

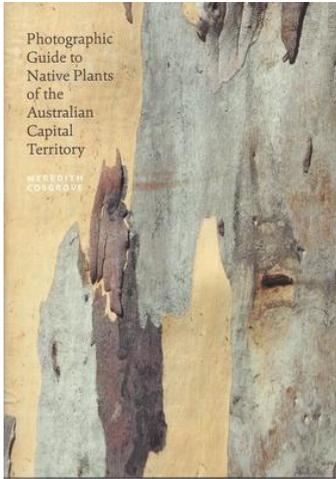
## Some Recent Natural History Publications #21 August 2015

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### **Photographic Guide to Native Plants of the Australian Capital Territory**

Meredith Cosgrove

Meadow Argus. 360 pages. RRP \$45



Here in the ACT we are remarkably, perhaps unreasonably, blessed with quality field guides to what is, after all, a small geographical entity. Hitherto however we have not had a reasonably comprehensive text-and-illustrations guide to plants. There is an out-of-print flora, some localised guides (including, I should acknowledge, a couple of contributions from me, now long unavailable) and a textless photo-only one. But Cosgrove, a PhD student in botany at the ANU, has I think now filled the gap admirably. I've long voiced my reservations about photo field guides, but she has got around most of the problems by using multiple photos – mostly four but up to five – per species, each species being allocated a page. The text is succinct but apparently adequate (I've not been motivated to field test it in the frigid months since I acquired it, but that will change very soon) – habit, height, flowering, fruiting, breeding system (an unusual addition, whose usefulness I've not yet determined), occurrence (ie how common it is), habitat, altitude, key ID features and brief notes on interesting feature or similar species.

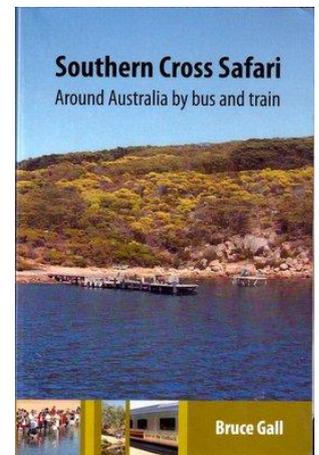
Maps are precise, based on herbarium specimens, and usefully extend beyond the ACT borders – as plants generally do! There is also a curious – and again useful – little vertical graph of altitude frequency. The inclusion of life-size scale bars for leaf, flower and fruit size is an excellent innovation. Taxonomy is of course up to date, and based on the Australian Plant Census. For a look at some pages, go to the Meadow Argus website <http://meadow-argus.com/>. I think all us who step outside in the ACT need this book – and spring's coming!

### **Southern Cross Safari; around Australia by bus and train**

Bruce Gall

Redgum Publishing. 516 pages. RRP \$35

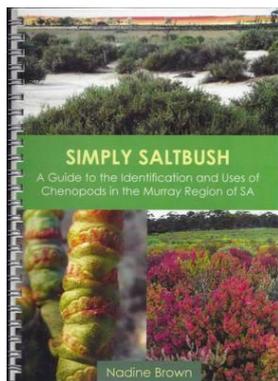
This is the tale of a veritable odyssey, and a fascinating tale it is too. It's a substantial tome moreover, but in the end I returned my library book in favour of Gall's first venture into publishing. Put simply, this is the account of a journey round Australia, albeit with many detours, with a focus on visiting national parks and reserves, staying in hostels or pubs and using public transport as much as possible (though he hired cars where essential, until guilt got the better of him!). There are many threads to the book, one of which is his scrutiny with a very professional eye as to how parks are managed, especially with regard to track maintenance and interpretation. Gall has excellent credentials for such observations, having worked in such major parks as Kosciuszko and Sturt and having managed one of the world's great parks in Kakadu. Further, he has headed the park services of the ACT and Queensland. His observations on signage and track design and maintenance around the country (he is a Very Serious Walker) are sometimes complimentary, sometimes acerbic and always constructive. I hope park managers the country over study the book. However, these asides often break the flow of narrative and could perhaps have been assigned to an appendix, though this is purely a personal opinion. Another thread concerns the strengths – more often weaknesses – of the nation's train and bus systems to enable a traveller to get around the country and its reserves, a thread he often allows fellow-travellers, especially backpackers, to make observations on. Again, transport managers could well take note (especially in Tasmania it would seem!). Yet another thread concerns the nature and vagaries of hostel accommodation, a topic most of us don't get a chance to explore, and gently astute observations on his temporary travelling companions abound. It is whimsical, lively, astute, with flashes of humour – he's obviously an excellent informal interviewer and note-taker – and philosophy. My only concern is that he, as a Canberran, omitted any mention of Namadgi National Park or the Canberra Nature Park! Don't let that put you off though, this could be a minor classic – read it before the movie comes out though.



