

Some Recent Natural History Publications #6 November 2006

The Complete Field Guide to Dragonflies of Australia.

Theischinger G and Hawking J. CSIRO Publishing. 366 pages. RRP \$49.95.

Earlier this year I tried unsuccessfully through the internet to locate a second-hand copy of Jim Watson et al's 1991 *The Australian Dragonflies*. The arrival of this excellent field guide, whose senior author co-authored the earlier volume, was thus a doubly pleasant surprise. It is all I would want a modern field guide to be, though my preference for paintings over photos for illustration purposes is well and truly on the record. It is fully comprehensive (all 324 Australian species covered), and with only 2-3 species per page (illustrations on the facing page) leaves plenty of room for the essential text. Each family and genus is also introduced, and there are keys to families, genera and some species for both adults and larvae, plus a good illustrated glossary and a species checklist. Maps are of necessity not as precise as is possible for groups of larger and more widely known animals, but by dividing Australia into 16 biogeographical zones, an adequate presentation is achieved. I'm looking forward to field-testing this (but I'll start with various unidentified slides!). Note though that many of the identifications must implicitly be of dead animals.

Fungi Down Under; the fungimap guide to Australian fungi.

Pat Grey and Ed Grey. Fungimap, c/- Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne. 146 pages. RRP \$29.95.

This field guide differs from the previous one in some important ways – though has in common with it the fact that it is a very high quality and well thought out field guide. It is perhaps unique in being written, designed and illustrated (photographically) entirely by volunteers, albeit in consultation with professionals. It makes no attempt to be comprehensive but selects 100 representative and conspicuous species to be the basis of a national mapping study by 300 volunteers who so far have contributed in excess of 20,000 records. The study is ongoing and doubtless this book will stimulate a further rush of interest. A perusal of the maps (in the form of dots for records) shows a heavy emphasis on south-eastern Australia, probably inevitable for a Melbourne-based project. A whole page per species allows lots of information including reference to look-alikes not included in the book. Good introductory pages and appendices on meanings and pronunciations of names (albeit with no help on where emphases lie), glossary and considerable further reading, all make this a very impressive publication indeed.

Grasses of South Australia; an illustrated guide to the native and naturalised species.

Jessop J, Dashort G and James F. Wakefield Press. 554 pages. RRP \$ 49.95.

This is definitely a book for specialists, but its significance lies in the fact that it is the first time that all the grasses of an Australian state have been comprehensively illustrated and described. Most genera and many species are distributed in more than one state, so for those among us who bravely struggle with the subtle complexities of grass identification, this book will be of value beyond its geographical limitations. Unfortunately the ACT doesn't rate as a separate entity when describing a species' distribution beyond South Australia. And I wish the taxonomists would agree on whether we should refer to Kangaroo Grass as *Themeda australis* or *triandra*!!

Monarch Butterflies; saving the king of the New World.

Phil Schappertt. Key Porter Books (distributed by Wakefield Press). 113 pages. RRP \$29.95.

A lovely book about a special animal which we know in Australia, though only as a recent arrival and under a different name – the Wanderer. The author is passionate about them and their protection, but the book focuses solely on the eastern US population. The extraordinary story of their natural spread across the Pacific to Australia within the last century, following their toxic food plants, is not touched on here. Nonetheless we can certainly learn a lot about the species which we can apply in Australia by reading this book and revelling in its photos.

Namaqualand; Garden of the Gods.

Freeman Patterson. Key Porter Books (distributed by Wakefield Press). 128 pages. RRP \$45.

Another lovely book of limited direct relevance to us. Namaqualand is part of South Africa's Cape Province, which I have had the good fortune to visit, though I missed the peak of the flowering of which this book is a celebration. There is a relevance though, in that there are strikingly obvious analogies with Western Australia, with Namaqualand being similar to the northern sand plains of WA, behind the cold current-generated 'desert coast'. There is limited information in the book, though it does include some hints on flower photography. I couldn't in any clear conscience suggest that this represents value for money, but if you can have a look at it, do so, especially if you're contemplating a visit.

The remainder of these reviews refer to history books of varying relevance to Australia natural history; as I have previously said this is not my field particularly, though I have a great interest in the development of understanding and appreciation of our land.

Terra Australis Incognita; the Spanish Quest for the Great South Land.

