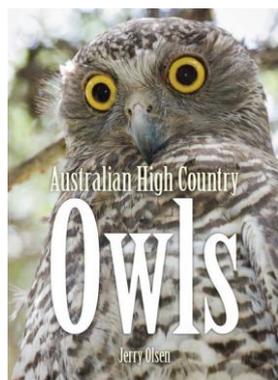


Some Recent Natural History Publications #16 December 2011



Australian High Country Owls

Jerry Olsen

CSIRO Publishing. 376 pages. RRP \$69.95

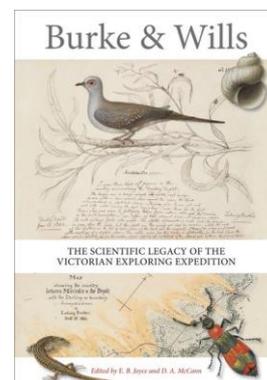
This is a long-promised and eagerly awaited book from the person probably most qualified in Australia – and perhaps the world – to do so, though Canberra ornithologist Jerry Olsen is likely to be better known for his work on daytime raptors, including Peregrines, Little and Wedge-tailed Eagles. I am puzzled by the title; while some books claim more than they offer, this one claims much less! In truth it is a book about owls in general, drawing on his experiences in Europe, North America and Indonesia, though there is a welcome focus on his extensive work on Southern Boobooks on Black Mountain and adjacent suburbs, and the argument would probably be that all the other case studies are included to explain things about local owls. Nonetheless I always appreciate the big picture, and this book meets my expectations in that direction admirably. Multi-chapter sections include *Studying Owls*, *Diet and Hunting*, *Breeding* and *Conservation*, with chapters high-lighting case studies from all over the world to illustrate the points made. The *Breeding* Section alone for instance contains 17 chapters on a whole range of aspects, built around the detailed Canberra Boobook studies but going as far afield as necessary to explain ecological concepts – including a fascinating chapter on Snowy Owl responses to a savage winter in western Canada (though the excellent CSIRO editors made a rare slip-up here, allowing Vancouver to be described as in “south-east Canada”). Throughout the book Olsen introduces ecological, behavioural and taxonomic concepts (*inter alia*), both as tools to explain what we see, and as important and interesting ideas in their own right. And the book couldn't have been complete without an account of the exciting find by Olsen and colleagues of a new boobook species, the Little Sumba Hawk Owl, in south-eastern Indonesia. I'm never comfortable with detailed 'how to' instructions on caring for and rehabilitating injured native wildlife, given the risk that untrained and unlicensed people might be tempted to try it, but I understand the rationale too, and no-one is better qualified to write on it than Olsen. Throughout the book his passion for owls shines, always a feature of his work and writing. You'll wait a long time for a better book on owls than this one.

Burke & Wills; the scientific legacy of the Victorian Exploring Expedition

EB Joyce and DA McCann (eds)

CSIRO Publishing. 368 pages. RRP \$59.95

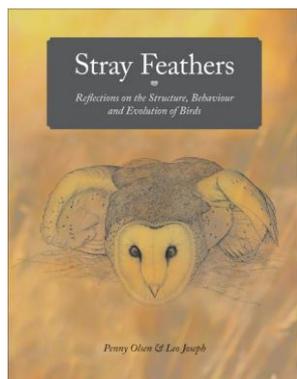
I think that things are not as dire in the traditional book publishing industry as sometimes asserted, when such a book as this can be produced, presumably with the expectation of at least recouping the costs. For most Australians, it would be an alien idea that the Victorian Exploring Expedition (known near universally as the Burke and Wills expedition) was primarily intended as one of scientific study, but in fact it was sponsored by the Philosophical Institute of Victoria (soon to evolve into the Royal Society of Victoria) who supplied 10 pages of detailed instructions for scientific responsibilities and measurements. (These are reproduced as one of the book's excellent appendices.) Some of the colony's leading scientists were on the organising committee, including von Mueller himself (though he withdrew after the baffling, to us and presumably to him, appointment of Robert Burke as expedition leader). After the jingoistic excitement of the aftermath of the expedition's catastrophic finale had faded, the general consensus has been that the exercise produced little or nothing of scientific value. This book challenges that, based on impressive and exhaustive re-examination of the evidence by a range of authors. It concludes that the scientists – expedition deputy, surveyor, astronomer and meteorologist William Wills, artist-naturalist Ludwig Becker and botanical collector (and surgeon) Hermann Beckler – in fact made significant contributions. The case is strengthened by cleverly including the contributions of the impressive Alfred Howitt's two expeditions to discover the fate of the enterprise, and to bring back the bodies for burial in Melbourne – this might technically be cheating but I doubt that anyone will object. Whether your interest is in the development of scientific endeavour in the mid-19th century (and there might be a case for arguing that it was more highly regarded then than now), the social history aspects, with all the fascinating personality clashes, the retelling of the details of the journey itself, Beckler's impressive sketches or the examination and revelation of the real achievements of the scientists, there is something here for you.



