

## Some Recent Natural History Publications #2 May 2005

\*\*\*\*\*

### *Ocean Shores to Desert Dunes; the native vegetation of New South Wales and the ACT.*

David Keith. Department of Environment and Conservation (NSW) 2004. 353 pages, RRP \$79.95.

This is a very significant book indeed and a worthy winner of the National Trust Heritage Award (Education Category). It's a field guide, but a rather special one – a field guide to landscapes. It contains a remarkable amount of valuable and hitherto not readily available information, but also manages to be both very readable and extremely beautiful; field guides are not automatically either of these. The photos alone would reward an hour or so of browsing. There is throughout an explicit and implicit theme of conservation.

The introduction includes sections on the ecology of vegetation and classification and mapping – long enough to be useful but certainly not so intricate that you collapse before getting to the book! (And it happens...) Then there is a key to the twelve vegetation formations of NSW and the ACT – rainforest, woodlands, freshwater wetlands, alpine complex etc. I like this because it says the author is not assuming prior knowledge on our part. Each of the formations is divided into a number of classes, 99 in all.

To get a feel of it I chose one that I know – the dry forests of Canberra Nature Park. The relevant formation is Dry Sclerophyll Forests, and the introduction to it includes information on human history and use, evolution, fire, soils and fauna. 'Our' dry forests, one of 24 dry forest classes, are defined as Southern Tableland Dry Sclerophyll Forests and the double page spread on them starts with an account of their impact on the Hume and Hovell expedition and the subsequent bitter falling out of the principals. It outlines their vegetation and soils, tells us what the neighbouring vegetation classes are, and where best to see them (including Black Mountain!). There is a detailed map of the forest distribution, three lovely and well-chosen illustrative photos, and lists of Indicative Species in five different vegetation strata. Excellent! Appendices tell us how much of this forest type was present when Europeans arrived, and what percentage is estimated to remain. And as if that wasn't enough, there are detailed state-wide fold out vegetation maps at the back of the book.

I've spent more time on this book review than I usually give to a publication in these notes, but I think it's justified. This is not a book for the back pack, but it's most definitely one for the car, and it will be there whenever I travel in NSW in the future.

### *Geology of Australia.*

David Johnson. Cambridge University Press, 2005. 276 pages, RRP \$69.95.

I have grumbled in the past that publishing geologists do not seem to be good at communicating with lay people – relative to many botanists or zoologists in particular – but David Johnson, of James Cook University, seems to be a refreshing exception to this. *Geology of Australia* is a 4.4 billion year history of the Australian continent and goes beyond 'just rocks'. Like *Ocean Shores to Desert Dunes*, this book is also about landscapes, but this time the story is about the link between past and present. (4.4 billion years incidentally is the age of the most ancient known Australian material, eroded zircon from an even older crust from NWWA.) Concepts like plate tectonics, rock types and mountain building are introduced, then used to explain how Australia came to be. Johnson also has a lively interest in the animate part of the land – I've met geologists to whom vegetation is a just an annoying shroud covering the interesting stuff! He explores life's origins and development, explains fossils and extinctions. Throughout the book 'Boxes' (which may extend for two or three pages) explore topics including metamorphism, geology of Uluru, evidence for climate change and tsunamis. There is a chapter on the Great Barrier Reef and one on the earth in the context of the solar system. Each chapter begins with a succinct description of what is to follow and concludes with a brief helpful summary. Illustrations are plentiful and pertinent. My only quibble is with the price, which seems a bit steep for a paperback and will deter many people, which is a pity because this book would be helpful and interesting to most people I know.

### *Australia's Volcanoes.*

Russell Ferrett. Reed New Holland, 2005. 160 pages, RRP \$29.95.

In many ways this is another field guide, but a very creative one. After some introductory chapters on how volcanoes work and what a volcanic landscape comprises and represents, Ferrett takes us on a state-by-state tour of volcanic sites and helps us to recognise and understand what we see. He limits himself to recent sites – less than 35 million years old – because beyond that erosion hides the evidence. This is a clearly, even simply, written book for laypeople. Photos, maps and explanatory diagrams are all relevant and helpful. Overall this book is a useful and unusual aid to further understanding this fascinating world. (My sole disappointment was in finding a Volcanic Site not far from Canberra on the frontpiece map – at Bombala – then finding nothing about it in the text!)

### *The Complete Field Guide to Butterflies of Australia.*

Michael F Braby. CSIRO Publishing, 2004. 340 pages, RRP \$39.95.

Yet another field guide – a more conventional one this time, but none the less valuable and interesting. Invertebrates in general represent one of the fields in which I am far too ignorant, and I've not yet field tested the book, so I can't readily judge its practical value. On the other hand Dr Braby won a Whitley Medal in 2000 for his state-of-the-art 2 volume *Butterflies of Australia* (also by CSIRO Publishing), which got rave reviews in the Australian and international entomological literature. That's good enough for me. Also he's a Canberran...

