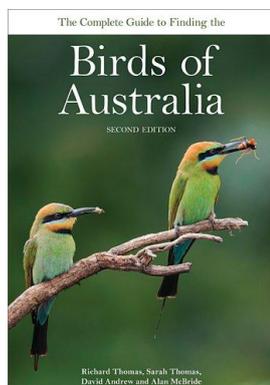


Some Recent Natural History Publications #15 June 2011

The Complete Guide to Finding the Birds of Australia; second edition

Richard Thomas, Sarah Thomas, David Andrew and Alan McBride
CSIRO Publishing. 480 pages. RRP \$49.95



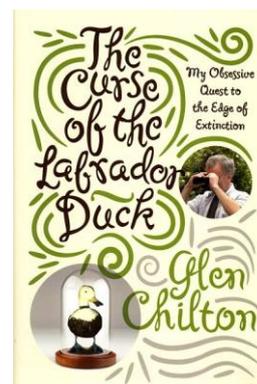
I must declare some interest in this, in that I regard Richard and Sarah Thomas as old and dear friends, since the time they spent in Australia in the early 1990s, nominally doing Chemistry post-docs at the ANU but in practice swanning around seeing (nearly) every Australian bird species. The first edition of this book, courageously self-published in 1996 and wildly successful, resulted. This edition is a total rewrite, by Andrew and McBride, who were involved in advisory roles in the first edition. Andrew is a professional wildlife scientist, who helped found *Wingspan* and Lonely Planet's *Watching Wildlife* series. There are two issues to consider with a 'Where to See...' guide. The first is somewhat philosophical, and relates to the general problem of a list of significant sites/species/restaurants etc – ie the potential implication that everything else is a list of *insignificant sites/species/etc*. There are a couple of spin-offs of this. One is that a blinkered reader could rush past many other interesting places and birds to reach *the* site; the other and more serious one is the potential pressure put on small sensitive sites. The first is not I think the responsibility of the authors; as birders it's up to us to do our homework on habitats, and to be adventurous. The second *is* down to the authors, who have a responsibility to the environment and the species; having said this, the sites chosen in the guide are either 'hard' sites, or extended ones (eg whole national parks, or 'the first 50km or so of the road'), so they are fully exonerated! The second issue is how well the guide has been done, and this one is done very well indeed. The format – key sites in every Australian state, then a full list of Australian bird species with recommendations as to where to see them – was established by the Thomases, and has been retained. Virtually all sites have been checked, new ones added, damaged or inaccessible ones removed, bird taxonomy updated. If you know and use the first edition, it's well worth while updating. If you don't, and birds are a reason for your travels, add this to the car library. It's unlikely to help you in your own area, but there's a big and birdie country out there...

The Curse of the Labrador Duck; my obsessive quest to the edge of extinction

Glen Chilton

Simon and Schuster. 320 pages. RRP \$35

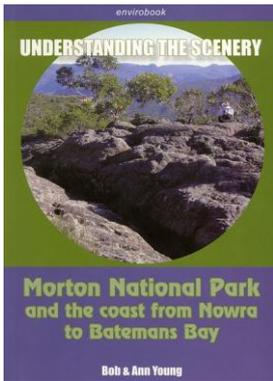
It is not often that I struggle for words, but this book brings me to the brink. Don't let me give you the wrong idea, I can't readily think of another book in recent times which has given me more sheer pleasure, varying from laughing out loud to nodding appreciatively at delightful and sometimes unexpected use of language. But it is such an unlikely concept for a book – professional and highly respected Canadian ornithologist sets out, over a four year period, to track down every museum specimen (50 plus, including eggs) of the fabled Labrador Duck. This duck was a strikingly handsome sea duck with no close relatives, which apparently bred in icy eastern Canada and wintered down around New York; bad move, as although it was notoriously horrible to eat, the last ones were still shot by gunhappy heroes off New York in the 1870s. Chilton became the world expert and methodically tracked down every one, in Canada, the US, Britain, France, Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic and Russia; how the ducks got to such far-flung places is part of the story. He doesn't have loads of spare cash, and effectively backpacks his way around – inter alia this is a perceptive and sometimes hilarious travel yarn. His unconventionality is part of the charm, cheerfully sharing rooms for reasons of economy with women (colleagues, guides, friends) who, as he puts it, were "not my wife", even sharing a naked frigid night time swim with one in Canada. (His wife, incidentally, is very much part of the adventure, fitted around her own high-powered scientific life; they have both just relocated to James Cook Uni.) He is refreshingly willing to name names of the dishonest, incompetent and boorish, be it John James Audubon, the Amtrak rail system or Paul Ehrlich (in that order), but overwhelmingly he is generous and warm, and people seem to reciprocate. Apart from the sadness implicit in the loss of any species, this is an absolutely delightful read. (Note though that while I've just been introduced to it, it came out in 2009 – thanks Patrick!)