Stray Feathers; reflections on the structure, behaviour and evolution of birds

Penny Olsen and Leo Joseph

CSIRO Publishing. 286 pages. RRP \$59.95



This fascinating book is based on a most unusual platform, taking the line drawings prepared for the planned volume on birds in the Australian Biological Resources Study's *Fauna of Australia* series, which was superseded before publication in the early 1990s, and using them to illustrate a selection of short essays. Olsen, a clear and clean writer, is well known for her work on birds of prey, but more recently has created her own publishing niche in the area of Australian birds in art and history. Leo Joseph tends to approach birds with an anatomist's and taxonomist's eye, but has written on evolution, most recently in the excellent *Boom and Bust; bird stories for a dry country*. The essays follow the theme of evolutionary adaptations of Australian birds across the full gamut of topics, including anatomy, senses, tongues, plumage, feeding, tool use, communication, courtship, 'living together' (with the same and different species)

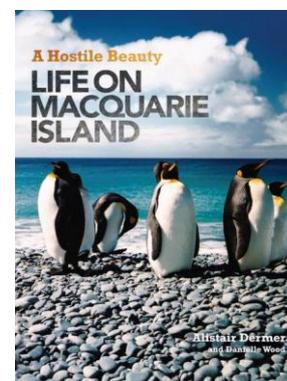
and nests. The drawings themselves are a delight – artists include such luminaries of contemporary bird art as Peter Marsack, William Cooper and Nicholas Day, but the star, who provided the bulk of them, is the somewhat mysterious Trisha Wright who 'could not be located to seek her blessing'. Much of the reading really is a pleasure too, especially for anyone (and isn't that everyone?) who delights in learning new things about this wonderful land that we have the privilege of living in. I am intrigued that male Great Bowerbirds arrange their decorative objects – stones, shells, bones etc – in a gradient of size, increasing with distance from the bower, so that from the distant female's perspective he stands out and looks larger than life. Closer to home, male Golden-headed Cisticolas prepare for breeding by building courtship nests to convince potential mates of his desirability – if she likes it, after mating she completes it and lays her eggs into it. He may have up to 14 such consorts in nests he has built in his territory. All of this information is made readily available to any of us with an interest, but unfortunately not all of the treasures in this book are so easily enjoyed. To be honest I struggled to follow some of the aspects of Joseph's introduction, though his device of using a single singing male White-winged Fairy-wren to illustrate a breadth of topics is a good one, and no amount of work enabled me to see the things he wants me to in his 'simplified evolutionary tree' graphic. Unless you're very familiar with anatomy, you might want initially to skip the first section and come back to it when you've enjoyed later essays; I found it heavy going, mostly because of the lack of compromise regarding technical terminology. This, however, should most definitely not be enough to put you off this remarkable collection of fascinating information – from why cormorants hang their wings out to the 'built-in bagpipes' of Magpie Geese – exquisitely illustrated. Get from it what you enjoy and want, and peck away later at the rest; it's all very rewarding. (*This is an abbreviated version of a review that appeared in the Canberra Times on 17 September; full text available on request.*)

A Hostile Beauty; life on Macquarie Island

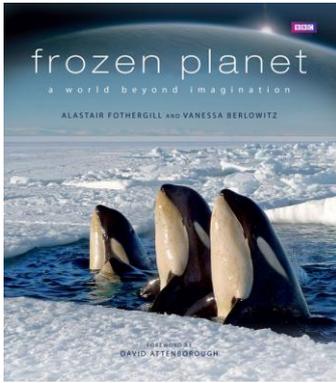
Alastair Dermer and Danielle Wood

Miegunyah Press. 208 pages. RRP \$70 (*I refuse to even report an RRP of \$69.99!*)

Given the ready availability of high quality images in a range of formats, I'm somewhat surprised that there is still a market for glossy expensive picture books, unless they are of exceptional quality or of truly original subjects. Sadly I'm not convinced that this book is either, but others – including Bob Brown who wrote the Foreword and launched it – clearly disagree with me. Dermer spent six months on the island ten years ago, with the intent of staging an exhibition of his photos, but was apparently persuaded to make a book of them instead. There is no question that this is *his* book, despite the collaboration with an author, the talented Wood, professional writer at the University of Tasmania; her name on the cover is in a font less than half the size of his name, and deep down the page of Dermer's sometimes lavish *Acknowledgements* is the minimalist "thanks to Danielle Wood for her contribution". The publicity sheet doesn't even offer her for interview. One



does not sense a happy partnership. Nonetheless I enjoyed Wood's descriptions of animals, plants, the often brutal and plunderous human history and conservation challenges, and would have liked more of them. There is no doubt that many of the photos are very good, taken with a good camera in spectacular scenery with human-tolerant animals; I like the close-ups, but I don't feel I'm seeing anything very new. I'm one who is probably more interested by the sub-Antarctic islands such as Macquarie than by the frozen continent itself, but I couldn't in honesty suggest that you go and spend \$70 on this book.



