

Some Recent Natural History Publications #4 April 2006

A Book for Maisie.

D J Carr, 17 Collings St Pearce 2607. Self-published, 2005. 356 pages.

This is the first of two rivetting biographies that I've included in this collection of reviews. I claim no expertise in this genre, but both tell the story of fascinating and significant scientists who have contributed to our knowledge of the land. Though I never met her, Maisie Carr (previously Fawcett) is a hero of mine – the reason may be best summarised when I say that perhaps her greatest public memorial was the recent long overdue removal of cattle from the Victorian Alpine National Park. I would regard her, along with Alec Costin, as the greatest of our alpine ecologists, who brought scientific rigour to the study of soil conservation, stock grazing and fire in the Australian Alps, beginning in 1941 and continuing for most of the next 40 years. Perhaps inevitably politics over-rode scientific evidence, though her work led directly to reduction of grazing in the highest and most sensitive areas; sadly she died in 1988 and didn't see even the 1991 reduction in grazing, let alone last year's total withdrawal. In addition to her alpine work she was a committed teacher and noted eucalypt botanist.

The book is both a labour of love by her husband Denis Carr (himself a very distinguished biologist), with significant help from others including Jeanette Lenz, and a very skilfully crafted biography. Different phases of her life are brought sharply and meaningfully into focus by the interspersing of her own letters, notes and extracts from unpublished manuscripts with letters and interview extracts from others, and Dr Carr's own observations. It's an enjoyable and enlightening read, made even more significant by the inclusion of three of her hitherto unpublished manuscripts. The only unfortunate part is that Dr Carr was forced to publish this important book himself. He notes, with justifiable frustration, that "Melbourne University Publishing... preferred to seek the lucrative publication of the scurrilous remarks of a failed politician to the celebration of the life and work of a distinguished alumnus of the university." Indeed, and their shame is also ours if we cannot help this story be more widely told. I would strongly encourage you to contact Dr Carr and support him and honour Maisie by getting a copy.

TW Edgeworth David; a life

David Branagan, National Library of Australia, 2005. 648 pages, RRP \$39.95.

This is another gripping story of another great Australian, in his time probably much better known than Maisie Carr was in hers, but probably equally unfamiliar today. Sir Edgeworth David was a pioneering geologist, who came to Australia from Wales in 1883, aged 25, to work for the Geological Survey of NSW. En route he met Cara Mallett, who was to marry him and become his remarkably loyal and stoic life companion. Eight years later he moved from economic geology to the Sydney University Geology Department, his base for the rest of his very eventful life. A conference in Mexico in 1906 was a very different event from one in 2006! However he became an internationally known figure with his Antarctic work, begun when he was already nearly 50 in 1907. He arranged the finance for Shackleton's expedition in that year – and continued to do so for subsequent Antarctic work for the next 20 years. He sailed with them, climbed Mt Erebus and accompanied his student Douglas Mawson and another on a 1500km trek to the South Magnetic Pole, dragging sledges. That nearly killed him, but it didn't stop him from helping form the Australian Tunnelling Corps during the First World War – and in 1916, aged 58, he was in the nightmare of the western front trenches, doing the essential work on soil types and water tables needed for trench construction. Later, back home, he championed Wegener's very controversial and unpopular Continental Drift theory and recognised the evidence for the existence of Gondwana. At the very end of his life he was involved in the controversy over apparent pre-Cambrian fossils (a supposed oxymoron at the time); again he was only vindicated long after his death. A breath-taking and exhausting read; sometimes we get partly bogged down in the minutiae of family and professional detail, but that is a small price to pay for the insights into this quite extraordinary man.

Backyard Insects.

Paul Horne and Denis Crawford, Melbourne University Publishing, 2005. 252 pages, RRP \$24.95.

This is the second edition of the book, beautifully illustrated with Crawford's excellent macro photographs. It comprises a brief introduction to a few major insect orders, then one-page accounts of a selection of species or groups, each opposite a photo. Information is of necessity brief, but simply written, purposeful and apparently accurate. The most likely target would seem to be interested young teenagers and perhaps a bit younger, and I'd be happy to recommend it for that purpose.

Wedge-tailed Eagle.

Penny Olsen, Melbourne University Publishing, 2005. 111 pages, RRP \$39.95.

This is another in my favourite natural history publications series, formerly produced by the University of NSW. This one I enjoyed even more than most, in that it features one of my favourite animals and a local scientist and author whose work I have long admired. When I had the privilege of reviewing Penny's monumental *Australian Birds of Prey* a few years ago, I commented that I would hate to be wanting to write another book on the topic for many years to come. This book reinforces her reputation for clear and enjoyable writing, and dedication to scientific accuracy. (How appalled she must have been then, by the typo which substituted 'recently' for 'rarely' in the sentence "... the number of lambs taken rarely justifies the removal of eagles."! Bottom of page 85 – please correct as soon as you buy the book!) Topics include Aboriginal associations, the changing attitudes of European settlers, habitats, and the full range of details of biology, behaviour, food etc, as well as conservation issues. Those of us who care about keeping up to date with our understandings of Australian fauna should not fail to add this volume to the growing line of books which bear this imprint on a readily accessible shelf.

