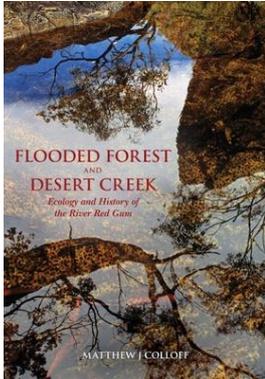


Some Recent Natural History Publications #20 September 2014

Flooded Forest and Desert Creek; ecology and history of the River Red Gum

Matthew J Colloff

CSIRO Publishing. 325 pages. RRP \$69.95



I'm possibly biased in that I've long been on the record as describing the River Red Gum as my favourite tree, but this book is something special. Colloff is a CSIRO scientist whose major research interests are the ecology of wetlands and rivers, their restoration and the impact of climate change – and the taxonomy and biology of house dust mites. (The book itself is unfortunately silent about him, so I had to do my own basic investigation; I think this is unfortunate as some knowledge of an author is of value to the reader of any book, and especially of a major body of research such as this one.) The River Red Gum is the only eucalypt found naturally in every Australian mainland state and territory; as the title suggests it may form extensive forests along major riverways in the Murray-Darling basin, or ribbons just one tree wide along creek beds in the arid inland. A sentence in the preface grabbed my attention immediately: "River Red Gum forest, like no other ecosystem

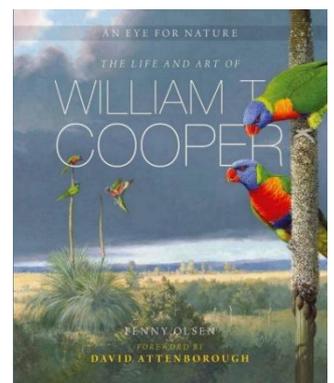
I have worked in, inspires silence, mindfulness and introspective observation." Nonetheless, it has also inspired massive and persistent exploitation, for grazing, timber and firewood, and has undergone major ecological changes through interruption of natural flows and flood regimes by dams and diversion for irrigation. Finally, in recent years and in the face of severe opposition in some quarters, the pendulum has swung some of the way back to a regime more sympathetic to conservation and restoration of lost values. Colloff has attended many fiery meetings in the basin where plans for future management practices, including the reversal of some significantly damaging practices, have been discussed and fought over. The book is equally one about the species, its ecology, evolution and place in the system that is Australia, and the story of our co-existence with it, the numerous ways in which we've used it and valued it. These include indigenous perspectives, art, literature, tourism and enquiries into the future of the red gum systems, and a brief look at the way River Red Gums are being protected in urban situations from Alice Springs to Shepparton. It is a fascinating account at all levels, very readable and rich in photos and illustrations. A very valuable addition to the shelf and desk of anyone interested in this land.

The Life and Art of William Cooper

Penny Olsen

National Library of Australia. 278 pages. RRP \$50

When Sir David Attenborough describes someone as "the best ornithological illustrator alive", the world had better take notice. In this case perhaps especially so, as Bill Cooper is Australian and still painting, in far north Queensland. His parrot works are perhaps especially well known, as reproductions are justifiably common in public places from government offices to guest houses. Olsen has carved something of a niche in the birds-and-art and birds-and-history fields, based on the immense resources of the National Gallery, and this book is probably one of her best. Cooper is essentially self-taught, growing up in struggling working class Newcastle in the 1930s and 40s. He made a living as a landscape painter while trying to find his place in life, until a chance visit to the Australia Museum in Sydney in 1966 set him on the road to becoming one of the pre-eminent wildlife artists of his time. He collaborated first with Keith Hindwood, and later and enduringly with Joseph

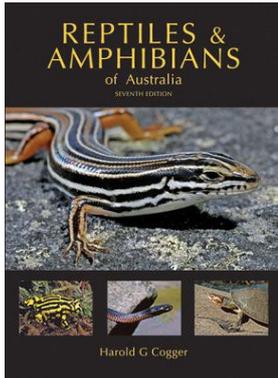


Forshaw in a series of portfolios – exquisite boxed sets of paintings way beyond the financial reach of most of us, which is one reason this book is of such value, as it reproduces many of them. The development of his art and his life, including the essential relationship with Wendy Price, is traced with the help of innumerable beautifully reproduced paintings, including many early ones, and others which I've certainly never seen before. If you are familiar with his work, I'm sure there will still be surprises here for you. If you're not, then lucky you – here's your chance to rectify that!

