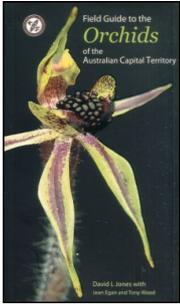


## Some Recent Natural History Publications #10 July 2008

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### *Field Guide to the Orchids of the Australian Capital Territory*

David Jones, Jean Egan, Tony Wood. National Parks Association of the ACT. 288 pages. RRP \$38.50.



It might be supposed that the ACT is too small a geographical entity to warrant its own Field Guides, yet we have been blessed with a plethora of such guides in recent years, mostly excellent, on topics including trees, birds, reptiles and frogs, wildflowers, and now orchids. I imagine that the reasons lie in a combination of an enthusiastic and natural history-educated market, and a concentration of professional and amateur biologists who can provide for them. In addition of course, such a guide is likely to be of considerable value in the surrounding region too. This one is a beauty, and I suspect that in years – or even months – to come we won't be able to imagine how we managed without it.

(Actually, most of us didn't really manage...) David Jones is one of the outstanding, if sometimes iconoclastic, Australian botanists of recent decades. Fortunately for us he has now retired, to enable him to write this book! I'm on the record as not being a great fan of photographic field guides, but not only are Tony's photos superb, but they are complemented by David's precisely detailed drawings, which have been digitally prepared by Jean (herself a very good botanical artist, incidentally). Each species is allotted a double page spread. I don't wish to appear totally hagiographic, and there is one thing which I believe would have made an excellent guide even better. The taxonomy of orchids has been changing at meteoric speed in recent times (largely due to the works of Jones himself) and a brief account of recent names of each species would have made life easier for most of us. (Some of the most recent names are included in the index, which certainly helps, but quite a few of these species have only just been separated out from a clumping of species, and their previous identities are not always clear.) Nonetheless, this is state of the art, the most up-to-date orchid book in Australia, and I can't wait to field test it!

### *Field Guide to the Native Trees of the ACT*

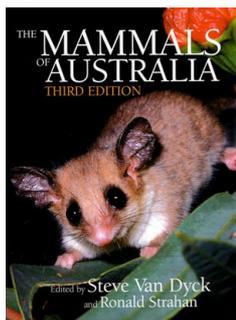
National Parks Association of the ACT. 98 pages. RRP \$27.50.

This is a thoroughly revised version of an already indispensable little guide, which first appeared in 1983; that means that I've been relying on it for most of the time I've been in Canberra! One of the major changes has been the introduction of colour photos throughout to complement the excellent drawings. I have to say though that I'm not always convinced that the choice of photos has justified the extra expenditure; in too many cases the trunk is shadowed or the photo is too distant, so that key features are obscured. The foreground photo of *Eucalyptus blakelyi* is a good example of a useful photo, but repeating that format for *E. fastigata* means that the key character of contrasting bare outer limbs is not seen. The colour is not always true either – for instance the *E. polyanthemos* foliage looks bright green instead of the characteristic bluish tinge that helps identify it, and the trunk of *E. aggregata* is far too pale. This is not to detract from the overall value of the book, but are things that could be changed in a future printing. In terms of defining a 'tree' for the purposes of the book the editors have quite properly erred on the side of generosity; it includes all 26 eucalypts, 15 wattles and 21 'others'. Each species is allocated a full page, with generously useful text. It includes keys (and instructions how to use them), information on ACT habitats, a glossary and explanations of scientific names. I'd be surprised if you didn't need this book.



### *The Mammals of Australia; third edition*

Steve van Dyck and Ronald Strahan. New Holland Press. 887 pages. RRP \$125.



This is one of the key titles of Australian natural history; it was already monumental, but since the bigger and better 1995 second edition it has grown by another 130 pages!! One important reason for this is the inclusion, for the first time, of whales and dolphins; another, though less significant in terms of pages, is the inclusion of Christmas Island. Australian bat taxonomy is in serious flux at present, and the new editor, the exciting and dynamic van Dyck of Queensland Museum, has courageously included quite a number of undescribed species and sub-species which may well prove to be full species. One might not think that much will have changed in a decade in our understanding of mammals, but one would be wrong! For instance in the 1995 edition the number of rock-wallaby species recognised nearly doubled to 15. In this edition the number of Marsupial ‘Moles’ has also doubled (albeit it to two...). Gilbert’s Potoroo, listed as extinct in the previous edition, is now again extant (although with less than 40 individuals). A quick flick through reveals new species described since 1994 among antechinuses, phascogales and mountain brushtail possums, *inter alia*. Each species description is comprehensive and up to the moment, and is written by a zoologist working with that species. I read that, remarkably, just one species account in the entire book (of 389) has not required updating! (The exception for the record, is Feral Donkey.) This is a significant investment, but given that it will be good for the next 10 years or so, I’d recommend that you consider it very seriously.