## **Simply Saltbush; a guide to the identification of chenopods in the Murray Region of SA**

Nadine Brown

Self-published. 122 pages. RRP \$20



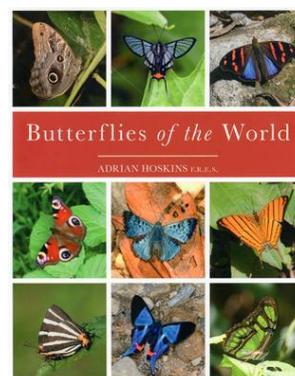
This is the third self-published book in this offering, a most unusual situation (though perhaps it will become less so in time). And like the other two this is of very high quality, though perhaps with a relatively limited market. However I should say first up that if you're potentially interested don't take too much notice of the geographic limitations of the subtitle; saltbushes tend to be widespread across the arid lands, so it is likely to be of broad application. Brown is too modest, it seems, to tell us anything about herself, but various on-line references simply describe her as a "local saltbush expert", which she clearly is. As with the previous plant book this one allocates a full page and several illustrations – photos, drawings and maps – to most species, with relatively more text. There are good keys to the genera too. If saltbush is your thing – and it does cover a lot of the country – then this book will be too.

## **Butterflies of the World**

Adrian Hoskins

New Holland Press. 350 pages. RRP \$35

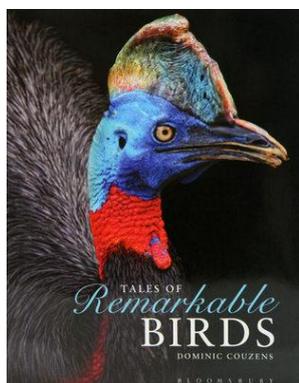
Englishman Adrian Hoskins is a true doyen of butterflies, especially tropical ones; his *Learn About Butterflies* website is one of the great natural history sites. A coffee-table book full of great information is a rare treat, and this book is just that. He is also an excellent story-telling writer which, combined with his knowledge and passion, is bound to give a great result. The book begins with a most informative section on all aspects of butterfly lore you could imagine – origins, anatomy, lifecycles, enemies, survival strategies and migration. Hoskins' wealth of knowledge is evident, but he exhibits a valuable restraint in giving us all we could ask for without swamping us in facts. After the excellent introduction the book settles down to introducing the seven families of butterflies, broken into natural sub-groups. His account is anything but dry, regaling us with wonderful butterfly stories; even overtly anthropomorphic comments like "a butterfly with a sense of humour!" reflect only his confidence in his topic. I willingly own to being far too ignorant about invertebrates, though not through lack of interest; this book gives me much less excuse for being ignorant about butterflies at least, and I'm very glad of it. (And how could you not love a book which introduces us to Gaudy Commodores, Uncertain Owlets, Long-streak Sailors, Smooth-banded Sisters, Forest Glade Nymphs, Common Jesters, Dingy Skippers, Constables, Elegant Satyrs, Fairy Hairstreaks and Amazon Snowflakes!)



