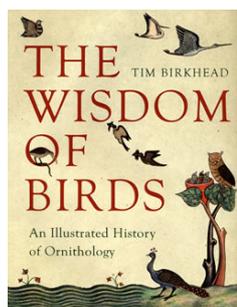


Some Recent Natural History Publications #12 May 2009

The Wisdom of Birds; an illustrated history of ornithology

Tim Birkhead. Bloomsbury, London. 433 pages. RRP \$65

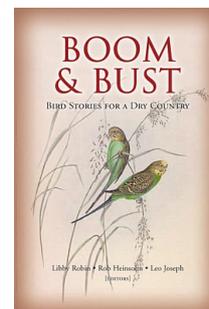


This is a truly superb book, wherein is a fabulous wealth of delicious information about birds, and about those who have studied them. Birkhead is a professor of animal behaviour and the history of science at Sheffield University, and his admirable ability to communicate clearly and inspiringly is not necessarily typical of his trade. Be warned that it is almost entirely Northern Hemisphere oriented, but for much of the history of ornithology that is not an unreasonable bias. Birkhead defines the beginning of a modern unified scientific study of birds as being the work of the vastly under-appreciated 17th century English polymath, John Ray, encapsulated in his encyclopaedia of ornithology. (He predated Linnaeus by 60-odd years, and influenced him profoundly; his other major opus, *The Wisdom of God* also obviously inspired the current title.) Birkhead's chapters are defined by key areas of study, such as migration, fertilisation and embryology, territory, song, and infidelity. In each we learn, inevitably and delightedly, more than most of us are likely to have already known about birds, as we follow the discovery process. Although observers from Aristotle to Ray understood that migration was the only explanation for the annual appearance and disappearance of birds, it was well into the 19th century before ideas of torpor (including at the bottom of ponds!) finally disappeared from the literature of ornithology. We learn how even Darwin himself glossed over the evidence of widespread female (bird...) infidelity, to spare the blushes of his daughter. And it was a bird-catcher, Antonio Valli da Todi, who first reported the existence of territoriality in birds in 1601. The selection of the plethora of illustrations, most from historic texts, is exquisite. Overall this is book is an absolute must for anyone interested in how we come to at least our present level of understanding of birds, and as a major bonus it's a delight to read.

Boom and Bust; bird stories for a dry country

Libby Robin, Robert Heinsohn and Leo Joseph (eds). CSIRO Publishing. 299 pages. RRP \$40

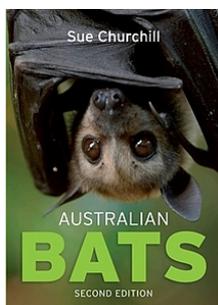
This book is an excellent complement to the previous title in being entirely about Australia (in fact the three editors, who also contribute chapters to the book, are also Canberra-based researchers). It comprises a series of essays on how different bird groups and species have adapted to life in an El Niño-driven climate, but in the process we also learn how our understandings have changed. I read much of it sitting by waterholes in south-west Queensland, which made it feel even more immediate and significant. This, like Birkhead's above, is writing by biologists for laypeople at its very best. An excellent example is the lovely chapter *Rain and Grass; lessons in how to be a Zebra Finch* by Steve Morton, who has studied them profoundly. He outlines the history of our understanding of Zebbies, a story which features such giants of Australian ornithology as Dom Serventy, Jock Marshall and Harry Frith, and challenges the assumption that Zebra Finches' breeding is a classic direct 'boom and bust' response to rain in the deserts, while offering a more subtle interpretation of it. And perhaps best of all he brings these hyperactive, hypercharismatic dryland delights to life in the vast spaces they inhabit. I was delighted that they are Nyii Nyii to the western desert people, which is exactly how Zebbies introduce themselves. In another chapter Julian Reid tackles the eternal problem of how pelicans (and others) know when to head inland to breed; his discussions are thoughtful and thought-provoking, but I don't think we're there yet. Another pervading theme throughout concerns the implications of human-wrought climate change for these and other desert species, as well as what we can learn from them. Anyone who who seeks better to understand life in inland Australia needs to read this book – and it's no hardship!



