

## Some Recent Natural History Publications #14 December 2010

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### **Forest Phoenix; how a great forest recovers after wildfire**

David Lindenmayer, David Blair, Lachlan McBurney, Sam Banks.  
CSIRO Publishing. 128 pages. RRP \$39.95

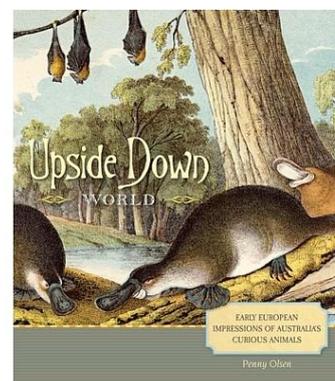


It would, I think, have been wonderful had this book been written following the cataclysmic ACT fires of January-February 2003. It might have made a little easier the task of those of us who were trying to put them into some sort of perspective as an integral part of the Australian landscape from long before humans were. I doubt that any reader of this review will need to be told who ANU ecologist David Lindenmayer is, but the authors have been studying the montane ash forests of the Victorian central highlands for nearly three decades (and intend to go on doing so for another couple). And of course these forests were central to the fires of February 2009, which in terms of human life were the most disastrous in at least European Australian history. Given that, it is not hard to understand why they have been seen in unremittingly negative terms – as is any severe fire event here. This book very wisely steers clear of the human dimension. Rather it is all about the natural ‘recovery’ cycle of the forests, explaining simply and succinctly how fire ecology works. The four chapters each begin with a few pages of introductory text, followed by more pages of beautiful photographs with very pertinent and informative captions. These photos alone warrant the purchase price. While Victoria-oriented it is equally pertinent to the local situation, with the ash forests of the Brindabellas and Kosciuszko very closely related to the Victorian ones. One difference from the ACT scenario is the absence of logging of native forests here, whose interaction with fires attracts some discussion in the book; this is certainly relevant to nearby NSW though, and so indirectly to us. An important and beautiful publication.

### **Upside Down World; early European impressions of Australia's curious animals**

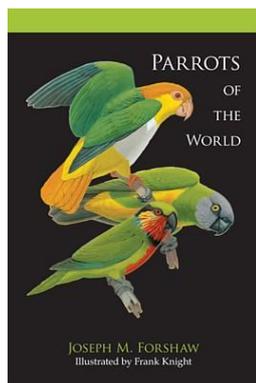
Penny Olsen. National Library of Australia. 240 pages. RRP \$39.95

This is a book that I wish I'd written; not, I hasten to clarify, because I think I could have done it any better, but because it would have been so much *fun* to do! Olsen, another ANU scientist and prolific writer, was originally known as an expert on birds of prey – and has published accordingly – but in more recent times has contributed significantly to our knowledge of the history of Australian wildlife art. In 2001 her *Feather and Brush; two centuries of Australian bird art* was a delight. This volume is her second collaboration with the National Library in telling wonderful Australian natural history stories based on the library's apparently inexhaustible mine of information and images, following *Glimpses of Paradise; the quest for the beautiful parrakeet* in 2007 (see #9 in this review series). *Upside Down World* examines, with the benefit of a huge amount of detailed research, how early European settlers responded to a range of Australian species, from the more obvious – Platypus, Thylacine, Black Swan and Koala – to less expected objects of interest, including Marsupial Moles, Ground Parrots, Shingleback Lizards and lungfish. I thought I knew a bit about this topic, but I was overwhelmed and delighted by the torrent of quotes and images that I'd not previously encountered. I didn't know that Thylacines had been known as Zebra Possums, or the Wedgie as a Bold Vulture. Observations – by governors, explorers and settlers – range from the astute to the ... curious. I love the comment on the Nonpareil Parrot (Eastern Rosella, if you must) that it is 'not very susceptible of education: one which was kept for three years at Malmaison, in France, had learned nothing'. One might well observe that attitudes to Australian wildlife have not changed as fundamentally as we might like to think in 200-odd years. Here we will find responses that range from insightful, delighted, respectful, concerned, to the venal, ignorant, fearful and contemptuous; a bit like reading a newspaper in 2010 actually. Likewise the array of illustrations runs the full gamut from commendable accuracy (especially if one allows that not all those forced to produce the sketches would have regarded themselves as artists) to what may generously be described as wildly apocryphal. Fabulous stuff – and equally pleasing is the fact that the library has maintained its reputation as a producer of *very affordable* high quality books. Consider seriously doing yourself a favour.