Frozen Planet; a world beyond imagination

Alastair Fothergill and Vanessa Berlowitz
BBC Books. 312 pages. RRP \$55

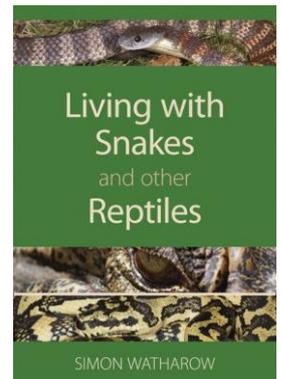
Given the topics, the comparison between this book and the previous one are inevitable, but given the disparity between the resources of the authors and photographers, they are probably unfair. It seems that of all the spectacular episodes of the remarkable BBC/Attenborough *Planet Earth* series (I think my favourite TV series of all time), the *Ice Worlds* episode was the most popular, and that this was used to identify the next series – this one. Somehow I didn't watch it recently (because, I just confirmed, it wasn't on the ABC, so I probably failed to notice it!), but this book tells me that was a mistake. The book is full of photos that really make me gasp in amazement – at their extraordinary subjects, their spectacular composition and technical brilliance or amazing beauty (or combination of those). Subjects range from macro shots of snowflake structure to soaring Aurora Borealis to close-ups of animals from Weasels to Polar Bears. The text is equally superb, a wonderfully written and polished narrative, though being essentially a commentary it is in present tense throughout, which can be a bit disconcerting until you get the hang of it. The bulk of the book follows the four seasons, jumping from Arctic to Antarctic with surprising comfort, though again it is really a TV series on paper so it reads as a series of scenes. The last chapter tells some secrets, as to how some of the most dramatic sequences were planned and shot (which I enjoy) but the penultimate one is more chilling than the ice. It explains, calmly and unequivocally, how rising temperatures are shrinking the ice caps, breaking up the edges of the ice shelves, forcing animals to follow the ice north and south, displacing and competing with others, drowning hunting Polar Bears, making Narwhals more accessible to Killer Whales. (I understand, though not from this book, that this episode will not be shown in the US...) I think that this book is well worth the outlay, not least because none of us will ever see these places, and will certainly not see some of the things the BBC has yet again brought to us. And the pictures will blow your ugg boots off.

Living with Snakes and Other Reptiles

Simon Watharow

CSIRO Publishing. 160 pages. RRP \$29.95

I'm afraid I don't really get this book, though on the surface it could be potentially useful. The problem is that it doesn't do what the title claims it does, and in fact doesn't do anything much that hasn't been done more thoroughly before. Everything is very brief; sketchy chapters on *Snakes in History* and biology of snakes appear skimpy indeed compared with say, Rick Shine's excellent work from a few years ago. *Why Do We Fear Snakes?* could have been interesting, but seems to have been written off the top of the head with no reference to anyone who might have actually shed light on it. And strangely, the chapters which you might think were the real point of it, such as *Living With Snakes*, do not address the topic at all but are simply a series of brief accounts of selected species. *Living With Lizards*, where the "most common offenders" include Shinglebacks, legless lizards and a couple of geckoes, leaves me baffled. But Watharow seriously challenges his own credentials in the Appendix entitled *Common 'nuisance reptiles' of NSW and ACT*, which helpfully provides a column specifically for the ACT; unfortunately five of the first six snakes he lists for the ACT do not live here, and except for Diamond Python (unrecorded for some 85 years) have never been recorded. One which is quite common – White-lipped Snake – is not listed. It might call the rest of it into doubt if there was any substance to question.



The Biggest Estate on Earth; how Aborigines made Australia

Bill Gammage

Allen & Unwin. 384 pages. RRP \$50

This is not a review – I have not had time as yet to do this book the honour it deserves, which means reading it thoroughly from cover to cover. Eminent local historian Bill Gammage has spent years doing some of the most comprehensive and thorough research conceivable on Aboriginal use of fire throughout Australia, and explores the implications of that for land management then and now. It has already attracted both major awards and controversy; while it covers a much smaller time scale than Tim Flannery did with *The Future Eaters*, it has the potential to change our thinking about the country in a way no book has done since then. Gammage writes clearly and potently, with empathy, grace and humour. Even with the relatively little I've so far read, I can promise that it's a 'should read' for all of us, and will fuel sparkling conversations over dinner for years to come.

Ian Fraser is a Canberra-based professional naturalist and writer (viz, he doesn't make much money!) who is the author of seven books on local natural history, most recently A Bush Capital Year, CSIRO Publishing 2011, with artist Peter Marsack. He has run the educational Environment Tours nature-based tours program since 1984 and has been the voice of natural history on local ABC radio since 1992. The ABC in 2004 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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