While I don't (yet) know too much about butterflies, I do know a bit about field guides, and this one looks very well designed and user friendly indeed. Each page deals with three species, with illustrations on the facing page – male and female, top and bottom, variations where relevant. The text page includes a detailed map, and information on similar species, behaviour, habitat, status and larval food plants. The introductory pages also mean that I have absolutely no excuse for continued ignorance of basic structure, habitat, behaviour and classification of Australian butterflies. This book will join my other field guides in the back seat box on a regular basis. (And I can't end without revelling in the wonderful common names of butterflies – I just love Scarlet Jezebel, Banded Dusk-flat, Orange Albatross, Bright Cornelian, Princess Flash, Stencilled Hairstreak, Peacock Jewel and Sapphire Moonbeam!)

### *The Big Year.*

Mark Obmascik. Bantam Publishers, 2005. 268 pages, RRP \$24.95.

This is a US book (2004), just published in Australia. It could – I hope! – only have taken place in the USA and it reminds me why I don't run tours for twitchers. The central character (one of three in fact) would be every tour operator's idea of a nightmare – greedy, selfish, loud, ruthless, demanding. Having said all that, I read this book in two sittings, which is definitely not how I usually read. It is written by someone skilled in the craft of words (despite being a journalist...) and is a joy to read.

Let's backtrack. This is the true story of three Americans (men, of course) who in 1998 independently decided to have a 'Big Year' ie devote themselves to finding as many bird species as possible on mainland North America, north of the Mexican-US border. Obmascik skilfully gives us the history of Big Years and the backgrounds of the three. Two are, almost inevitably, very rich – one admits to having spent US\$12,000 a month on the quest! He is unrelenting. The other wealthy contestant (and yes, it is a competition – they are not birding for enjoyment) keeps going home because he misses his wife. The third does something unheard of – tries to compete while juggling a full-time job. In the process he puts himself into debt for years and seriously damages his health. Obmascik is bird-literate, has a gift for story-telling and evoking landscapes, and a delightfully off-centre sense of humour. I ground my teeth at the content sometimes (though at least two of the three seemed to genuinely love birds) but couldn't stop reading. Try it for something different.

### *Tree; a biography.*

David Suzuki and Wayne Grady. Allen and Unwin, 2004. 190 pages, RRP \$29.95.

This is a very beautiful and truly remarkable book – not that we'd expect anything less from Suzuki. Ostensibly this is the biography of a single giant Douglas-fir on the west coast of North America, from its germination to natural death centuries later. In fact it is a great deal more than that – almost before we realise what's happened, we find ourselves also reading a text book, but like few other texts. It blends botany with forest and conservation ecology – animals as well as plants. It incorporates evolution, genetics and plant physiology. It also contrives to be a historical tract, exploring the rich and complex history of botany and of plant usage (consider the impact on education of the coincidence of linen paper availability with the invention of the printing press). And the black and white illustrations are exquisite. This book won't take long to read – you won't be able to stop for one thing – but you'll be coming back to it. A true delight.

### *Hérons, Egrets and Bitterns; their biology and conservation in Australia.*

Neil McKilligan. CSIRO Publishing, 2005. 133 pages, RRP \$34.95.

This is the latest in one of the most important publishing initiatives in the field of Australian biology. The Australian Natural History Series was begun by the NSW University Press and has now been continued by CSIRO Publishing. Each title deals with a species or, as in this case, a group of species and is written by an active authority in the field. We can rely on it to give us up to date information on our knowledge of evolution, relationships, all aspects of biology and conservation. In this case 80 pages of this background information is followed by a two page account of each Australian species, plus briefer references to occasional visitors. A five page list of references is a very valuable adjunct. This book is like a more digestible, more discursive and much cheaper synthesis of the relevant HANZAAB. Add it to your invaluable row of the Australian Natural History Series on your natural history shelf.

### *Birds of Australia's Top End.*

Denise Lawungkurr Goodfellow. Reed New Holland. 159 pages, RRP \$29.95. *New edition.*

Denise Lawungkurr Goodfellow is a quite remarkable person. She is pugnacious, passionate, committed to conservation and the rights and needs of Aboriginal people in a way that leaves most of us feeling inadequate. She's also a damned fine birdo, and makes much of her living through helping visitors to find and know the extraordinarily rich bird life of the Top End. To that end she's a birding guide as well as an excellent researcher and writer and considerably more than a competent artist. I could go on for some time about Denise, but her book is about birds, and this is a book review...

I wouldn't expect her to do anything in quite the way that others do, and this field guide is no exception. (For one thing she doesn't even call it a field guide!) My guess is that a fair bit of the cost of publication came from her, because there are clear signs of attempts to minimise the cost – more black and white illustrations and maps than we're used to in these spoilt times, and the plates are lumped together in the middle of the book. If this is the price of having the book available to us, it seems a fair trade off to me. As I've said before, words used well are a crucial part of any field guide for me – I loved the original Pizzey – and this guide immediately endears itself to me for Goodfellow's enthusiastic sharing of her very broad and deep knowledge of her subject. Each entry is very full, with description, a specific reference to flight characteristics, similar species (very important), call, breeding information, range in both Top End and beyond, its Kunwinjku name and hints as to where to find it. This is often supplemented by an author's note or footnotes with wonderful bits of extra information gleamed from her own experiences, Kunwinjku culture and an impressive scope of Australian and international birding literature.

My only complaint in fact is that I bought the first edition just a month ago, prior to a quick visit to Darwin! I had no complaints about it then though, and you should make sure you don't visit the Top End without this book.