## **Tales of Remarkable Birds**

Dominic Couzens

Bloomsbury. 224 pages. RRP \$40



I'm always happy to read interesting bird stories, but so many have been told that it's getting harder to come up with new ones. Couzens however has succeeded admirably, and I'd be surprised if many readers couldn't find new tales to contemplate here. The book is, according to its introduction, "a celebration of bird behaviour around the world", "small tasters" as he elegantly puts it. A lot of thought has gone into planning the book, to ensure that the samples give us tastings across the gamut of bird behaviour, from feeding to breeding to migration, and across the globe. He has taken an interesting approach; his forty chapters are grouped in fives, with such a cluster covering each of the seven continents plus one on 'islands'. Most chapters, each of about four pages including photos, feature one bird species, though a few deal with a group of birds (albatrosses, sunbirds for instance). For the record the Australian

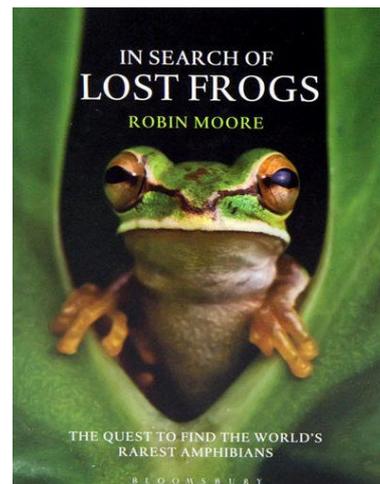
entries discuss White-winged Choughs, fairy wrens, Great Bowerbirds, cassowaries and Varied Sittellas. The sittella story, concerning the fascinating way they roost at night, where the dominant male selects the roost site and takes the most exposed position on the end of the line of huddling birds, an unusually altruistic approach, is one I'd not heard before. Not uniquely, it could have done with more rigorous editing, and the photos, while generally excellent, are from stock sources and often don't complement the stories told. Nonetheless this would be a most appropriate gift for the birder in your life.

## ***In Search of Lost Frogs***

Robin Moore

Bloomsbury. 254 pages. RRP \$40

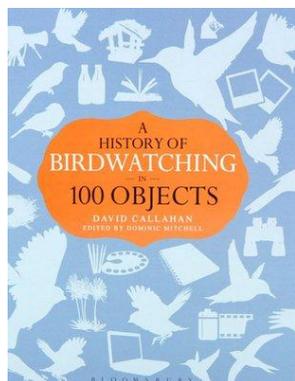
This is the rivetting story of a global, coordinated and scientifically-based search by scores of scientists for remaining individuals of 100 'disappeared' frogs of the numerous species whose populations have catastrophically crashed in recent years. Moore is a professional wildlife photographer who, at the time of writing, was Director of Amphibian Programs at Conservation International, a US-based NGO. His book is a beautiful and unusual amalgam of well-explained science, passionate and reasoned advocacy, lyrical and evocative personal accounts (from childhood in Scotland to an emergency room bedside in Madrid to tropical rainforests at night) and handsome coffee table adornment. I love everything about it. One of the key strengths of the book is Moore's use of evocative stories from those who witnessed key events in global frog disappearances – including himself at times. By 2010 at least 120 frog species were believed to be extinct, and that many again had not been seen in the last ten years, with over half the rest at serious risk of extinction. Moore, for Conservation International and with help from the IUCN, co-ordinated searches throughout the world for 100 selected frog and salamander species which had not been seen for at least 15 years. Some of the stories are hair-raising (night encounters, by Moore himself, with drunk teenage armed Colombian paramilitaries for instance), others moving. In the event a remarkable 21 'lost' species were rediscovered, though all are at critically low levels; in addition new species were recorded. The book concludes with a compelling chapter on our skewed views of what's worth protecting, explaining how most species-directed conservation money goes to just 80 species world-wide; most are large mammals, and none of them are frogs. Please read this chapter – and as a bonus you'll get some fabulous photos, especially of frogs but also of people and landscapes, and some excellent story-telling.



