

Some Recent Natural History Publications #1 21 March 2005

A Guide to the Plants of inland Australia.

Philip Moore. Reed New Holland 2005. 500 pages, RRP \$49.95.

I am not an automatic fan of photographic field guides, but this is a very good one. Nor am I usually very interested in plant guides which stretch themselves too thinly by trying to cover too much area, but by judicious selection this one will still be very useful. Moore is already the co-author of one of my favourite plant guides, the classic *Native Plants of the Sydney District*; the very battered state of my copy is testament to its usefulness. This book covers the majority of mainland Australia, excluding only Cape York, the south-west and the eastern and south-east coastal strip and slopes west of the divide. Plants (over 800 species) are selected as being common and conspicuous, or as being representative of major plant groups. If you're spending a lot of time in one area, you'll want something more comprehensive (though you'll be lucky to get it in most places!), but for those of us just passing through this will be very helpful indeed.

Good pictures are of course necessary in a field guide, but for me the essential part of any guide is the text (perhaps especially in a photographic one, where we can't use artistic licence to show all the key aspects of the plant or animal), and this one excels in that. There are two or three species to a page, so descriptions are succinct but comprehensive. We have meanings of species names (though not, curiously, of the genus name), key characters, similar species, habitat, a distribution map and where appropriate notes on ecology, history and 'uses'. The major plant families form the largest section of the book, followed by smaller families under 'Less Familiar Plants'. For some reason these are grouped alphabetically by genus, rather than under family, but we're all allowed our minor eccentricities! There are also very good introductory essays on the evolution of arid land plants in Australia, adaptations and ecology, fire and Aboriginal uses of plants.

In short, this is a book I'd have been glad to have written, but since I didn't I'm free to say how good I think it is!

Plants of the ACT.

2 CD-Rom set. Andrew Paget (ww_flora@tpg.com.au; ph: 6556 9092) 2004. \$150

A very different proposition (not just in the format) from the previous guide, but also very good indeed. Unlike the previous title this guide covers a very small and defined area (just the ACT) and does so almost comprehensively. It is presented in families (one CD each for monocots and dicots), with a power point slide show for each family. It is not searchable, though that is planned for future editions. There are no keys, but at least within a family this is probably not a major drawback, given the relatively few species involved.

A typical slide has a very carefully chosen photo, with arrows to key characters where appropriate. There are clear sparse non-technical descriptions of the key identification features, and details for distinguishing the plant from similar species. Where necessary there are supplementary photos, sometimes of the entire plant, but more often they are semi-microscopic magnifications of important features. As long as you locate the family, you are almost certain to identify the species, with limited botanical knowledge required.

Description of habitat is inconsistent, which I think is unfortunate. I would also have strongly preferred to see some indication of distribution within the ACT. For instance I am pleasantly surprised to learn that there is a white-flowered form of the lovely Sunshine Wattle (*Acacia terminalis*) – more usually found east of here – in the ACT, but frustrated that I don't know where to look for it!

Obviously the price will put it beyond the reach of many of us but if you can afford it, it will give a level of access to our plants that has not previously been attained here. This will be especially true if you have a laptop so you can take it into the field!

Down by the Riverside; a field and management guide to native plants in and about the rivers of the Goulburn district, NSW.

Rodney Falconer, Goulburn Field Naturalists' Society, 2004. 175 pages.

Yet another well-planned and executed field guide, which is of considerable relevance to our part of the world. This is another photographic guide, but again the use of supplementary photos where appropriate, and more importantly a comprehensive and thoughtful text, make it a very useful one. A species is allocated a double-paged spread, with text on the left covering selected description, local occurrence, notes on ecology, habitat value and usage, and discussion of similar species. Facing it are annotated photos of the species, plus some of the similar species discussed. Colour tags on the page edges lead us to plant groupings (based on form, 'water plants', 'shrubs' etc rather than relationships).

The author – a former director of the regional Conservation Council, based in Canberra – is a very good field naturalist, and it shows.