Understanding the Scenery; Morton National Park and the coast from Nowra to Batemans Bay

Bob and Ann Young

Envirobook. 144 pages. RRP \$29.95



I often wish I wasn't so ignorant about geology and geomorphology, and this book will help me overcome at least some of my deficiencies in this area. It is very much a beginner's guide, and clear enough that even I can readily understand it! The authors were long-time lecturers at the University of Wollongong, and have written *Sandstone Formations*, an international perspective (I assume that book's good, it's certainly very expensive!). Beautifully and appropriately illustrated throughout with photographs, this book starts with an overall introduction to the geological history of the area, then discusses and interprets interesting sites in various sub-regions – Bungonia to Bundanoon; Fitzroy Falls to Barren Grounds; the Coastal Strip, and so on. Anyone who goes to the coast and hinterland from Batemans Bay north will recognise the places, but may not know all the things that this book tells us about them. For instance, were you aware that at Mermaids Inlet, on Beecroft Peninsula at Jervis Bay, you can see huge boulders hurled onto cliff tops by a tsunami? This book will definitely be coming on my next coast trip – and there's also one called *Understanding the Scenery; Royal National Park* when you've finished learning all that's in this one! (Again, this book isn't new, but I've just discovered it – thanks this time to Les and Janet!)

My Little World

Julia Cooke

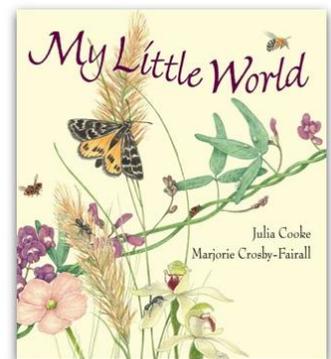
Scholastic. 24 pages. RRP \$27

A book for children, but far too beautiful and subtle to be left entirely to them. The genesis of the book lay in family nature walks on Black Mountain in Canberra, when Cooke, as a little girl, found she often couldn't see the big things her parents pointed out, but was good at seeing the small and inconspicuous that adults overlooked. The lovely little verses that comprise the verbal element of the book were actually written as a secondary school exercise a while ago now, given that Cooke is now finishing her PhD in plant ecology at Macquarie Uni. Each poem (one to a two-page spread) is of three four-line verses eg: *I saw a beetle marching/On a plant that shone with dew – /I lay down very close to it/To get a better view.*

*Its head and back were armoured/With a bright metallic sheen/
Which mostly was an orange-red/But now and then looked green.
Its legs were brown and shiny/Its tummy shaggy grey/
It had antennae just like feathers –/Whoops! – it's flown away?*

What more needs to be said about a Christmas Beetle?

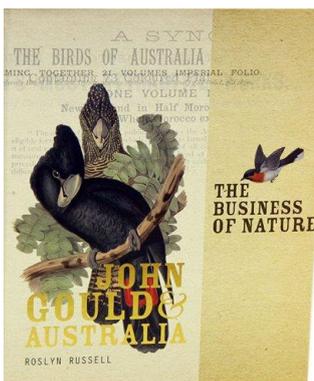
Scholastic, to their credit, saw the value in it and paired her with artist Marjorie Crosby-Fairall, an inspired choice. The detailed paintings that form the backdrop of each page are exquisite, full of detail that repays many re-readings. And vitally I think, they are accurate depictions of insects and other invertebrates, plants and a few of the small reptiles that populate Black Mountain. Your child needs this book – and if you don't have a convenient child you'll need to find another excuse to get a copy.