## ***A History of Birdwatching in 100 Objects***

David Callahan

Bloomsbury. 222 pages. RRP \$40

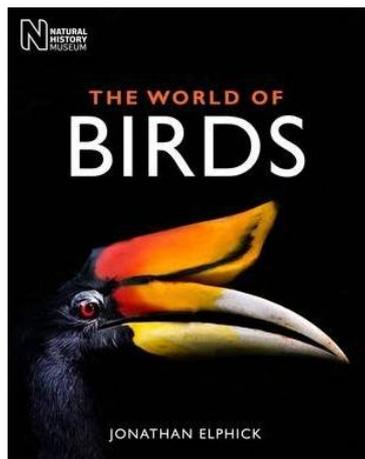


I so wish I'd thought of this idea! Callahan, who did, is a staff writer for the major British birding magazine *Birdwatch*. I can't do better in defining the book than its title does. Starting with an Arnhem Land rock painting from some 45,000 years ago which apparently depicts long extinct giant flightless mihirungs, it traces the history of people's fascination with watching birds, and the ever more sophisticated tools used to help them do so. Each topic is given a two-page spread with one illustration. Egyptian tomb bird paintings (4600 years old) and papyrus paintings (3300 years old) can be identified to species level; as with all topics the context is discussed at moderate length. The Gutenberg printing press, which ultimately led us to be able to read the book and this review, and the launching of the first scientific journals (near simultaneously in 1665 in England and France) feature early in the book. Proceeding through time we meet the 19<sup>th</sup> century pinhole cameras that produced the first bird photographs; the first microphone, parabolic reflectors (for enhancing bird song recording), the first metal rings for studying migratory birds (uniquely numbered and attached to the leg) and telephoto lenses are also all 19<sup>th</sup> century contributions to bird watching. And who knew?! Into the 20<sup>th</sup> century the world's first 'ecolodge' for birders and others was built in Nepal in 1964; mobile phones – I love the photo of the 1973 'brick' which could only just be described as mobile, goretex jackets and lightweight hiking boots (not until 1975), the PC, the CD and the Kodak 'electro-optic camera' follow. However I have some reservations, since there are two significant errors in the very first chapter on the Arnhem Land paintings; mihirungs were distant duck relatives, not ratites, and the *Australian Archaeology* 2011 article on which he bases his story (and which he doesn't even mention) clearly states that "there is insufficient evidence to indicate any age for the painting". A fascinating book, but that start left me with niggling doubts about some of the rest.

## **The World of Birds**

Jonathon Elphick

CSIRO. 608 pages. RRP \$89.95



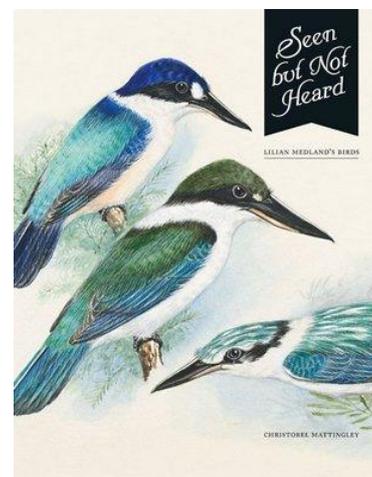
There has probably never been such a comprehensive one-volume book on all the world's birds – though at over 600 near-A4 pages it is admittedly a lot of book. Elphick is a freelance British ornithologist but definitely part of the respected establishment, with fellowships of the very prestigious Linnean and Royal Zoological Societies of London. He is as eminently qualified as any single person is likely to be to undertake such a daunting task as writing this book. Moreover the book is simply beautiful too, oozing with superb photographs, averaging about three to a two-page spread. It is designed in two distinct sections. The first is a monumental account, written in plain accessible language, of Everything Any Reasonable Person Could Possibly Want to Know About Birds. I try to keep up with what's going on in the world of bird research, but it's a very fluid field with understandings changing all the time. Reading this book brings it home to me how much is happening and I doubt that there are many people who wouldn't fill gaps in their bird knowledge here. Finally, after more than 250 pages of fascinating information, the book launches into nothing less than an introductory account of every bird family in the world. Inevitably there will be minor grumbings about the taxonomic model that Elphick has chosen, though that would have been the case whatever he'd opted for – bird people can be surprisingly tribal about their preferred classifications. He has opted for a pretty conservative model – indeed some might say old-fashioned – but all the bird groups are there, and if it really bothers you, you can rearrange them in your mind as you read! As you may have divined, I just love this book. I will dip into it for pleasure from time to time, and will certainly use it as an invaluable resource.

