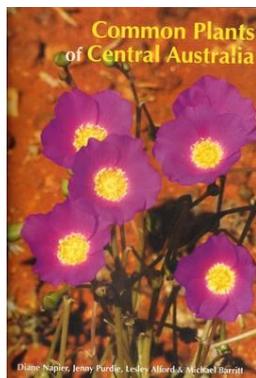


Some Recent Natural History Publications #19 April 2013

Common Plants of Central Australia

Diane Napier, Jenny Purdie, Lesley Alford and Michael Barritt
Gecko Books. 77 pages. RRP \$12.95



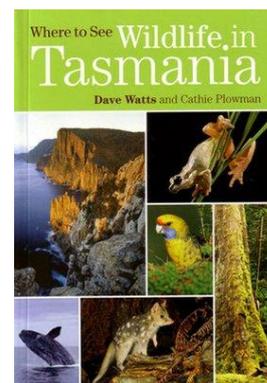
Last year, in Issue 17 of this series of reviews, I reviewed favourably two plant field guides, in the Identikit format pioneered by the Northern Territory Conservation Commission, on the Top End and the Victoria River District/Northern Barkly respectively. This volume completes the set, covering the rest of the Northern Territory, basically south from Tennant Creek. Like the others it makes no pretence to being comprehensive, but it does introduce 37 of the commonest plants you're likely to encounter in a trip through the arid lands. As with the others in the series, it offers a comprehensive double page per species, with 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). If you just want the basics for your next trip, this will do the job nicely; if you're a bit more serious about your plants, this will appropriately

supplement something like Anne Urban's or Philip Moore's guides to plants of inland Australia. I congratulate the authors for their initiative and skills.

Where to See Wildlife in Tasmania

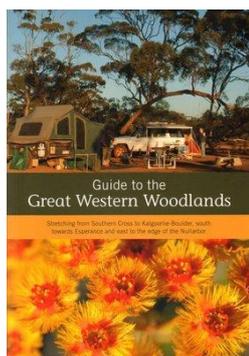
Dave Watts and Cathie Plowman
Allen and Unwin. 200 pages. RRP \$29.95

Dave Watts, it seems, has been taking excellent photos of Tasmanian wildlife for ever; I've sent many of his splendid cards in my life. He has also produced field guides to Tasmanian mammals and birds. Cathie Plowman worked for the Tasmanian parks service for years. Together they have compiled an excellent guide to some 30 accessible Tassie wildlife hotspots, organised into regions and generously augmented with maps, Watts' ever-enjoyable photos and information on access and facilities. On most pages there is an illustrated account of an animal species, with basic information and advice on the best places to see it. Each site also comes with a list of Key Species. There is no real attempt to define this concept, nor to put particular emphasis on 'specials'; the account of the Yellow-throated Honeyeater doesn't mention that it's endemic (though there is a list of the 12 endemic bird species dropped into the Introduction). Kestrel, Brush-tailed Possum and Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike are as likely to be listed as Key Species as are rare or endemic animals. I don't see this as much of a problem actually; if you're a wildlife aficionado you'll be aware already of which ones are particularly significant for you, and if not then it's appropriate that everything is brought to your attention. More importantly, there is a strong conservation theme throughout. Please don't go to Tassie next time without this one.



Guide to the Great Western Woodlands

Carolyn Thomson-Dans and 16 others.
Department of Environment and Conservation, Western Australia. 160 pages. RRP \$29.95



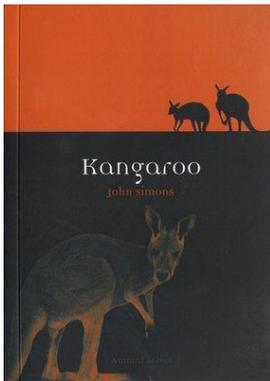
Another new regional guide, and another excellent-looking one, this time from the far side of the country, featuring the superb semi-arid woodlands and heathlands of the eastern and inland south-west of Western Australia. It's a vast area – over 15 million hectares (two and a half times the size of Tasmania!), with more than 3,000 plant species (over 20% of Australia's total) and a staggering 160-odd eucalypt species. Without having yet field-tested it (though that will come later this year), I think the book looks superb. Sections cover the special nature of the region, its history and four key 'trails' (I wish we could stick to 'tracks' in Australia!) that traverse it, before getting to a key section on Destinations. This introduces a series of reserves, with most of which I'm unfamiliar, and the Kalgoorlie-Boulder and Kambalda-Norseman areas. Finally there are useful-looking sections on wildflowers, trees, mammals, reptiles, birds and place-name meanings. Not only is this book a must-take if you're

visiting, it's an inspiration in itself to visit this largely-neglected but magnificent part of our country.

Kangaroo

John Simons

Reaktion Books. 208 pages. RRP \$25



It's been a big 12 months for books on kangaroos – in my most recent edition of these reviews I covered two excellent contributions from CSIRO Publishing, by Terry Dawson and Ken Richardson. In this at least it seems that Simons and London-based Reaktion Books were unlucky with their timing. This is part of a long Reaktion series – more than 50 so far – of single word titles, each dealing with an animal or animal group. I'd not come across the series before. Simons is not a zoologist (he's Executive Dean of Arts at Macquarie University, but has spent most of his time in the UK and the USA), and I'm afraid it shows. On the second page he tells us that there are 65 species in the genus *Macropus*; this is nonsense (14 is the generally accepted figure) and he's probably confusing it with the family, Macropodidae. This might seem trivial but biologically it isn't, and immediately makes me suspicious of the rest; it also yet again makes me wonder why the publishers didn't get an appropriately qualified person to check it. After a few pages of apparently randomly selected factoids, marred by the fundamental error of generalising about 'kangaroos' – for instance, talking of kangaroo adaptations when he mostly seems to mean Red Kangaroos – he settles into his real task of examining how people have used images of kangaroos for various purposes. Interesting enough, but I think we've seen most of it already. It might provide an hour or so's entertainment, but if you're interested in kangaroos *per se*, stick to Dawson and Richardson. (On the other hand the publishers are obviously doing something right; Simons scored an hour's interview on the prestigious ABC Margaret Throsby show this week, something Dawson and Richardson didn't manage!)