### **Parrots of the World**

Joseph Forshaw and Frank Knight. CSIRO Publishing. 336 pages. RRP \$39.95

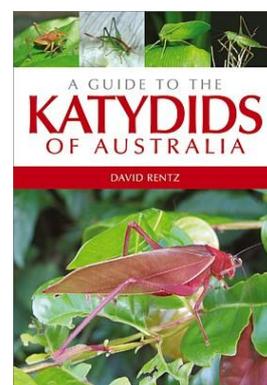


This is a beautiful field guide by two practitioners (both Canberrans) who are at the pinnacle of their craft. Frank Knight is now our most prolific field guide illustrator, having provided the plates for the currently pre-eminent Australian guides for birds, mammals and frogs. *But* – I don't get it. This is not a treatise on parrots doubling as a field guide – it is a classic field guide, pure and simple, aimed solely at field identification. If I go to Uganda, the Kimberley or Peru, I'll take the comprehensive bird guide for the area; does anyone carry a universal specific guide to parrots, and presumably also for weavers, honeyeaters, hummingbirds etc? Well, maybe they do, or maybe some people do roam the world just looking for parrots. If this is you, then this is unquestionably the guide for you, arranged by geographical region to facilitate your planning. You won't find a better one!

### **A Guide to the Katydidids of Australia**

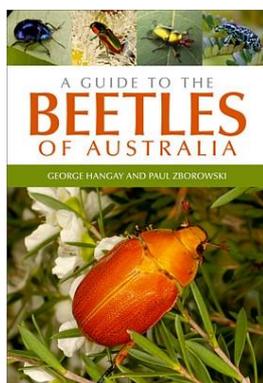
David Rentz. CSIRO Publishing. 224 pages. RRP \$49.95

Perhaps it's not really so odd that biologists, by and large, seem incapable of retiring. Presumably they chose the profession because of love for the subject, which probably explains why they generally just turn up for work as usual the day after the retirement party. David Rentz is one such – though he has at least relocated from Canberra (where he long worked for CSIRO Entomology) to north Queensland. This is another in a series of lay-accessible CSIRO monographs on invertebrates, separate from the Australian Natural History Series and without an evident series name. For many of us it might arguably have been more useful to go to the entire Order (as the next title has done), despite the resultant thin-spreading. However that is not Rentz's field and he has every right to focus on his specialty. For the record, Katydidids comprise just one family (Tettigoniidae) of nearly 50 in the Order Orthoptera – grasshoppers, crickets etc. However with over 6000 species (over 1000 in Australia) it is easily the second-largest family, exceeded only by the short-horned grasshoppers (Acrididae) at 10,000. This is more than the other near-50 families combined. It is not easy to define however in lay terms, as words such as grasshopper and cricket are used interchangeably and near-randomly. 'Long-horned grasshoppers' is as close to a useful generalization as we are likely to get. To my ears 'katydid' sounds North American, and it may be that Rentz, who came here originally from California and undoubtedly has long dominated the field in Australia, has influenced its usage here. You might think that you could get all this book's information from the web, but you'd be wrong. As well as being a field guide it has a vast amount of information that only someone who has devoted his life to their study could provide, not to mention a wealth of excellent photos, most at least apparently taken in the wild. Add it to your car library and increase still further the pleasure of your next outing. (But I can't help asking; why is this book, with 24 less pages than the next one, \$5 dearer?)