### *Albatrosses*

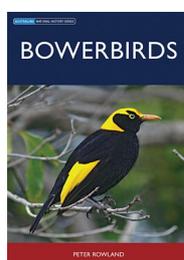
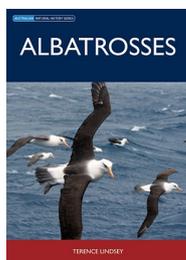
Terence Lindsey. CSIRO Publishing. 139 pages. RRP \$39.95

### *Bowerbirds*

Peter Rowland. CSIRO Publishing. 136 pages. RRP \$39.95

### *Great Whales*

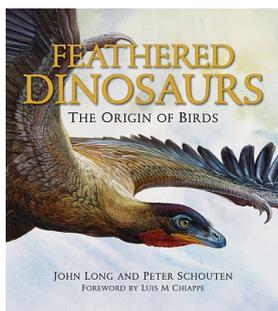
John Bannister. CSIRO Publishing. 142 pages. RRP \$39.95



I have rhapsodised before about the Australian natural history Series and look forward to doing so again in the near future. It continues to enrich our natural history shelves at a remarkable rate, as the titles continue to appear. If by chance you’re not familiar with the series, each is written by an authority on a group of Australian animals (all vertebrates so far), or occasionally a single species. They are scientifically rigorous and up to date, but eminently accessible to interested lay people. Typically the book covers evolution, classification, habitat, ecology, behaviour, conservation, interactions with humans, and a detailed account of each species. The authors are obviously not constrained to a rigid template however, and so we find chapters on ‘Myth and Legend’ in the albatross book, ‘Bower Evolution and Sexual Behaviour’ of bowerbirds, and ‘The Future’ of whales. If your wallet and bookshelf can bear it, you can’t go wrong with these books; at the very least be aware of them as a crucial source of information.

### *Feathered Dinosaurs; the origin of birds*

*John Long and Peter Schouten.* CSIRO Publishing. 193 pages. RRP \$49.95

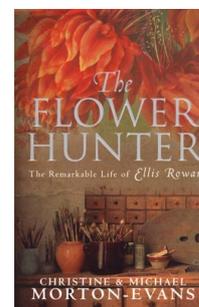


I love the way our understanding of past biological systems (or rather of *the* biological system at different moments in the past) is snowballing. John Long is my favourite Australian palaeontologist-writer, and I was smitten with Peter Schouten's work with Tim Flannery in *Astonishing Animals* back in 2004. This book is then a pretty powerful formula for me, and I revelled in it as much as I would have expected. It is a winning combination of beautiful artwork and good science; Schouten explains for each painting why he portrayed the species as he did, based on morphology, climate, habitat and extrapolation from apparently similar living species. It covers some 80 species of feathered dinosaurs, mostly carnivores, in the broad group known as *coleurosaurians*. And right among these groups is the one living group of dinosaurs, the birds. This book, without particularly pressing the point, underlines that truth very well. If you share my passions – or if you just like life in general and birds in particular – you will enjoy this book.

### *The Flower Hunter; the remarkable life of Ellis Rowan*

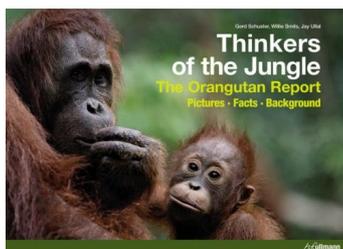
*Christine and Michael Morton-Evans.* Simon and Schuster. 328 pages. RRP \$34.95

It is not too unusual for for someone who died a celebrity some 80 years ago to have been largely forgotten now. What is more unusual is for that 1920s celebrity to have been a woman, and a botanical artist. Born into genteel Victorian colonial society in 1848, Ellis Ryan (later Rowan after she married a soldier, shockingly facially wounded in the Maori wars) seems to have been a remarkable person right from the start. It is recorded that her dream as a little girl was to travel: "I would like to go everywhere. I'd go to the moon if I could find a way to get there." She was also fascinated by flowers and wildlife and by art. Together those formed her life and her fame. Early on she became a protégée of, and collector for, von Mueller, who helped design her father's garden. In time she travelled to New Zealand, tropical Australia and the remote arid inland of Western Australia and eventually the even more remote New Guinea – at the age of 70! She won numerous prestigious awards for her paintings and was commissioned to paint vast works for the Australian Club in Melbourne, whose misogyny still forbids women to belong! (Husband Frederic on the other hand seems to have been understanding and supportive until his death in 1892.) The works by which we know her though are exquisite natural history works, primarily of flowers. I think that the 'largely forgotten' claim by the authors and publishers is actually somewhat overstated – her works appear reasonably often in galleries and library exhibitions. Some of them are reproduced in the book. Whether you are familiar with her work or not, I can't imagine you not being delighted by this well-researched and well-written story of a remarkable life.



### *The Thinkers of the Jungle; the Orangutan report*

*Gerd Schuster, Willie Smits and Jay Ullal.* HF Ullman. 319 pages. RRP \$60



I imagine you're unlikely to go and buy this book, but if you're interested in Orangutans, you need to seek it out. Smits is the key author – Ullal is a photographer and Schuster a journalist – who has lived with and for Orangutans in Indonesia since 1980, founding the Bornean Orangutan Survival Foundation, now the largest primate conservation project on earth. This is a book full of glorious – and sometimes heart-rending – photos, but also of a deep wealth of information on these wonderful apes, including their biology but especially the horrendous threats to their present and future, plus of course what is being done to assist them. I can guarantee that by the end of it you'll like Orangutans more than you do most humans! For that reason it's not an easy book, but you may consider that the \$60 to the Project to be a worthwhile investment – if you accept Smits' insistence that what is occurring is genocide, then your conscience may have a say in it too.