

Some Recent Natural History Publications #5 July 2006

Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds. Volume 7.

Higgins PJ, Peter JM and Cowling SJ (eds). Oxford University Press. 2 volumes, 1984 pages. RRP \$620.

This marks the culmination of one of the most significant publishing ventures in all Australian history – not just of natural history publications. Active planning for it began by the then Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (currently Birds Australia) back in 1980; it took another ten years for the monumental first volume (actually two volumes) to appear. Altogether the series comprises 9034 pages, or 21kg of very solid information indeed! It is a compendium of all known information on every species recorded in the area until publication dates (the infamous Grey-headed Lapwing currently in central NSW in a sense made it obsolete more or less simultaneously with the production of the final volume!). As a resource it is of immeasurable value – I constantly refer to my set in the course of work. The paintings are simply superb, with every species illustrated as often as is required to distinguish sexes, ages and races. In this, incidentally, none are more beautiful than those of Canberra artist Peter Marsack, whose stunning Western Bowerbird adorns the front cover of Volume 7. On the other hand the sheer mass of information (not to mention the cost) means that this is a specialist's publication. In a way a review is superfluous, since anyone who is the least likely to invest in it will already know all about it. Nonetheless, in good conscience I simply could not allow such a very significant event to pass unnoted; go and have a look at it in the library as a sort of homage!

Birds Britannica.

Mark Cocker and Richard Mabey. Chatto and Windus, London. 518 pages. RRP \$115.

This is another compendium, but this time aimed at lay-people. It is a stunner; it's a book I wish I could have written (or at least the Australian version). It looks at virtually every bird recorded from the British Isles and offers a superbly researched history of each one's fortunes over the centuries, its general habits and most of all its relationships with humans. In this it is also a book about people and their reactions to birds for as far back as those reactions have been recorded. It is full of quotes about birds from a vast range of observers (though the references are all in appendices, so as not to interrupt the flow) and almost as full of superb photos. I am wallowing in it, working through it a few pages at a time; it is also a book made for dipping into, but I know I'd miss too much that way. Just delicious.

Venom.

Dorothy Horsfield. Pandanus Books, ANU. 305 pages. RRP \$29.95.

I don't usually review novels, but why not if they're about natural history? Well, one reason might be that I simply don't have any literary expertise, so am not really equipped to make sensible comment on serious fiction. Bear that in mind in what follows. Bear in mind too that I was an annoying child who was offended by biogeographical inaccuracies in *Tarzan* and *Jungle Jim*.

I like the fact that *Venom* is set in and around Canberra and so I know most of the settings used – Yarralumla for instance features. Horsfield is a journalist, novelist and poet who was one of the acclaimed 'Seven Writers', a group of Canberra women authors. She certainly did some homework on funnel-webs, which are at the core of the book. Curiously she doesn't give any acknowledgments for assistance in this area (and given the ever-affable presence in Canberra of Dave Rowell, a real expert, I find this particularly curious.) Each chapter starts with some information on the spiders, but as the 'source' each time is the fictional protagonist's notebook, it is hard to know what to make of it. Madeleine Henderson, newly single young mum, takes a job as part-time field assistant with eccentric, obsessed (but Good) spider researcher Dr Paddy Jones. Her ex, a driven, obsessed (and Very Bad) political adviser, is consumed with jealousy and does what he does best – pulls strings and manipulates. Meantime the search for spiders continues, though curiously, despite looking for 'Brindabella' and 'Alpine' Funnel-webs, the closest they get to either of those areas is Woods Reserve. Hmm. Anyway, see what you reckon.

Slow River; a journey down the Murray.

Steve Strevens. Allen and Unwin, Sydney. 226 pages. RRP \$26.95.