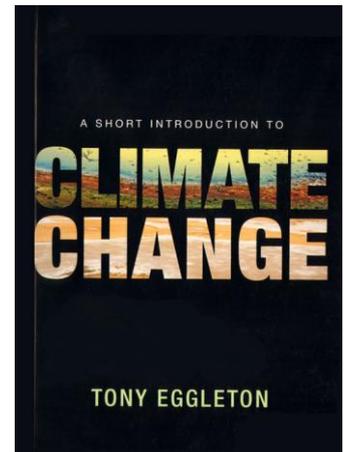
A Short Introduction to Climate Change

Tony Eggleton

Cambridge University Press. 246 pages. RRP \$39.95

This is perhaps outside of my usual remit in these reviews, but this book and the next seem to me too important not to bring to your attention. These days no intellectually honest, rigorously sceptical observer without a vested interest could possibly doubt the reality of human-induced climate change. However there is so much deliberate misinformation, mostly originating with the vested interests of industry and abetted by some ideologically-driven but science-free politicians and media interests, that many people actually believe there is uncertainty among climate scientists. There is not and after reading this excellent book no-one could believe such a thing. Eggleton is a 'retired' ANU geologist, who wrote this book in answer to an old friend's questions as to the real situation with regard to climate change, which Eggleton found he could not satisfactorily answer. He brings to the topic the rigour of an experienced scientist combined with a skill for communicating scientific concepts to laypeople. Starting with the basics, Eggleton builds a calm, logical picture of the entire topic – this book, incidentally, is a great introduction to the essence of climate science in general, not just the aspect relating to human-caused change. Each chapter is concluded with a very valuable summary table, with the topics discussed leading into columns headed 'observation', 'key statistic' and 'conclusion'. The discussion on the natures of 'climate' and 'weather' are particularly pertinent. He also devotes a chapter to the views of those who deny that anything untoward is going on. He searched for, and failed to find, a "body of science" that supports such views, so instead analysed the writings of three prominent Australian 'climate sceptics' – Ian Plimer, Bob Carter and Joanne Nova. By going to their cited sources, and applying scientific logic to their arguments, he identifies the false premises in their questions, the smothering blankets of pseudo-science and the outright falsehoods. Unless you're much better informed than most of the population, you should probably read this book.

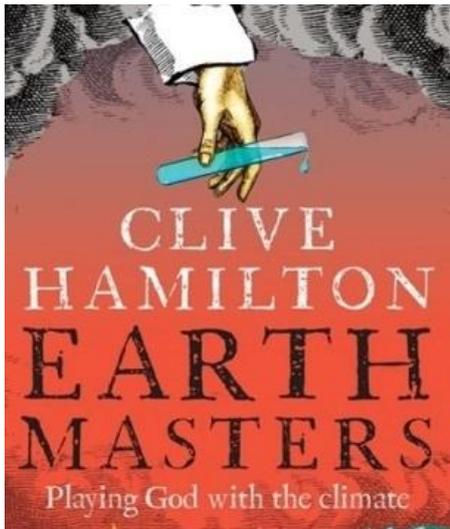
(This is an abbreviated version of a review that appeared in the Canberra Times; full text available on request.)



Earth Masters; playing God with the climate

Clive Hamilton

Allen and Unwin. 247 pages. RRP \$25



Hamilton, a modern polymath if ever there was one – economist, philosopher, ethicist and board member of the Australian Government Climate Change Authority – exposes with lucidity and power an aspect of the climate change debacle that is new, and still largely unnoticed. This is the enormous push towards geoengineering ‘fixes’ as alternatives to actually tackling the root cause of climate change, which is our excessive usage of fossil fuels resulting in the transfer of buried carbon from long-dead organisms into atmospheric carbon dioxide, which in turns prevents some of the earth’s radiant heat from dissipating into space. Hamilton is a superb communicator, and makes clear the two general categories of approach. One involves the removal of some of the carbon dioxide that we’re releasing, to store it somewhere safe, eg by seeding oceans with iron to encourage the growth of plankton that will die and sink to the ocean floor. The other seeks to mask the problem by either allowing less sunlight in or more radiant energy out, eg by introducing vast quantities of sulphur particles into the atmosphere to

reflect sunlight away. Such schemes – and he explains many – tinker with vast systems we don’t understand at all well, and there can be no small-scale tests; the only way to find out if a plan works is to try it on a planetary scale. Meantime of course the need to actually *do* something about the problem, as opposed to the symptoms, can be conveniently forgotten. There’s a lot more to this book even than that, as he examines international politics, industry involvement and ethical and moral implications. A thoroughly disturbing read, but at the least we ought to know what’s being done in our name.

(An extended version of this might also be appearing in the Canberra Times soon.)

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 was the voice of natural history on local ABC radio from 1992 to 2012. 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. In 2012 he launched the natural history blog ‘Ian Fraser, Talking Naturally’, at <http://ianfrasertalkingnaturally.blogspot.com.au/> 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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