The Business of Nature; John Gould and Australia

Roslyn Russell

National Library of Australia. 224 pages. RRP \$50



John Gould is an integral part of the lore of Australian natural history. Born a gardener's son in Lyme Regis in 1804, he went on to raise the vocation of zoological entrepreneur to a new level, as taxidermist and publisher; he described over 320 species of Australian birds, 176 of which (by my count) are still valid – an extraordinary achievement; he famously identified Darwin's Galapagos finches (with revolutionary results); he introduced Budgies to England as cage birds; and he indirectly fostered later generations of Australian naturalists via the Gould League. The author, a historian, openly admits that the book provides only 'a brief sketch' of Gould's life; if you don't know the story, this is a clear and concise summary, but if you have some familiarity with it you're unlikely to learn more here.

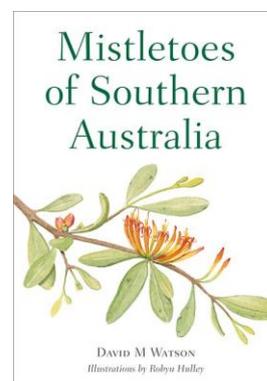
The real purpose of the book is to showcase the glorious paintings of Australian birds and mammals, produced by Gould's team under his direction, that are surely among the National Library's most significant treasures (at least if you share my biases!). To my mind this is a perfectly adequate excuse for a book, especially at the remarkably low prices that the library continues to charge for highest quality publications. The last 130-odd pages of the book are a portfolio of these paintings, superb reproductions of one per large format page. From an era when animal paintings often looked far too much as though painted from a dead animal by someone who'd never seen a live one (which they often were), Gould's productions remain a revelation, accurate, life-like and beautiful. He wasn't, and never claimed to be, the artist – his wife Elizabeth was crucial to the process until her tragically early death – but usually produced sketches to guide the real artists. There is not much bad to say about this book, though an editor should have eliminated the use of 'animal' when the author means 'mammal' (a long-standing *bête noir* of mine). I must mention however the curious (and unidentified) font, unpretentious for the most part (except in italics, when it becomes very swirly) but when 'ct' are juxtaposed the 't' mysteriously sprouts a magnificently wispy coiffure; most peculiar. This in no way however detracts from a very handsome and welcome addition to the NLA stable.

Mistletoes of Southern Australia

David M Watson

CSIRO Publishing. 200 pages. RRP \$49.95

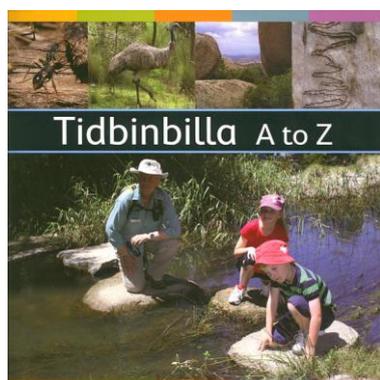
I am something of a champion of mistletoes, which still need defending against ignorance and bias, even sometimes among those who should know better. I am also a fan of David Watson of Charles Sturt University, who has added immeasurably to our knowledge of mistletoes and their vital role in the landscape. Unsurprisingly then, I am delighted to see this book, a comprehensive but utterly accessible compendium of knowledge about Australian mistletoes, as well as their context in the wider mistletoe world. The central section comprises species accounts of all 46 species found in southern Australia (ie south of the Queensland – NSW border), with a full page painting by Robyn Hulley facing an account including description, habitat, main hosts, butterfly associates and a distribution map. It is sandwiched by sections on mistletoe biology, cultural aspects (including European versus Australian, including indigenous, beliefs, and mistletoes in Australian art) and ecology, including management. Watson's field research has previously shown that a landscape depauperate of mistletoes is also bird-poor relative to a normal healthy mistletoe-enhanced area; this refers to threatened bird species as well. Appendices add a full list of all 91 Australian species, and a very thorough list of references – including web sites. I must also make mention of some particularly fine photos which enrich virtually every page. Another enthusiastic recommendation.



