and Other Traces*) and has studied wombats in the wild for some 40 years. She also draws heavily on the published literature. The bias is heavily towards the Bare-nosed Wombat – Triggs has adopted this name in place of the more generally used Common Wombat for our local rep, which makes good sense to me to contrast with the two dry country Hairy-nosed species. I would have liked a more even balance of information between the three species, but to be fair she has selected the species that most Australians, and certainly most eastern staters, know the best. As we would expect from this eminent series, there are chapters on evolution, anatomy, reproduction, threats and behaviour (I do like *What goes on in a burrow?* as a chapter heading). Somewhat contentiously there is quite a bit on hand-rearing orphan wombats. While her first DO is to get a permit to do so, I'm always uneasy about tempting people to have a go anyway by offering information; such information could be made available via the relevant authority or wildlife care group. However this is an aside and does not detract at all from the value of the book to those of us who are fascinated by wildlife and want up-to-date information.



Wildlife of Australia

Louise Egerton and Jiri Lochman. Jacana Books, Allen and Unwin. 448 pages. RRP \$60



This is another ambitious and earnest attempt to cover Life, the Universe and Everything, in one volume and, in this case, by one author. The lumping of, for instance, Quails and Button-quails, Swallows and Swifts, Treecreepers and Sittellas tells us something of its limitations. We have for decades known that these similarish pairings are entirely unrelated; I am not necessarily suggesting that the author doesn't know this, although by making no reference to relationships at all she's certainly implying something misleading. She's obviously had it checked – there is a long list of eminent Acknowledgements – and it is generally correct as far as it goes. (Though she perpetuates the old red herring of 'difference between butterflies and moths'.) But as well as being inevitably shallow, as happens when we spread ourselves too thinly, it is generally *dull!*

There are always interesting snippets that can be passed on to focus interest in any animal or animal group; they are entirely absent here. The leader in this difficult field remains unchallenged as the *Encyclopedia* (sic) of *Australian Wildlife*, first published (perhaps surprisingly) by Readers Digest back in 1997; curiously it was revised in 2007 – with Egerton as the editor! Given that, I don't get the purpose of the current volume at all.

Ian Fraser is a Canberra-based professional naturalist and writer (viz, he doesn't make much money!) who is the author of six books on local natural history. He has run the educational Environment Tours nature-based tours program in association with the local Environment Centre since 1984 and has been the voice of natural history on local ABC radio since 1992. The ABC recently produced a four-CD set of his 'Around the Bush Capital' series. In 2001 he won the *Australian Plants Award*, Australian Native Plants Association, professional category and in 2006 he was awarded the Australian Natural History Medallion. He claims no expertise and has no natural history favourites – except for birds and orchids...

This periodic review is emailed free on request, in order to help anyone interested in Australian natural history to keep up with the burgeoning literature. Previous issues available at <http://www.botanicalbookshop.com.au/reviews.asp> for which my thanks to Tom Butts of the Botanical Bookshop.

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