Reptiles and Amphibians of Australia. Seventh Edition.

Harold G Cogger

CSIRO Publishing. 1056 pages. RRP \$150



This is a huge book with a concomitantly hefty price; it is also *the* classic of Australian herpetology, from the doyen of the field, based at the Australian Museum in Sydney. In the first edition in 1975 there were 664 species described (the book has always striven to be comprehensive); in my own most recent edition (1992) there were 951, and the current version includes 1218 species. Without doubt it too will become out of date eventually, but meantime it is state of the science. (In saying this I am well cognizant of the ongoing furores in Australian herpetological taxonomy, with some individuals self-publishing many new names, implying new species, with no peer review or support. It is a fiery field and Cogger must of necessity adopt a more conservative approach.) It is essentially an identification guide and makes no pretence to be more – indeed one can barely imagine the scale of the resulting volume were something more comprehensive to

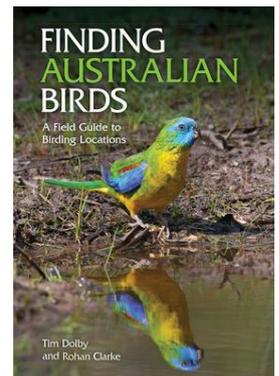
be incorporated. Moreover there are excellent books on the ecology and behaviour of Australian frogs, snakes and lizards at least. There are keys throughout (though I confess I won't be examining the tooth and head scale structure of any taipans I encounter for instance, to determine which species I have). Terminology for these keys however is well explained and sketched and every species is illustrated with uniformly excellent photographs. If you have an interest in these fascinating animal groups, haven't updated your edition of this book for over a decade, and are feeling flush, this may be the time to do so.

Finding Australian Birds; a field guide to birding locations

Tim Dolby and Rohan Clarke

CSIRO Publishing. 602 pages. RRP \$49.95

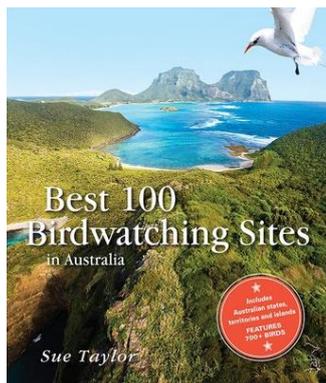
It is inevitable that any 'where to find birds' book published in Australia will be compared with Richard and Sarah Thomas' pioneering work *The Complete Guide to Finding the Birds of Australia*, first published in 1996 and completely updated (in collaboration with David Andrew and Alan McBride) in 2011. In summary this one generally stacks up well alongside the earlier volume, but doesn't offer much that is compellingly different or superior. The format in fact is almost identical – a tour through the Australian states and territories (though unlike Thomas et al., this book relegates the Australian Capital Territory to a couple of pages in the chapter on New South Wales!), followed by a list of the birds of Australia with suggestions as to where to see them. Unlike Thomas et al., the entries in this list don't include a helpful general sentence or two to clarify the bird's requirements, important to success in finding them. Dolby and Clarke has some 140 pages more than Thomas et al., but this mostly seems to comprise more detailed accounts of each site, rather than significantly more sites (though there are certainly some, eg Dorrigo NP which was a slightly odd omission in the earlier work). This extra detail for each site is probably the major factor in Dolby and Clarke's favour; part of this involves mentioning relevant mammals, of which I thoroughly approve. Every now and then there is a well-drafted map of an area, more impressive than Thomas et al's sketch maps, but they are pretty sporadic and apparently arbitrary. The downside of the new book is undoubtedly the difficulty faced by the user in finding our way around it. The original Thomas and Thomas had an excellent table of contents, with each sub-region and individual site listed under the state headings. This was unaccountably omitted from the second edition, though there is enough information at the start of each chapter to enable navigation through it. Dolby and Clarke lacks this information entirely. It is impossible to find a list of state sites to skim; you can only search for a site in the index and hope it's included. There are some regional maps but you have to stumble across them, and they don't seem to have all the sites on them anyway. This is unfortunate but not fatal. If you don't have a 'where to' guide, take the above factors into account before you select one. On the other hand there is no really good reason to have both, so if you're happy with your Thomas et al. you can probably stick with it without missing out on too much.