Tidbinbilla A to Z

Tidbinbilla Volunteer Presenters

Conservation Volunteers. 30 pages. RRP \$10



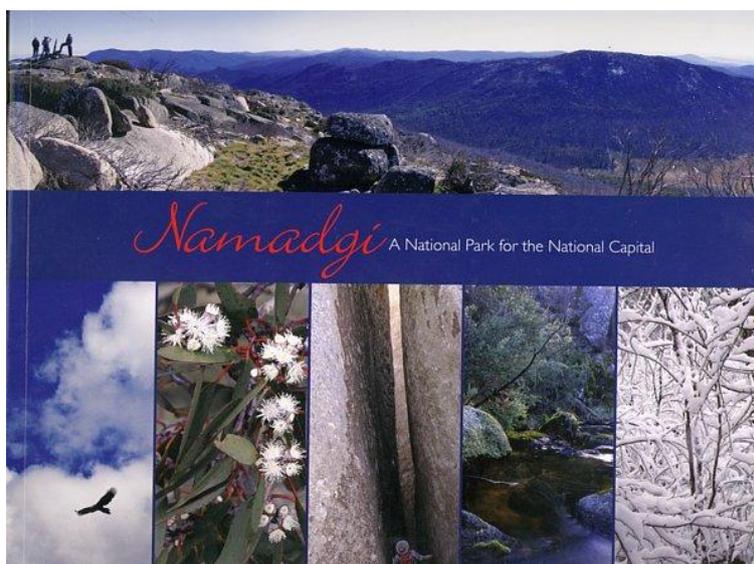
A nice little offering from a group of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve volunteer interpreters, a children's alphabet of animals, plants, even ecological concepts (N is for nest, U is for understorey) and other features (V is for Visitors Centre). Neatly, Y is for yellow, to introduce a Sulphur-crested Cockatoo and allow S to be for sanctuary! At a page per letter, the text – about four well-crafted sentences, lots of information clearly expressed – is accompanied by a photo taken by the volunteers; these are of very high quality. A nice addition to your kids' bookshelf, a good souvenir of Tidbinbilla, and an impressive example of what a determined group of volunteers can achieve. Currently only available at the Tidbinbilla Visitors' Centre.

Namadgi, a national park for the national capital

Christine Goonrie and Clive Hurlstone

National Parks Association of the ACT. 92 pages. RRP \$25

Another admirable contribution by a group of volunteers, also in tribute to a major ACT reserve, but at a completely different scale from the previous title. The book was initiated in 2010 to mark the 50th anniversary of the founding of the National Parks Association of the ACT, a body which fought hard and well for 19 years before the Gudgenby Nature Reserve was declared in 1979, with the first stage of Namadgi National Park following five years later. Since then they have been fierce defenders and proponents of the park's values. This is in no sense a field guide or repository of information, though there is basic and sound text on the park's history, ecology, geology, cultural values and walking opportunities. Rather it is a glorious celebration of Namadgi, one of the key elements of the ACT, and surely among the best reasons for living here. The photos are just superb, and worth lingering over. This is surely a book to be left very prominently where visitors to your home will see and admire it. It is also a reminder to us that to live in the ACT and not visit Namadgi at least once a season is to waste our privilege at living alongside it! Well done NPA, and here's to your next 50 years.



Ian Fraser is a Canberra-based professional naturalist and writer (viz, he doesn't make much money!) who is the author of seven books on local natural history, most recently A Bush Capital Year, CSIRO Publishing, with artist Peter Marsack.

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.

ianf@pcug.org.au