The Big Twitch.

Sean Dooley, Allen and Unwin, 2005. 322 pages, RRP \$26.95.

In the months since its publication, this book has already assumed cult status, so I'm probably a bit late to usefully review it. However, since it's one of the most enjoyable books I've read in some time, I can't ignore it. As the theme is a quest to see as many birds as possible in a calendar year, the analogy with *The Big Year*, the story of a US quest which I reviewed last year, seems inevitable. There are important differences though. Dooley, a young Melbournite who embarked on the quest on the strength of a sudden inheritance, is self-deprecating and very humorous (he writes scripts for TV comedies, inter alia) – not traits particularly associated with his North American counterparts. He is fiercely competitive too, but he is not competing against anyone else, but against himself, and perhaps the birds – his aim is not to beat another birdo, but to be the first to see the wildly improbable figure of 700 species in the year. The story is tightly told and it is very pleasurable to recognise not only the birds (well, most of them perhaps!), but places and even people. It is also, as I have suggested, very funny indeed in parts. From the time I read the twin forwards – for birders and for non-birders (the latter starting "Feelings. Relationships. Social interaction. Now that the bird-watchers have lost interest...") – I was hooked. Next page is the Glossowary... An underlying theme is his (mostly restrained) angst at the difficulties of blending his passion ('obsession' is probably not unduly unkind) with the attractions of a more 'normal' life and especially of actually having a girlfriend. I won't go on, because it's quite likely you've read it – if, however, you're one of the few who haven't yet got to it, please do yourself a favour!!

Flowers of the ACT and Region.

Don and Betty Wood, Wood's Books, Canberra, 2005. 177 pages, RRP \$24.95.

This book presents me with something of a dilemma, since on the one hand I am a long-time friend of Don and Betty and on the other I am – as they well know – not the greatest fan of this type of field guide. I have some doubts about the ability of photographs to show all we need to see for confident identification; for instance a photo alone cannot usually distinguish between two similar species. More to the point though I like my field guides to give me some information about the organism, as well as simply hang a label around its neck. In this case a photo, plus name, flowering time and height of plant, plus general habitat details in an appendix, comprises each entry. Inter alia I would like to know where in the ACT a species can be found, or even where the photo was taken. Perhaps it would be better to think of the book as a well-illustrated check list than a field guide in the general sense. This is a very major and ambitious project to be undertaken by a couple of amateurs (and I use the term in its purest and totally non-derogatory sense, since it is an appellation I am more than happy to wear myself). It includes 560 species, including exotics, while sensibly excluding grasses, sedges and eucalypts. Species are grouped by colour, then by flower type, using clear lay terminology. It is the most comprehensive readily accessible guide to the ACT's flowers; I can only express the fervent hope that their next book will go just that little bit further and offer us even more.

Wild Neighbours; the humane approach to living with wildlife.

Ian Temby, Citrus Press, Sydney, 2005. 250 pages, RRP \$35.95.

I certainly approve of the idea behind this book, produced in association with the Humane Society International, but am left a bit puzzled by it. Ian Temby, who works as Wildlife Damage Control Officer (!) with the Victorian Dept of Sustainability and Environment, knows his stuff, and there is quite a bit of information on the biology of a range of wildlife species. It is aimed at anyone on the east coast (viz sections on Tassie Devils under the house, Brush Turkeys and bandicoots are probably of limited practical application to a Canberra reader). Each topic deals with the natural history of the species or group, public health issues, problems and solutions. One of the questions I am most often asked relates to birds attacking their reflections in spring, and I have only part solutions; sadly this book hasn't helped. White shoe cleaner or clay slurry on the window is unlikely to appeal to many, and putting up a nearby mirror may assist the window, but doesn't help the bird. The first approach recommended in each case is tolerance – I heartily approve, but I'm not sure that most people who interpret wildlife as a 'problem' are going to be keen on this. Habitat modification is the only other response that makes sense in most cases, but one hardly needs a book to explain that covering garbage stops things eating it... So, lots of good information, but perhaps not many solutions.

Albatross; elusive mariners of the Southern Ocean.

Aleks Terauds and Fiona Stewart, New Holland, Sydney, 2005. 175 pages, RRP \$39.95.

This is a truly lovely book. Both authors have devoted much of their life to albatross study and conservation and the senior author has spent much time on Macquarie Island. My only disappointment is that it only refers to the five species which breed in Australian waters (and they apply a conservative taxonomy, so several species currently widely recognised are not separately dealt with). There my complaints end. Both text and illustrations are superb. It starts with a detailed account of each of the islands and rocks where the birds breed and ends with a briefer description of what it's like to live and work in each of the sites. In between are chapters on humans in the Southern Ocean – not many of whose activities are beneficial to albatrosses! – and on the biology of each of the species. Conservation is a pervading theme. Attractiveness and authoritativeness do not always coexist in a book; here they most certainly do.