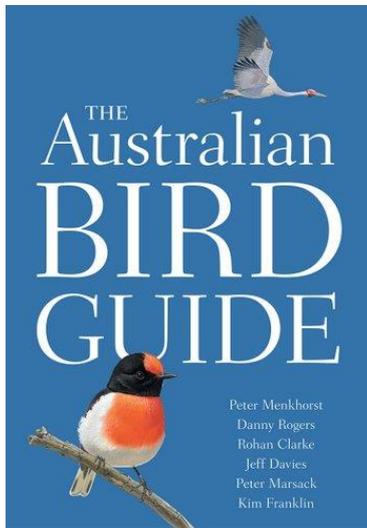


Some Recent Natural History Publications #24  
May 2017

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*The Australian Bird Guide*

Peter Menkhorst, Danny Rogers, Rohan Clarke, Jeff Davies, Peter Marsack, Kim Franklin  
CSIRO. 576 pages. RRP \$49.95



It's been a while since I recall so much anticipation for an Australian natural history book. Of course a lot of it has been whipped up by CSIRO, and quite rightly and understandably – this is a project years in the development, and they have invested a huge amount of money, and potentially prestige, in it. It has run over deadline at least twice, and I suspect well over budget, as it was necessary to engage an extra artist to complete it. Yes, CSIRO have *commissioned* artists (and I assume authors), a most unusual situation; this is a luxury normally enjoyed only by established novelists (and perhaps you do detect a hint of envy here, but it is minor and wry – I fully understand why they're doing it!). Moreover they have engaged the services of a publicity firm (again, a first in my memory) to market it, and are hosting a major launch in Melbourne, which is usually left to the author's choice and resources. All this is to emphasise that clearly CSIRO has a huge stake in this book, and believes it to be justified – note the very boldy challenging title!

But is it, and could it be? After all, this is now the fifth Australian national bird guide in print, which I believe is a unique situation (maybe matched only by Europe as a whole, but it might be an exercise for you to prove me wrong...).

Moreover all the existing Australian guides are adequate, and two of them (Pizzey and Knight, and Morcombe) are very good, P and K being excellent. I confess that my initial response was scepticism, but I am being won over; indeed it would take some time in the field with this book and one's current preferred guide to make an objective call and of course I've not yet had that opportunity. It seems to me that in part this tome combines the strengths of the two guides I've mentioned – the illustrations are at least the equal of Frank Knight's and the text is comprehensive like Pizzey's, while the plates allow us to scan down the page in columns and compare, where appropriate, juvenile and non-breeding plumage of similar species for example, as per Morcombe. (Of course the text isn't as lyrical as Pizzey's, but he was one of a kind.) While I don't doubt that aficionados could detect the subtly different styles of the artists, I do doubt that normal punters could – the change from one to another appears seamless. Peter Menkhorst, the lead author and eminent Victorian zoologist, is very well credentialled, having *inter alia* edited the next two editions of Pizzey and Knight after Graham Pizzey's death; his co-authors have very good claims too. I have commented on the artists, who are less likely to be familiar to readers, though in Canberra Peter Marsack (who painted all the passerines) is well-known and highly respected.

Other strengths are more subtle and will, as I've suggested, emerge in time. Tellingly the authors claim to have monitored on-line bird discussion groups over the past decade – an enormous job – to glean what birders regarded as 'problem' groups, and focus on clarifying them. While a field guide can never be fully up-to-date (on the day of the launch someone will doubtless report a new vagrant record from Ashmore Reef) this guide is comprehensive up to November 2015, which is as good as it's possible to get. Unlike previous guides, vagrants are included in the 'main' part of the book, allowing for comparisons. Maps are very nuanced, which means it will take a while to memorise their codes, but they're useful. Having the taxonomy based on the IOC list is a good idea, because they update their taxonomy on line every three months, explaining it clearly; it's as close as a book can probably get to keeping up with the changes that are inevitably unfolding. And Leo Joseph's essay on relationships and taxonomy of Australian birds is both illuminating and accessible.