I love the Murray. Steve Strevens loves the Murray. I love this book. It's the story of the trip he had to do – to follow the river from source to mouth. (That journey, albeit somewhat less assiduously, was my choice for one of the first long tours I ever ran.) Appropriately, it was a very relaxed trip, some in his old tinnie, some in the ute when the flow was too low – he did the trip just last year. One 200km section, from Yarrowonga to Picnic Point near Barmah, he did over five days by canoe. Nor did he even do it one go, taking it in sections over the year from his home in Swan Hill. He was entranced by the river when he first came there as a boy to live with his family in 1959; he went to school on its banks, left it at 16 for the navy and after ten years came back to stay. The journey is one of discovery, both of the river's innumerable turns and backwaters and forests, and of its people. He talks to river people all the way along, residents and visitors, indigenous and not, and through him and them we learn a lot more about its history, its hold on people and its problems. I knew a bit already, but learnt a lot more. Maybe it's time I ran that tour again – and when I do, this book will come with me.

How to be a Bad Birdwatcher; to the greater glory of life.

Simon Barnes. Short Books, London. 198 pages. RRP \$22.95.

My partner, who has a slightly more balanced view on birding than I do, read this book first and virtually all at once, and urged me to do so too. The only thing I didn't like about it is the title. I know what he means – Simon Barnes is an excellent explainer – but he doesn't really mean 'bad' in the sense that most of us would think of it. In fact despite his claim in the first sentence of the book "I am a bad birdwatcher", I think he is a very good birdo indeed. What he means is that he watches birds entirely for pleasure and takes them as and where he finds them. He probably wouldn't go rushing off for a 1500km round trip to sleep on concrete in the frost to see the first Grey-headed Lapwing to visit Australia, but he'd love it if he came across it, just as he loves the daily Galahs in his yard. (He's actually English, but you get my drift.) The book is about how being constantly aware of birds enriches our lives and is a step by step guide to how to go about it, without the initial sense of being overwhelmed that we all experienced once. It is lovingly and wittily crafted, with a simplicity that is deceptive. The second chapter ends "Look out of the window. See a bird. Enjoy it. Congratulations. You are a bad birdwatcher." In other words it doesn't really matter if you can't put a name to it (though he insists that we can, if we will) as long as you enjoy it. His trade is actually as a sportswriter – chief sportswriter for the Times in fact – and the newspaper sports pages I read would benefit vastly from his input! "I don't go birdwatching. I am birdwatching." "A twitcher might be defined as someone who actively seeks stress in birdwatching." (He is pointing out the difference between 'twitching' – in the somewhat demented British sense – as a field sport, and birding for enjoyment, lest someone is scared off by thinking that one implies the other.) A bonus is the witty spare little bird portrait sketch which heads every chapter. A few brush strokes and the bird comes to amusing life; very like the prose in fact. The book is also a loose autobiography, to demonstrate how birds became an essential part of his life, with his redefined and redeveloping relationship with his father through birdwatching as a theme both funny and poignant. 'Bad' aside, I loved every word of it.

Rifling Paradise.

Jem Poster. Hodder and Stoughton, London. 324 pages. RRP \$32.95.

Poster came to Australia twice to research for this book, which is set west of Sydney in the 'late 19th century' (that per the back cover, though I can't find confirmation in the book). Small landowner Charles Redbourne has to leave England in a hurry after strong implications of paedophilia – that aspect of his character gets no further mention however. He comes to shoot things in the name of science, but is forced to question this mode of relating to nature by his over-the-top brutal redneck guide and his host's eccentric artist daughter. (Is dad abusing her? Probably, but who knows?). In the Blue Mountains dramatic and mystic retribution comes, apparently because an Aboriginal special place is not respected. And in the end it all works out. At least I think it does – it's all very allegorical and to be honest I don't really get it.

Nor does Poster's research always seem to help him. For instance his host's home is 'a little over an hour's ride from the harbour' (in a carriage) but is entirely rural. More surprisingly still it then requires a train trip across the plain for the Blue Mountains to come into view. Hmm. However, others have apparently thought much more highly of it, so maybe you should give this a go for yourself too.