### **A Guide to the Beetles of Australia**

George Hangay and Paul Zoborowski. CSIRO Publishing. 248 pages. RRP \$44.95



Another in the same series as the previous title, with a similar approach though a far broader remit. The great British zoologist JBS Haldane famously (and probably!) said 'The Creator, if He exists, has a special preference for beetles, and so we might be more likely to meet them than any other type of animal on a planet that would support life'. This was in response to the sheer near-incomprehensible numbers of beetles whose world we share. In Australia alone there may be 30,000 species, of which at least a third are probably undescribed. This is less than 10% of the world's species however – some 40% of the world's insect species are beetles. If you want to write a book about them, this is a problem... As a result of this sheer wonderful profligacy, this book offers 'brief descriptions' of 91 Australian beetle *families* – which is about 80% of the Australian total. (The remaining 20% are regarded as unlikely to be encountered by the likes of us.) And it is us laypeople that the authors have kept firmly in mind – no dumbing down, but clear descriptions (aided by their comprehensive glossary) and lots of interesting information, including nearly 50 pages of invaluable introduction. While I wouldn't have wanted to make the decision, this book was a worthy winner of the 2010 Whitley Medal for Australian zoological publishing.

## **Spider Silk; evolution and 400 million years of spinning, waiting, snagging and waiting**

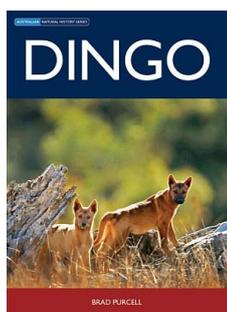
Leslie Brunetta and Catherine L Craig. CSIRO Publishing. 280 pages. RRP \$39.95

I'm a big fan of spiders, which really are a most wonderful group of animals, complex and sophisticated. This is a very comprehensive account of spider evolution and adaptations, which are indeed many and extraordinarily various, and it is well-written, a good collaboration of scientist and professional writer. Despite the name the book is not all about silk, though of course this remarkable material – stronger and tougher than kevlon, and manufactured by the same spider in different forms for different purposes – is the key to understanding spiders and their amazing success. There is perhaps more technical detail than some might want, such as on the detailed protein structure of some silks, but it's not for an author to guess what each reader might need. While those interested in the field will have come across versions of much of this before – perhaps in Bert Brunet's excellent Australian spider books – there is certainly material new to me here. This includes an interesting discussion as to why insects get caught in webs that are obvious to us. However, I am left a little perplexed as to why CSIRO is publishing this book at all. You see, not only has it no discernible Australian content, but it was already published in the Northern Hemisphere, with the same cover, by Yale University Press. CSIRO distributes books by other publishers, why not this one? None of my business really, but I'm incurably curious. Never mind, despite its lack of Australian focus it's a good instructive and entertaining read anyway.



## **Dingo**

Brad Purcell. Australian Natural History Series, CSIRO Publishing. 176 pages. RRP \$39.95



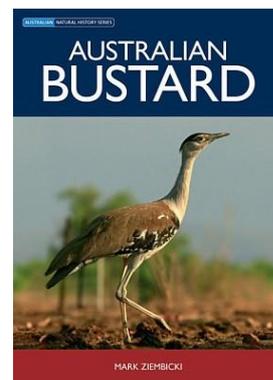
I've long been on record as an enthusiast of this series, and this volume epitomises most of the things I like about it. Brad Purcell is a young, passionate scientist who did his PhD on Dingoes in the Blue Mountains; his knowledge is first hand and fresh. Much has happened with our understanding of Dingoes since the previous book on the species in this series, written by Laurie Corbett in 1995, though it was by then already recognised that 'our' dog is a sub-species of the Grey Wolf *Canis lupus*. Purcell sees it as important to recognise the Dingo as a 'hypercarnivore', defined as a group-living carnivore that takes more than 70% of vertebrate prey and hunts animals weighing more than itself. The significance of this is that it helps with our understanding by allowing comparison with equivalent canids elsewhere, and the book contains interesting discussions of the implications of this lifestyle on both the

social systems, populations and movements of the Dingoes themselves, and on their various prey species. The intriguingly named chapter *How do dingoes see Australian landscapes?* is really about the latest tools and techniques for studying Dingoes, and some results of these. There are also thoughtful and sometimes challenging chapters on human-Dingo competition and Dingo conservation. I've always struggled philosophically with the question as to whether Dingoes, new-comers here after just 4000-odd years, should be regarded as essentially Australian animals. This book doesn't – and can't – help me with this, but it's a great read anyway.