Weaknesses, or at least queries? They are few. I was somewhat surprised to see that the order of families and even some species is not strictly according to any accepted list (such as the IOC) – that is they don't appear in the order in which we believe they evolved. I actually like having that evolutionary context, but perhaps it's not the role of a field guide to provide it, and indeed it is offered in an IOC-guided check list at the back of the book. Then I read that it is intentional; they have used a 'pragmatic' approach to offer species 'likely to be encountered together' to be placed together in the book. I immediately thought of *What Bird is That?*, but fortunately it's not *that* pragmatic! If I'm looking for say the pigeons, in a hurry, I'll probably get huffy the first time, but I'll get over it. I've mentioned the nuanced maps, but such nuance will inevitably be blurred by the unavoidable scale of the maps (roughly 1:140 million by my estimate!). Range delineations in the text (as per Pizzey) would be ideal, but their absence is probably space-determined.

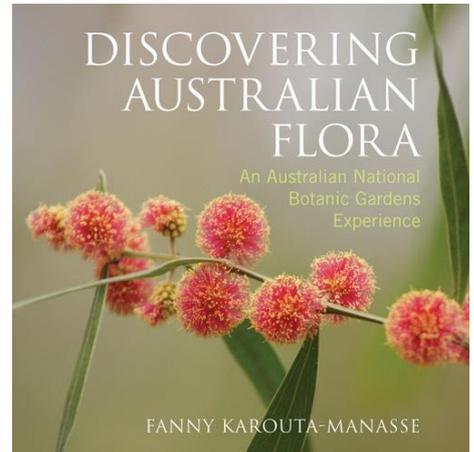
My only real, and I think supportable, grumble is the index; it starts with Abbott's Booby, so you get the picture. Surely most people want to start by looking up 'booby', 'honeyeater' etc? I think this will cause much annoyance in times to come, which the book overall most certainly does not deserve.

This book will, I am sure, become a classic over time and I suspect that many birders visiting Australia and buying a guide for the trip will turn to this. Many more of us will add it to our shelves, and in time will find ourselves also turning to it more and more. Good luck CSIRO – I think you deserve it, and I wasn't sure I'd be saying that when I first heard of the project.

### **Discovering Australian Flora; an Australian National Botanic Gardens experience**

Fanny Karouta-Manasse  
CSIRO. 104 pages. RRP \$35

This is a creative, intriguing, informative and ultimately beautiful little book by Canberran Fanny Karouta-Manasse, herself a very interesting person. She is a plant biologist with a PhD in marine ecology from Montpellier University, who went on to study seaweeds at Leiden University (yes, she is definitely a polyglot – the book was originally written in French and translated by her) who now volunteers at the National Seed Bank at the Australian National Botanic Gardens. She is also a photographer of rare ability who has been recognised for one of her microscopic seed photographs in the Australian Museum's Eureka Prize, so yes, she is also definitely a polymath. This book is a bit of a Russian doll – the more you look into it, the more you find. The first impression is of an especially fine (and unusually affordable) coffee table book and it is certainly that. The photographs, all taken in the Gardens, are exquisite; most, as you'd expect, are of plants, but there is a generous serving of animals too, both on their own and as part of a plant portrait. One of Karouta-Manasse's fortes is close-up photography, and there are some beautiful shots of flower details, with the background artfully hazy. However there is also more solid information than in the average coffee table book, being an excellent introduction both to the gardens and to the flora of Australia in general – a challenging task and one in which I think she succeeds admirably. She introduces the Gardens' plantings by the categories in which they are grouped (taxonomic, ecological, horticultural, ethnobotanical and endangered species), then goes on to an overview of the Australian flora. In this she introduces succinctly but clearly concepts such as the nature of *Eucalyptus* and *Acacia* (with snippets of history), fire and the Australian flora, endemism and sclerophylly, all well-researched and explained. Ultimately I think this book is a thinking person's souvenir – and its attraction ought not to be only to visitors.