Miriam Estensen. Allen and Unwin. 274 pages. RRP \$35.

Miriam Estensen writes strongly and convincingly about the sea and those who sail it. Where the record is silent she speculates about what might have occurred then, but is open about that, which I find perfectly acceptable. (Bear in mind that I'm not an historian.) This is the story of a series of astonishingly brave and daring Spanish expeditions, between 1567 and 1607, west from Peru (ie all of western South American, and all Spanish domain). They all headed out into the unknown Pacific to search for the Great South Land, postulated since ancient Greek times. 25 year old Alvaro del Mendaña led the first, discovering the Solomon Islands and returning well to the north of Hawaii. It took him nearly 30 years to mount another, catastrophic, expedition in which he and many others died, but which ended in the Philippines! The last is the only one of immediate interest to us, in that it was that of Luis Torres, who sailed through the eponymous strait, creating some havoc among the people he encountered along the south coast of New Guinea, but apparently just failing to see the object of all these journeys, over the southern horizon. Good research and story-telling, though the stories are not always pretty.

The Life of George Bass; surgeon and sailor of the Enlightenment.

Miriam Estensen. Allen and Unwin. 259 pages. RRP \$49.95.

This is another by the same author which came out in 2005, but which I have only just got to. George Bass is an interesting and attractive man, and as Estensen suggests, very much a product of his time, interested in everything and driven by a desire to discover new things. He was born to a tenant farmer, became a naval surgeon and learnt seamanship and navigation on the job, to a high degree of skill. He studied languages, the classics and contemporary radical philosophies. He was also a devoted son and husband. We know of his remarkable adventures exploring the essentially unknown coastline south of Sydney in the tiny Tom Thumb with former shipmate Matthew Flinders. Later he successfully tackled the entirely unknown and hazardous Bass Strait in an open whaleboat, and subsequently, again with Flinders, sailed around Van Diemens Land. He wrote of the plants, animals, people, and general impressions, while mapping coastlines. His was the first English description of a wombat (from Bass Strait) and a very comprehensive description it is too. In the end, as a merchant-explorer, he set sail for South America and vanished from history. This is another great read and is very pertinent indeed to our understanding of early European Australia.

Where Fate Beckons; the life of Jean-Francois de la Pérouse.

John Dunmore. ABC Books. 292 pages. RRP \$45.

La Pérouse was another who vanished into the Pacific, though in his case at least his fate was finally revealed on the rocks of Vanikoto, in the northern New Hebrides, some 40 years later. He was a naval man and one of the great Pacific explorers, though in the English-speaking world at least the drama of his disappearance probably outweighs his achievements. This is an exhaustive account of his life, including his naval career, with considerable emphasis on the 'the Great Voyage'. There is not much on the scientific aspects of the voyage and the Australian connection is minor – the expedition sailed to its fate after a brief sojourn in Sydney Harbour, shortly after the arrival of the First Fleet. One for the true historians.

Mr Stuart's Track; the forgotten life of Australia's greatest explorer.

John Bailey. MacMillan. 335 pages. RRP \$33.95.

I (while re-emphasising my lack of claim to any historical competence) have also described John McDouall Stuart in the terms of the book's title, so naturally I was positively inclined before even opening it! It is also set in country I love, the arid north of South Australia and eventually into the Northern Territory. Stuart was an extraordinary man, though probably not a man it was possible to be close to. He was essentially a loner, driven by the demons of his prodigious drinking which he could only escape, it seemed, in the desert. For him exploration (and perhaps just being in the desert) was enough, but his employer, the major pastoralist James Chambers, constantly sought fresh areas for his stock (and government rewards for doing so). Stuart was a diminutive Scot, tormented by stomach ulcers, a surveyor meticulous in his work, totally careless of his health or comfort, ruthless in his determination to achieve his goals. He despised those who were not as driven, but totally loyal to those who stayed with him. Each trip left him in ruined health, sometimes for months, near blind and in severe pain, but his stoicism was extraordinary. This book follows every agonising step of his travels, each expedition building on the experiences of the last, and pushing further until at last his dogged steps led him from Adelaide to the sea east of modern Darwin. He didn't know how to relate to women, had no interest in the rewards or society and died impoverished at 50 back in Scotland. Seven people attended his funeral. Not always a happy read, but a powerful and important one.