## **Seen But Not Heard; Lilian Medland's birds**

Christobel Mattingley

National Library of Australia. 208 pages. RRP \$40

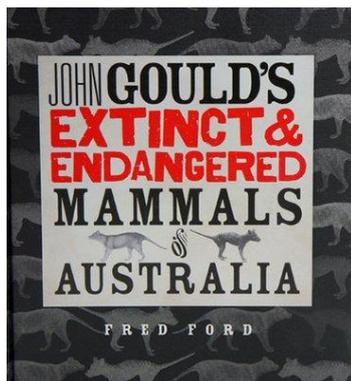
I have admired Lilian Medland from afar since I first encountered her beautiful artwork at a National Library exhibition on all things birdy some 15 years ago. Her story is remarkable in itself. She was born in London to a somewhat eccentric landed family in 1880, and home tutored in a childhood featuring outdoor sketching, skating, skiing, mountain climbing and rearing two lion cubs that her father brought back from Africa. I did read somewhere that she also kept a woodpecker in her studio, but since this isn't reported in the book it may have been apocryphal. She was also an avowed emancipist and, family money notwithstanding, she studied nursing and tended to Boer War wounded. However her sketching, while never formally taught as far as I can tell, was exceptional and while still nursing she was invited by Charles Stonham, leading surgeon at Guy's Hospital where she was working, to illustrate his sumptuous *Birds of British Islands*, published in 20 parts between 1906 and 1911. In 1907 she contracted diphtheria and 'lost her hearing' – hence the book title (though this is later seemingly contradicted in the all-too-brief six page biographical account). Six pages to tell the story of a rich 75 years of life? Really? With her husband, zoologist Tom Iredale, she came to Australia in 1923 where she continued working. She was doomed to professional frustration it seems – her large bodies of beautiful illustrations for three major planned books, on the birds of Britain, New Zealand and finally Australia, were doomed by war and financial issues never to be published. The last of these, a monumental work by the controversial Australian-English ornithologist Gregory Mathews, was disrupted by World War 2 and her 53 plates, each featuring several species, were finally donated by Mathews to the National Library of Australia. And here they finally appear in print for the first time in all their undoubted glory, plus a few bonus paintings. These make the book worth while, but I'd so like to have learnt more about her than I already knew.



## **John Gould's Extinct and Endangered Mammals of Australia**

Fred Ford

National Library of Australia. 280 pages. RRP \$50



In this most excellent book CSIRO zoologist Fred Ford takes 47 mammal species selected from Gould's *Mammals of Australia* as having since declined dramatically as a result of human activities – too many to the dreadful finality of extinction, others surviving but under the threat of extirpation in the not too distant future. In this sense it makes for grim reading in parts and I felt angry and depressed at times, as should any thinking being. Nonetheless it's a riveting book and I greatly appreciate and admire the thought that's gone into its planning. (A previous volume with similar title and aims on Gould's endangered birds fell well short of the achievements of this one.) The introductory pages on Gould himself and his closest associates, notably his remarkably talented and devoted wife Elizabeth and his extraordinarily skilful collector John Gilbert, are eye-openers. I considered myself reasonably well informed on this towering figure of 19<sup>th</sup> century Australian zoology but I realised as I read that much of my understanding was based on his bird work; his mammal contributions need to be considered differently. The main body of the book deals with the species individually, sometimes after an introduction to the group. A two-page spread reproduces the painting, a pertinently pithy quote from Gould, a brief summary of its current state – or fate, a distribution map, past and present and, as a very nice touch, a time line of key events in its history in European times. There follows anything from one to ten pages (in the case of the Thylacine) on the species itself, with particular emphasis on its appearance in the pages of European history, ending, where possible, with recent conservation initiatives. In addition to the Gould plates themselves the pages are lavishly and often intriguingly illustrated with relevant landscape paintings and habitat photos, illustrations by other artists, historic sketches and newspaper clippings. This book is a celebration and memorial both, and it fills both roles intelligently, originally and beautifully. Well done National Library of Australia – and please don't stop publishing, as the rumours suggest they intend.

*Ian Fraser is a Canberra-based professional naturalist and writer (viz, he doesn't make much money!) 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. 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. 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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