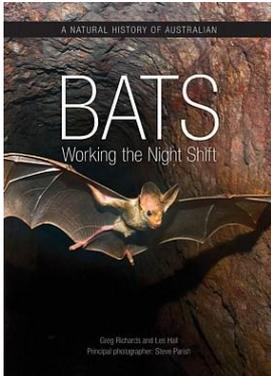


Some Recent Natural History Publications #17 June 2012

Bats; working the night shift

Greg Richards and Les Hall
CSIRO Publishing. 184 pages. RRP \$79.95

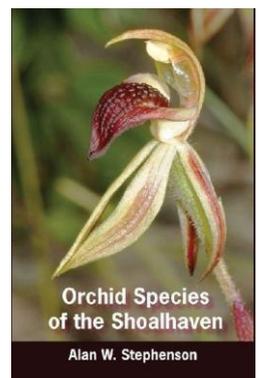


I'm always a soft touch for a book on bats, surely one of the most fascinating of all mammal groups, and I love well-planned and -designed natural history books, especially when written with passion. This book then is a real winner for me, ticking all the boxes. A key part of its success lies in the authors, colleagues in bat studies since they met as CSIRO Wildlife technicians in the 1960s. Hall later went on to work for 26 years at the University of Queensland, and is now a consultant in Australia and South-east Asia, as is Richards, the lead author, who spent his career with CSIRO. Between them they've studied bats for some 90 years! They formerly collaborated on a book on fruit bats in the CSIRO's Australian Natural History Series, but that was oriented somewhat to the more scientifically-minded; this one covers all Australian bat species (ie microbats as well as fruit bats) and is for everyone. The tone is discursive and it is easy to imagine the information being conveyed as a series of informal yarns – except that the blokes spinning the yarns know more about bats than most of the rest of Australia combined. Throughout the photos are superb, and sometimes downright surprising. The book begins, beguilingly “To hold a little micro-bat in your hand, its body the size of the end of your thumb, is nothing but astounding”. The approach to the contents is refreshingly original. A *Travelogue* chapter includes (along with major regions), bats of each capital city. As a happy Canberran I am delighted to read that “As well as being a great place to live in, the ‘Bush Capital’ is also a great place for bats”. Other chapter headings include *How bats are designed and how they work*, *Breeding*, *Ecology*, *Trial and tribulations of being a bat* (from crocodiles and barbed-wire fences to climate change) and *Bats in history and in our lives today*. Throughout there is an emphasis on interesting, often personal, anecdotes (I like the ‘bat in the motel shower’ story) and fascinatingly odd snippets on every conceivable bat topic. This reaches a zenith in the last chapter *Facts about bats and species profiles*; did you know that a small bat can eat 600 mozzies an hour, or that bat guano is a ‘powerful plant fertiliser’ and has been used in gunpowder manufacture? If you did know this, and very much more, maybe you don't need this book. The rest of us will be greatly enriched by it.

Orchid Species of the Shoalhaven

Alan Stephenson
Self-published. 54 pages. RRP \$20

My only excuse for not including this useful field guide in my last review is that I'd been using it in the field, and omitted to return it to my 'to review' pile. Stephenson is very well-qualified to write this guide, having been an active orchid enthusiast in the Shoalhaven (the area from north of Nowra south almost to Batemans Bay) for nearly 30 years. He has 'rediscovered' two supposedly extinct species and added several to the Shoalhaven list. As with many people who become captivated by orchids, he has also committed himself to their conservation; he has written informed submissions opposing many inappropriate local developments, and serves as the Conservation Officer for the Australian Native Orchid Association. It is a measure of the Shoalhaven's richness and Stephenson's diligence that the book contains nearly 150 species, all illustrated; this must be close to comprehensive. It is a basic guide, but quite adequate, liberally illustrated with clear photos, and fairly minimal text. I could actually have done with a few more words in each case; an important part of a field guide to me is 'key identification points' and 'distinguish from similar species'. While he offers habitat preferences for each species, in such a well-defined area suggestions as to particular orchid sites would be appropriate; there are very good reasons to be coy about the locale of threatened species, but recommending places for visitors to look for other orchids could only enhance Stephenson's intent for the book. One problem for self-publishers is that editorial input is optional, and perhaps an independent editor could have suggested some of these things. On the other hand, more power to the arm and keyboard of those willing to take the risk, and if you visit the Shoalhaven and are into orchids (perhaps the ultimate expression of botany – a personal opinion only, mind you), do yourself a favour and spend \$20.