Australian Bats; second edition

Sue Churchill. Jacana Books. 255 pages. RRP \$49.95

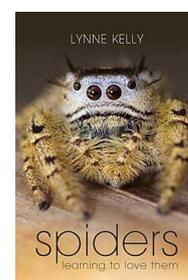
I am somewhat amazed and slightly despondent to discover that it is 10 years since the first edition of this essential guide to Australian bats; it really doesn't seem that long. Churchill – an independent ecological researcher who has focussed on bats for a long time – has thoroughly updated the work, taking into account the large volume of bat research in the past decade, including major taxonomic revisions. With an obviously close working relationship with other researchers, she has been able to include new species whose publication is still in the long pipeline of scientific papers. As previously, there is an introductory segment (of 50 pages) *All About Bats*, which really is pretty much all that most of us will need to know, followed by the very comprehensive species accounts. I heartily applaud a field guide which also includes information on roost habits, habitat, diet, reproduction and general notes for each species. If you already have the old edition and use it regularly you should update. If you don't, and have an interest in this fascinating and extraordinary group of animals which comprises a quarter of Australia's mammal species, you must seriously consider this one.



Spiders; learning to love them

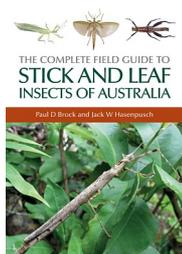
Lynne Kelly. Jacana Books. 264 pages. RRP \$30

I thought that after Bert Brunet's books on Australian spiders there wasn't much more to say. I was wrong. This is a truly remarkable book, by someone who began knowing nothing of spiders – except that she had a phobia of them. She made the decision to meet her fears head-on by learning all she could about spiders, by talking to spider people throughout Australia and overseas. The result was an overwhelming passion for spiders, plus this book, which is an amazing compendium of spider information, written with a passion and clarity that rarely coincide in biological literature. She has human names for her house and garden spiders, which might be off-putting but manages not to be, not least because it was part of her process of turning loathing to loving. I already think that spiders are amazing animals, but this book has given me an even deeper appreciation and fondness for them. I've also learnt a lot about venomous (and 'vemomous') spider bites, and met a lot of spider researchers that I'm glad to have made the vicarious acquaintance of. If you do or don't like spiders, this book will increase your enjoyment of life!



The Complete Field Guide to Stick and Leaf Insects of Australia

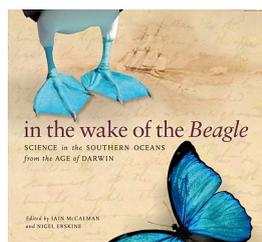
Paul Brock and Jack Hasenpusch. CSIRO Publishing. 204 pages. RRP \$44.95



I know almost nothing about phasmids beyond recognising one if I see it, but I no longer have an excuse. Of course I have no way of knowing that the book is accurate, but given the publisher and the CVs of the authors, I do not doubt it for a moment. There are excellent introductory chapters on their biology and ecology, followed by a guide to families and then species, a photo-illustrated page per species. There are even apparently quite accessible keys to genera and species. I notice that there are a few species whose distribution covers parts of remote inland South Australia, but none from other arid areas; this suggests that there may well be more to discover. A huge green chap I photographed in Idalia National Park in central Queensland should not apparently be there, which supports this thought. The price is a bit daunting, meaning that those who are not yet phasmid fans might be put off becoming so, but I suppose the market is not expected to be as large as for the bird field guides, which are generally cheaper though much larger. This is a pity, because the book itself has the potential to open our eyes to another group of Australian animals that we probably don't consider as much as we should.

In the Wake of the Beagle; science in the southern oceans from the age of Darwin

Iain McCalman and Nigel Erskine (eds). UNSW Press. 192 pages. RRP \$49.95

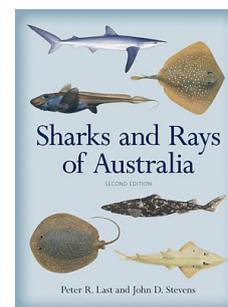


I am intrigued by the history of Australian biology and have read quite a lot of words on the subject, but this book told me a lot that I hadn't come across earlier and did so in a most enjoyable fashion. The chapter on the day to day physical and mental problems of a naturalist living on a usually tiny cramped wet vessel is illuminating. As young men some of the giants of British 19th biology – Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley and Joseph Hooker – spent years on such ships, including in Australian waters. Darwin suffered terribly from sea-sickness, Huxley from what sounds a lot like clinical depression, but all recognised the enormous opportunities afforded them and the experience shaped their long and glorious careers. I had previously known little of Hooker's time in Australia, two years before his father William became the immensely influential director of Kew, a position that in time Joseph himself was also to fill. Further, I had never heard of the ill-fated John McGillivray who, but for chance and perhaps his own unfortunate manner, might have been as famous; I am grateful for the chapter on him. Other imaginative offerings include a three-chapter section on interactions with indigenous people, including essays on the experiences in New Guinea of the *Rattlesnake*, under Owen Stanley with Huxley on board, and on Alfred Wallace's remarkable 1600km journey in a Malay prau, which contributed greatly to his own brilliant work on evolution and the significance of Wallace's Line. There is a fascinating chapter on the instruments available to 19th century navigators and field biologists and another on the techniques available to their modern counterparts. And the illustrations, many from the National and Mitchell Library collections, and many of which I have never seen before, are a joy in themselves. A superb book at all levels.