Best 100 Birdwatching Sites in Australia

Sue Taylor

New South Books. 221 pages. RRP \$40



Sue Taylor came to attention in 2001 with *How Many Birds is That?*, a light-hearted and self-deprecating story of her search to find 600 Australian birds – published, somewhat quixotically, before she'd succeeded. She's a birder who doesn't claim any special skills, and really enjoys her birding. This book reflects this attitude. It is *not* an attempt to do what the previous title does, and despite the claim on the back cover it's certainly not a book for twitchers. It's simply a cheerful introduction to 100 places in Australia where she's "had most fun birding". Many of the places (each of which are covered in two pages, with lots of photos) have a little binoculars logo with a short list of birds; I can't find anywhere an explanation of this but one presumes it includes her special birds there. Many of these are very common and widespread, re-emphasizing that

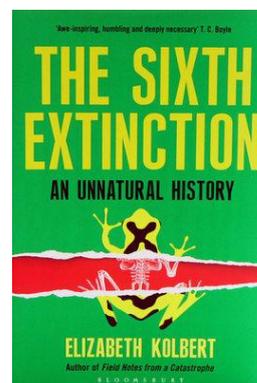
this is not a book to help you fill difficult gaps in your list. You might like to compare her list with yours, you might find some places to try when you're in the area, and if you've enjoyed Sue's writing in the past you'll probably enjoy this one too.

The Sixth Extinction; an unnatural history

Elizabeth Kolbert

Bloomsbury. 336 pages. RRP \$30

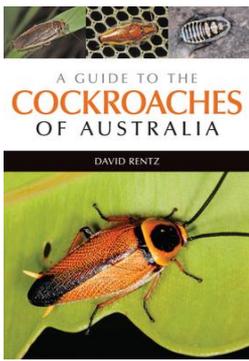
Kolbert is from the best traditions of New York journalism. *The Sixth Extinction* could hardly be more 'big picture', but it is told as a series of very specific and revealing stories, superbly planned and executed to keep the overall narrative unrolling, introducing key concepts with great clarity and at just the right moments. Each chapter revolves around a particular species, either extinct – mastodons, Great Auks, Neanderthals, ammonites – or at immediate risk of becoming so – a particular rainforest canopy tree in the Peruvian Andes, Sumatran Rhino, corals and Panamanian frogs, among others. Moreover, each plays its part in weaving another essential thread of information into the developing tapestry of the book. All of the 'natural' stories are accompanied by human stories – of those who helped us understand the past, and of those who are right now studying the wave of global extinctions. It's not a happy story, but neither are most great novels. There is no point in mourning the great natural extinctions of the past (though there are some departed species I'd have loved to see) but while we're driving another mass extinction with every day of our lives, and in many critical respects actively refusing to do anything about it, then our shame is great. However, many good people, scientists and others, *are* doing much on our behalves. We need all that spelled out, and Kolbert thereby does us a service. "When the world changes faster than species can adapt, many fall out. This is the case whether the agent drops from the sky in a fiery streak or drives to work in a Honda." When I say a book is 'important', I sometimes also mean 'earnest'; this one is both important and a riveting read and I can't overstate how much I want everyone to read it!