Common Plants; Victoria River District & Northern Barkly

Diane Napier, Nicholas Smith, Lesley Alford

Common Plants of Australia's Top End

Diane Napier, Nicholas Smith, Lesley Alford and Jacinda Brown

Common Urban Weeds of North Australia

Michael Schmid and Nicholas Smith

Gecko Books. 77 pages (each). RRP \$12.95 (each)



Years ago the Northern Territory Conservation Commission introduced the Identikit series of field guides of plants and animals, the format being one species per A6 page (ie a quarter of an A4), and compact at generally well under 100 pages. They were relatively cheap, so attractive to a visitor to an area, fitted easily in the pocket and were very successful and popular, the concept being taken up for flower book guides in South Australia, Western Australia and Victoria at least. The Conservation Commission has apparently long run out of funding for them, but they live on elsewhere – and now, thanks to a group of very capable Top Enders, they have returned to the Territory too. The authors are too modest to introduce

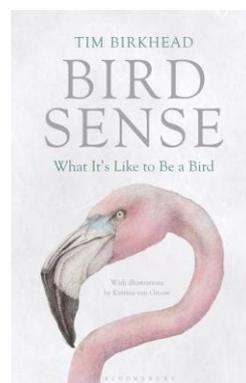
themselves in the books or accompanying promo, but some basic research reveals their excellent credentials. Alford is an environmental consultant and horticultural activist, including work with the Aboriginal Landcare Education Program; Brown is a successful freelance photographer; Napier is an ecologist, at least until recently with the NT government; Schmid has also done much work for the NT government, especially on weeds; Smith has published on Top End native and exotic plants for Greening Australia and the Northern Land Council. The formats for the two native plant books are the same; three or four apposite photos (full plant, flowers, fruit, bark etc) opposite a page of text (Summary, Description, Flowering Time, Habitat, Distribution, Origin of Name, plus a pleasing 'arty' shot across the bottom). Between them they cover the whole north of the Territory almost down to Tennant Creek, and the contents (totalling 74 species) don't overlap. If you're at all serious about your natural history travelling you'll not begrudge an extra \$26 on the cost of your next trip north, and the books will enrich it. If you're really serious, or live there, you'll probably want John Brock's *Native Plants of Northern Australia* too, but a) it's out of print, and b) these complement it nicely. They'll all go with me next time I head that way. The weeds book, with a species per page, is more likely to be of use to locals, but here I can see its great value to land managers, from gardeners to land care groups to reserve managers, and if you fit this category and are reading this I highly commend it too. (Gecko Books is a new imprint of JB Books, South Australia, whose focus is "Aboriginal and Australiana".)

Bird Sense; what it's like to be a bird

Tim Birkhead

Bloombury Publishing. 266 pages. RRP \$35

I think that Tim Birkhead, Professor of Behavioural Ecology at Sheffield University, is one of the best English language writers on the science of ornithology in the world today. In addition to an impressive overview of his huge and growing topic, he has an exquisite gift for telling stories of science that laypeople can be enthralled by. His previous book, the remarkable *The Wisdom of Birds*, was a history of the study of birds from Aristotle to the present day (see these reviews, number 12, May 2009). This book is only slightly less ambitious, seeking to provide an "accessible account of the senses of birds", examining in separate chapters Seeing, Hearing, Touch, Taste, Smell, Magnetic Sense and, perhaps controversially, Emotions. He draws on his experiences in often rugged field work from remote Atlantic islands to New Zealand rainforests to arid Namibia to illustrate his topics with pertinent and entertaining anecdotes. As revealed in *The Wisdom of Birds*, one of his areas of



especial interest is the history of science and again we explore with him the development of knowledge of the multifarious fields of the study of bird senses, bringing to life researchers, from the middle ages to today, to whom he and we are indebted. At the same time it is surprising to discover, in many of the topics considered, how much there is still to learn. Perhaps he doesn't – and couldn't – really address the sub-title, but what he does well is to help us understand how birds do things, and how we know how they do them. His enthusiasm and sense of wonder is both refreshing and inspiring, and there is a fascinating story revealed with each page turned. Birkhead reports there was relatively little interest in