## **Australian Bustard**

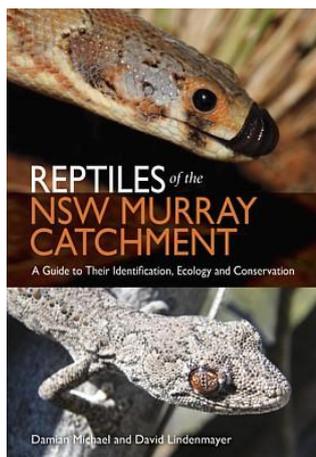
Mark Ziemicki. Australian Natural History Series, CSIRO Publishing. 120 pages. RRP \$39.95

I will never forget my first bustard, some 35 years ago along a sandy track in dry heathland in the south-west of WA; it flew across the windscreen and seemed to block out the light. I was thrilled, and to see these gloriously snooty, sadly trusting huge birds is still a highlight of any trip. Until the 1860s flocks of bustards were common on the Limestone Plains. I wrote the previous words before noticing that the first sentence of the book's preface is a reminiscence of the first time Ziemicki saw one too – bustards have that effect. Like Purcell's dingo book (above) this is written by someone who has recently done a detailed study of the species in the context of a PhD (this one in the Top End). In fact the book could not have previously been possible, as Ziemicki's study, specifically on the complexities of bustard movements, was the first formal study of the species in the wild. Of course he also draws on previous observations as well, to produce a volume which is well worthy of this near-uniformly excellent series, and by definition includes a wealth of new information. I would note however that the price of the volumes of this series appears to be fixed, regardless of the number of pages...



## **Reptiles of the NSW Murray Catchment; a guide to their identification and conservation**

Damian Michael and David Lindenmayer. CSIRO Publishing. 248 pages. RRP \$39.95



This is a modern, lovely-to-use field guide, with a quite specific purpose. While it is going to be a useful guide for the rest of us, it seems to have land managers strongly in mind; in fact there is even a chapter devoted to *Conserving reptiles on farms*. This chapter is succinct and practical, and will be of interest to other managers too, such as land care groups, catchment authorities and government agencies. Be aware that it defines the Murray Catchment quite narrowly; while many of us would have liked it to include the Murrumbidgee Catchment too, it is easy to see that some restriction was required, or by using the broader definition it would have been virtually an all-NSW guide! Basically it covers the Riverina, south-western slopes, the south-eastern highlands and alps. As a good 21<sup>st</sup> century field guide should, it brings us more than just identification, though it does that well. Each species entry covers two pages, has one or two good photos, lots of detail on habitat, similar species, management etc, and paragraphs on *Additional notes* and *Facts*. The former offers more information on the biology of the species itself, while the latter is a wonderful innovation; it uses an aspect of the species to introduce, clearly and simply, a broader ecological, conservation or behavioural concept. Reading all these *Facts* paragraphs is an excellent ecology lesson – I wish I'd thought of it! And at the end of the book is a nice little chapter to help us untangle those tricky skink groups, by means of well-planned tables for comparison. If you spend time in that part of the world, you've probably got some much less useful items in your glove box; if you or someone you know manages land there it's close to essential.

*Ian Fraser is a Canberra-based professional naturalist and writer (viz, he doesn't make much money!) who is the author of six – soon seven! – books on local natural history. He has run the educational Environment Tours nature-based tours program in association with the local Environment Centre since 1984 and has been the voice of natural history on local ABC radio since 1992. The ABC recently 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. 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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