A Guide to the Cockroaches of Australia

David Rentz

CSIRO Publishing. 318 pages. RRP \$49.95



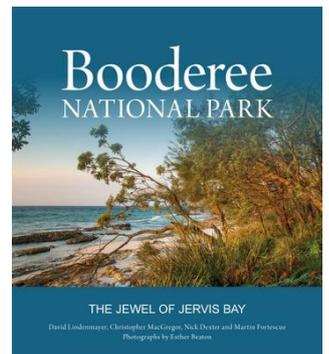
Because you're reading these reviews I know you won't be laughing at the idea of this book, but some might... Fortunately I'm one of those who are fascinated by these amazing insects – and I'm talking about the 500+ species of cockroaches (or Blattodeans) native to Australia, not the handful of exotic species in our cupboards which are the extent of most people's experience of the group. Rentz is ex-CSIRO and an international expert on katydids and their kin. Now nominally retired in tropical Queensland, he's clearly not stopped working; he tells us how he's so far found some 90 cockroach species around his home. This is primarily a field guide, but as is normal with this excellent series there are hugely informative chapters on biology, economic importance, ecology and morphology. There is even one on keeping cockroaches in captivity, and one on *Cockroach 'Personalities'*; I trust you won't be disappointed to learn that this is about people who study them, not the cockroach psyche. Apparently all Australian genera and most species are covered here, though the basis for including/excluding is not clear. I tried it out on a few unidentified photos I have and have put names to most of them with some confidence. Cockroaches are part of our land; if you're interested to learn more this book will help you.

Booderee National Park; the jewel of Jervis Bay

David Lindenmayer, Christopher MacGregor, Nick Dexter, Martin Fortescue

CSIRO Publishing. 152 pages. RRP \$29.95

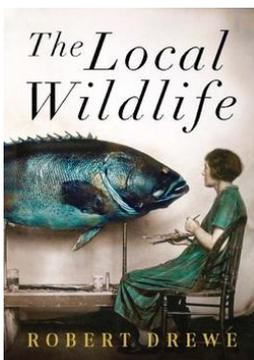
According to the authors more than 450,000 people a year visit Booderee National Park – as many as visit Uluru, Kakadu, Norfolk and Christmas Islands combined. But how many Australians could find it on a map? Perhaps if we gave them 'Jervis Bay' as a hint it would help them. This book is the story of a special reserve, but also a special collaboration, perhaps unique in Australia, of university ecologists and park managers, to pursue a continuous and intense program of research into a broad range of topics for a decade (and counting), for the purpose of informing park management. The program is coordinated by Lindenmayer, one of Australia's most respected and active ecologists. The book offers a detailed overview of the park's values, by talking about the research projects. It is structured unconventionally for such a publication, the chapters being based on ecological 'processes' – fire, predators, herbivores, weeds and feral animals – rather than plant and animal groups. This makes perfect sense from the perspective of a researcher, since ecological studies tend to look at such processes, but perhaps it also means the book will be less useful to some readers who are looking for a field guide to the reserve. Few books however can be all things to all people, and while sometimes the writing is a bit drier than it needs to be, this is still a most interesting book, and one of considerable importance to us in my part of the world.



The Local Wildlife

Robert Drewe

Hamish Hamilton. 256 pages. RRP \$30



And lastly, something completely different. Robert Drewe, Walkley-winning journalist turned successful novelist and playwright, grew up in Western Australia but eight years ago moved to the north coast of New South Wales to focus on his writing. This collection of short stories – mostly comprising just three small pages – is inspired by his time there. The 'local wildlife' of the title is of course a *double entendre*, referring in large part to the diverse human denizens of that lush part of the world, but fauna is also a recurring theme, and while Drewe isn't a naturalist, he does have an acute eye and a nice turn of phrase. For instance he characterises summer as "when the cattle egrets change their plumage from virginal white to a seductive wooing-and-breeding tangerine"; this is a very evocative description indeed of their breeding garb. I assume – and hope – that most of the characters and events are fictitious, but who would know? There are also whimsical little stories which are essentially observations and musings on life, inspired by ants, dung beetles, echidnas and Basil the Brush Turkey, inter alia. Most of the stories are very enjoyable and some make us think; good holiday fare.

Ian Fraser is a Canberra-based professional naturalist and writer (viz, he doesn't make much money!) who is the author of eight books on local natural history, most recently Australian Bird Names, a complete guide, CSIRO Publishing 2013, with Jeannie Gray. He has run the educational Environment Tours nature-based tours program since 1984 and has been the voice of natural history on local ABC radio since 1992. The ABC in 2004 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. In 2012 he launched the natural history blog 'Ian Fraser, Talking Naturally', at <http://ianfrasertalkingnaturally.blogspot.com.au/> 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.
calochilus51@internode.on.net*