My only quibbles are minor. I fear that the somewhat cumbersome title doesn't do justice to the content, which is more a comprehensive regional field guide, rather than just of riverside plants. And yellow text on white (only for headings in the Forbs section) really doesn't work!

But another very useful addition to the local literature, and yet another invaluable contribution from a community organisation.

A Field Guide to Reptiles of NSW. Gerry Swan, Glenn Shea and Ross Sadler.
Reed New Holland, 2004. 302 pages, \$34.95.

A Complete Guide to Reptiles of Australia. Steve Wilson and Gerry Swan.
Reed New Holland, 2004. 480 pages, \$49.95.

I've lumped these books because they are very much companion volumes, of identical format. The NSW book is a new edition of the 1990 guide which only included snakes and lizards; the current one includes turtles (and we can have that etymological discussion elsewhere!).

Many reptiles, notably small skinks, are very difficult to identify without counting scales etc, but these volumes are extremely helpful indeed and a great improvement on the monumental national volume by Harold Cogger, which has little more information per species but weighs two and a half times as much.

Reptile taxonomy seems to be a very volatile field indeed, and these books have made a considerable effort to be up to date. Photos are uniformly excellent and in natural habitat. Maps in the NSW book are based on museum specimens and rather than covering 'general' areas are in the form of shaded squares; for obvious reasons the Australian maps in the other book are more generalised.

No-one interested in natural history in this part of the world can afford to be without the NSW Guide (plus of course Ross Bennett's excellent *Reptiles and Frogs of the ACT*, National Parks Association of the ACT 1997). And if you spend much time interstate, then I'd strongly recommend both.

Rica Erickson; a naturalist's life.

Rica Erickson. University of Western Australia Press 2005. 144pp.

Rica Erickson is a very special Australian indeed; we owe a debt beyond defining to the Ricas of the world, without whom we would know so much less than we do about the details of the wonderful nature of Australia. Rica is a truly remarkable self-taught all-round biologist, conservationist and artist. She was a country school teacher in south-west Western Australia who married a farmer in 1936. With his support, and that of various naturalists across Australia, and her children as research assistants, she made major contributions through meticulous observation, particularly of plant-insect interactions. She wrote the essential text on triggerplants, as well as an early book on WA orchids and at least 30 papers for natural history journals, including *Australian Plants* and *Emu*.

This is part auto-biography – and a refreshingly clear and modest one at that – and partly a collection of her writings over the years, for newspapers and journals. I loved her account of standing on a ladder for hours to describe what the leaf-cutting bees were doing in their mud cells, and sending the kids up to take over when she had to attend to housework!

Reading this book is both an unalloyed pleasure and a homage.

A Pirate of Exquisite Mind; the life of William Dampier, explorer, naturalist and buccaneer.

Diana and Michael Preston. Doubleday Press, 2004. 372 pages.

The 17th century pirate-naturalist William Dampier has always intrigued me, for the apparent contradiction between his passion for his hobby – very scientific natural history – and his profession, which involved murder and robbery on a very grand scale indeed. He sailed three times round the world, was the first Englishman to visit ‘Australia’ (where he collected plants), is referred to in *Gulliver's Travels* and inspired Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, and marooned and later rescued Alexander Selkirk, the original Robinson Crusoe.

This book is one of the very best biographies I have ever read, both in terms of research and evocative writing. From it emerges a fascinating man, one of the greatest navigators of his age and the first person to map and correlate winds and currents. He was an astute, empathetic and perceptive observer of flowers and birds and people – as long as they were not Spanish and likely to have valuables from which he could part them! It is hard to tell if he was primarily amoral with regard to his buccaneering (which it must be said was not illegal at the time), or if his often apparent reticence to write of it suggests a conscience.

I learnt a very great deal from this book, not only of Dampier himself, but of the 17th century world from South America via the Pacific to the Philippines, Vietnam, India and China. He was remarkably respectful of other cultures for their own sake and observed them carefully and non-judgmentally. I was astonished to learn that pirate society was based strongly on democratic decision-making and egalitarianism, in everything from planning to selecting (and changing) leaders, to distributing spoils.

I can't imagine that anyone who doesn't find me totally boring won't be fascinated by this book!