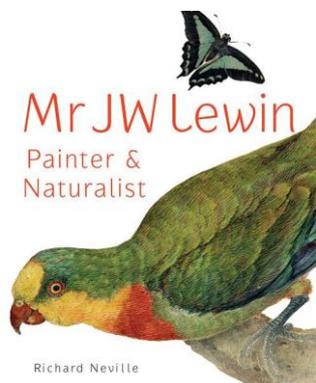
research into bird senses until recent decades. That has changed, and the final sentence of the book is an exciting one for those who are interested: "At the present time we have a good basic understanding of at least some of the senses of birds, but the best is yet to come." When it does, I hope that Tim Birkhead is there to report on it.

(This is an abbreviated version of a review that appeared in the Canberra Times; full text available on request.)

Mr J.W. Lewin; painter and naturalist

Richard Neville

State Library of NSW. 272 pages. RRP \$40



John Lewin is becoming better known here after a being long time obscure; I welcome his emergence. He was an English illustrator sponsored by the wealthy silversmith and amateur entomologist Dru Drury to come to Australia in 1798; he was provided with collecting gear and engraving materials which he was expected to refund in kind, with insect collections and engravings. When Drury died in early 1804 Lewin expanded his interests, particularly in the direction of bird art. He always needed to make a living and had of necessity an eternal eye out for what was going to be attractive to potential purchasers, both in the colony and back in England. This didn't prevent him from being both original and exacting, and the fact that he was familiar with most of his subjects set him apart from his contemporaries who were generally working only from skins. He made a point of including habitat or relevant vegetation with both his

bird and insect paintings, a style that was most uncommon at the time. As Neville says: "Unlike any of his contemporaries, Lewin painted the peculiarities of the Australian environment with a startling confidence, boldness and literalness." They stand up well to having details magnified, a feature of the book. I've had cause recently to become familiar with many of his Australian paintings per the National Library of Australia's excellent on-line services, but even so I found many works here I didn't know, from collections in New Zealand, Canada and Britain. Importantly Neville (Mitchell Librarian at the State Library of NSW) sets Lewin's story in its historical context, making this an important addition to the telling of our story, as well as being a beautiful (and affordable) book.

(This is an abbreviated version of a review that appeared in the Canberra Times; full text available on request.)

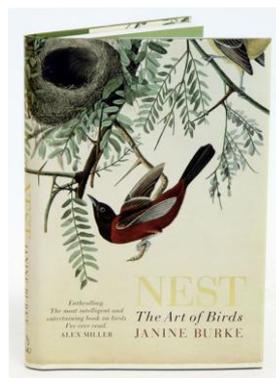
Nest; the art of birds

Janine Burke

Allen and Unwin. 182 pages. RRP \$33

I'm only going to take as much of your time for this one as is required to warn you off it. Burke is a respected art historian who had the cute idea of examining whether bird nests can be considered art. She admits to not knowing much about birds, but seems not to realise just how much she doesn't know. Furthermore only the first and last chapters seem to actually address her topic, albeit unconvincingly. In between is a lot of self-indulgent digression on whatever occurs to her at any given moment (eg more than five pages on the relationship between William and Dorothy Wordsworth, based on the fact that he wrote a poem called *The Sparrow's Nest*, though there is scarcely any discussion of the poem itself). However the worst is that the book is riddled with cringe-causing basic errors of facts about birds. In a couple of pages we read that the Mudlark (or Magpie-lark) is a relative of the Magpie (it isn't), that a Willie Wagtail builds a mud nest (it doesn't) and that its nest is only 7mm across (which would be truly remarkable given that each egg is some 20mm long) and that it contains 6 chicks (actually no more than four). And so on throughout. It becomes clearer however when we learn that her bird text and field guide is the *Readers Digest Complete Book of Australian Birds*, last updated in 1986, and that her information source for bowerbirds, a recurring theme, is an Australian Geographic article. This is disrespectful to her topic and her readers. Allen and Unwin are usually much better than this; I can only surmise that they accidentally printed an early draft which had not yet come to the attention of an editor.

(This is an abbreviated version of a review that appeared in the Canberra Times; full text available on request.)



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.

calochilus51@internode.on.net