### **Australian Alps; Kosciuszko, Alpine and Namadgi National Parks**

Deidre Slattery  
CSIRO. 320 pages. RRP \$45



## **AUSTRALIAN ALPS**

Kosciuszko, Alpine and  
Namadgi National Parks



This is the second edition of a book that first appeared 19 years ago, too far back to have featured in this review series. It's certainly not just a reprint, though the basic format of chapters and many sub-headings has been largely retained. However the text has been comprehensively revised and the emphasis has changed subtly from a field guide (as was proclaimed on the cover in 1998) to a broader overview of history and ecological principles. While there are many more pages, and they are larger, than in the original edition, it is hard to make a meaningful comparison as the text is bigger (and friendlier!). If you don't have the original edition of course all this comparison is unhelpful and probably tedious, so I'll stop now. If you do, you'll need to make your own decision, but I think there's enough new material here to consider upgrading.

Slattery has spent the past quarter century in 'community education' with regard to the Australian Alps national parks, through the Victorian National Parks Service, La Trobe University and the Victorian National Parks Association; she is very qualified indeed for this task. The early chapters comprise excellent overviews of climate, geology, ecology, vegetation and animals (though the biological emphasis is now on general topics rather than a species by species field guide approach). She tells an excellent historical narrative and does so in chapters on Aboriginal life, pastoralism, science, gold mining, water resources and conservation; I like to think I knew a bit about the subject, but I certainly know more now.

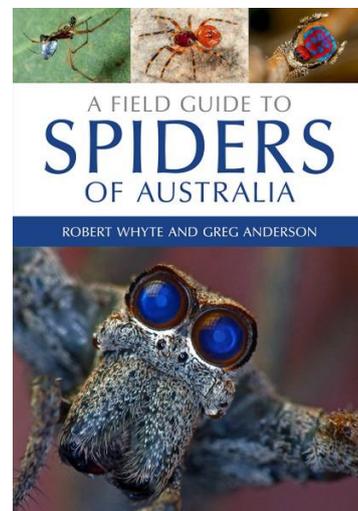
Old photos and helpful maps add to the charm and value. The final chapter, on visiting the parks, is also more of an overview than previously – perhaps she’s decided that there is enough detailed material available from other sources. This is certainly a book to take with you on your next Alps holiday, and preferably to have read in advance – you’ll get more out of your trip thus – along with your more specific field guides. An excellent addition to the literature on the south-east high country.

### ***A Field Guide to Spiders of Australia***

Robert Whyte and Greg Anderson  
CSIRO. 464 pages. RRP \$49.95

And the invertebrate field guides keep coming... I’ve belatedly noticed that this one will not actually appear until June but, given the relative dearth of titles coming my way these days it’s unclear when the next review batch will be produced so it seems better for you, the publisher and authors if I review it now; you can always order it! There has been at least one Australian spider field guide in the past, but this one seems to be the most comprehensive to date, covering all known families of Australian spiders. (I have to say ‘seems’ because as I suggested in the first review of this edition, if one is to review a field guide in timely fashion it is often not possible to submit it to proper field testing – and this one has just arrived.) I’m not sure how many Australian spiders there are, but while the book doesn’t help me with that question, it does provide 1300 photos of them (with most species only illustrated once), plus the information that by estimate only a third of our spiders have yet been named. The photos are excellent and the text is clear, chatty and informative, with a good introduction to each family. As for how to use it – it seems there really is no alternative to doing a lot of skimming until we start to get a handle on the different groups and can head to Most Likely Suspects in each case.

However that will probably not be a major burden, as this is a true modern field guide in being attractive and oozing useful information from its photo captions. Thanks to the newfound rock star status of the peacock/jumping spiders, and the key role of Canberra garbo-turned-citizen-scientist Stuart Harris, spiders are very much on the natural history stage at present; I suspect that this book might do very well. I hope so.