Sharks and Rays of Australia

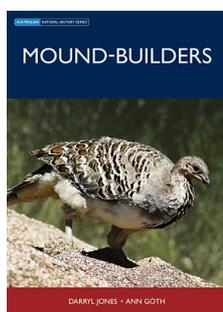
Peter Last and John Stevens. CSIRO Publishing. 656 pages. RRP \$120

This is another guide to an under-considered group of Australian animals, but one which may well be limited to specialists, given its price and sheer bulk. It is in the form of a field guide, but at over 3kg will not easily fit in the back pocket; on the other hand I don't suppose we can use a guide for sharks and rays in the same way we do for birds! The introductory information is fairly limited, but the species accounts are very informative, well beyond simple identification. The paintings are large and very impressive, and are repeated in columns without text at the end of the book, to allow comparison. Belatedly society is taking a responsible interest in sharks in particular and I hope this book can contribute to informed shark and ray conservation. Unfortunately most of us are likely only to come across it in a library – and I'd recommend you admire one there – but I'd love to see a scaled-down version for the rest of us.



Mound Builders

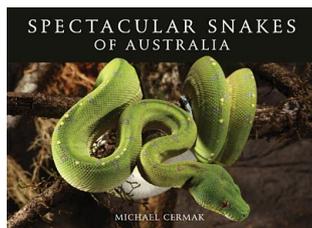
Darryl Jones and Ann Göth. CSIRO Publishing; Australian Natural History Series. 118 pages. RRP \$39.95



There seems to be hardly an issue of these reviews which does not include a new title in this remarkable and indispensable series. Both authors have special interest in Brush-turkeys (Jones is probably the world authority) but all three Australian species get full and fair treatment – in fact the cover features the beautiful Malleefowl. I'm sure you don't need an introduction to this extraordinary group of birds, or to this series of books if you have any interest in Australian natural history (or have just read previous issues of this review series!). The Australian species are put into their world context, which means also New Guinea, eastern Indonesia, the Philippines and some of the western Pacific, then detailed chapters deal with ecology, conservation and behaviour, with of course major emphasis on mounds and breeding. Just what you'd expect in fact, and this book will join the line of its much-thumbed predecessors on my natural history shelves.

Spectacular Snakes of Australia

Michael Cermak. CSIRO Publishing. 120 pages. RRP \$39.95



This is a book that might not have worked, but I think it does, because it defines its own purpose and sticks to that. It's part a coffee-table style visual celebration of snakes, and part personal experience of them, while also offering a clear and useful tour of all the Australian snake groups. The photos are uniformly beautiful, and the contents page draws us in with snappy chapter titles like *Rainbow at night*, *The frog hunters*, *Are all black snakes black?*, and *The temperamental one*, each referring to a separate snake group. The photos of the stars are supplemented with those of prey items and habitats, and the chapters are nicely and effectively headed with bars of close-ups of scales of relevant species. If you're a snake fan – and why wouldn't you be? – this would make a great present. Start hinting.

Wildlife of Australia; a nature photographers' journey

Michael Snedic. New Holland. 192 pages. RRP \$40

I know that Snedic takes good photos – I'm admired them in *Wingspan* for instance – and indeed there are some nice ones in this book. These days however if one is to put out a book solely of photos, with no supporting or explanatory text, they had better be something very spectacular and different indeed. I'm afraid that to my eye at least, these are not in that category. I want to know why a photo was taken, and where it was, but no such information is vouchsafed here. I think I know why though; in the brief introduction he confesses that at least some of them were taken in captivity, and he doesn't seem to want us to know how many. There are good reasons to do so sometimes, but my response to a photo of a 'difficult' animal is very different if it was taken in the wild or a cage, and if I'm not sure I'll doubt them all. A pity, and it didn't need to be so. He also claims to have not digitally manipulated the photos (except for a little bit...) but I'm unconvinced by the blues in the Rainbow Pitta for instance. However, as I said, there are some nice photos in the book.