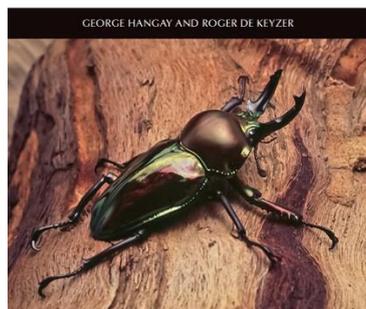
### ***A Guide to the Stag Beetles of Australia***

George Hangay and Roger de Keyzer  
CSIRO. 256 pages. RRP \$49.95



### **A GUIDE TO STAG BEETLES OF AUSTRALIA**

GEORGE HANGAY AND ROGER DE KEYZER



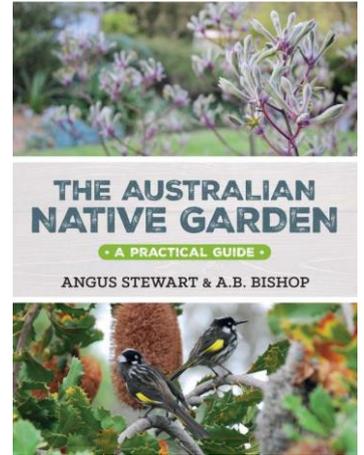
A little while ago I embarrassed myself by misidentifying a local stag beetle as one of the Christmas beetles (not *too* egregious as they’re in the same superfamily, but still...) so when this book unexpectedly alighted on my desk I took notice. The authors, both with long associations with the Australian Museum, claim with some justifiable pride that this is the first field guide on Australian beetles to deal comprehensively with an entire family – a modest-sounding aim until you remember just how many beetles there are (in case you can’t remember offhand, it’s over 30,000 in Australia alone, and climbing). Stag beetles are busy forest recyclers, many of them spending much of their lives inside rotting logs (and of course contributing to the breakdown of those logs). The relatively small size of their family means that all 98 Australia stag beetle species can be discussed in some detail here, with excellent photos. No, I know, no matter what I say probably not one person reading this will be persuaded to buy this book, and I understand that; in fact I suspect that much of the intended market will be collectors, a world of which I know little. But two things occur to me. Today especially it seems important that any aspect of science (and from my perspective especially

natural science) is made available to the public, and I am grateful that we have a publisher such as CSIRO committed to very small scientific markets, as well as major ones. Even if you don’t buy, please applaud.

## ***The Australian Native Garden; a practical guide***

Angus Stewart and AB Bishop  
Murdoch Books. 228 pages. RRP \$50\*

This one has actually been out for a little while now, but I realise I've not yet reviewed it. That may have been a conscious decision at the time, but it deserves better than to be ignored. It's a very handsome book, packed with superb photos and quite a lot of information. The problem is in the title; at one level, referring to Australian native plants, it's perfectly sensible, but it's also trying to prescribe for 'the Australian garden' and of course there's no such thing. The crunch comes with the rest of the title, which is the rest of the problem – it can't possibly really be a practical guide because you can't offer a comprehensive formula of practical advice as to how to prepare, plant and manage a native garden anywhere in Australia. (To emphasise the issue, and thinking only of capital cities, think of Perth, Darwin and Canberra.) It's an honest and bold attempt, but is simply too ambitious (or about 1000 pages too short). As it is, it introduces us to some natural regions of Australia, and a few selected inspiring native gardens (including Ben and Ros Walcott's beautiful one in Canberra), offers some basic gardening principles, and brings 150 attractive native plants to our attention. Note that this is for the whole of Australia, compared with the local Australian Native Plant Society list of 1000 species for Canberra alone. Perhaps that summarises my concern. If you'd like a genuinely attractive native plant and garden book for the coffee table, this may be it; otherwise there are plenty of regionally-focussed titles out there that really are 'practical'.



\* I refuse to quote \$49.99!

*Ian Fraser is a Canberra-based professional naturalist and writer who is the author of eight books on local natural history, most recently Australian Bird Names, a complete guide, CSIRO Publishing 2013, with Jeannie Gray (another is one the way). He ran the educational Environment Tours nature-based tours program from 1984 to 2015 and was voice of natural history on local ABC radio for 24 years. 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/page/ianfraserreviews.aspx> for which my thanks to Tom Butts of the Botanical Bookshop.  
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