

Some Recent Natural History Publications #8 October 2007

Anoraks to Zitting Cisticolas; a whole lot of stuff about bird watching

Sean Dooley. Allen and Unwin. 270 pages. RRP \$39.95.

I don't suppose any bird-related book ever published in Australia had as much impact beyond the already-birding community as did Sean Dooley's *The Big Twitch*, in 2005. In Issue #4 of this series of reviews I described it as 'one of the most enjoyable books I've read in some time', for its self-deprecating humour and its disciplined tight writing, as well as its topic of course. (If by some mischance you've omitted to read it, for goodness sake get out there and catch up!). Now, apparently out of the blue, comes another from him. This one isn't a story, but a gloriously self-indulgent, unpredictable, informative and slap-stick guide to birding and birders. It's in the form of a copiously annotated glossary, with entries ranging from particular bird species and localities, to the esoteric and arcane terminology used by (some!) birdos. (Try pishing, Jammy Pete or stringer to get the idea.) Then we move on to Shakespeare (Romeo and Juliet argued over a bird i.d., as you *may* recall), Girlfriends and Ego. How does one review a book like this? It trips blithely from thoughtful insights and information to Monty Pythonesque depths/heights. Just read it!! Dooley is the best non-feathered addition to the Australian birding scene since noccies...

A Guide to Australian Moths

Paul Zborowski and Ted Edwards. CSIRO. 214 pages. RRP \$39.95.

In recent years there has been something of a plethora of significant new Australian field guides, particularly of invertebrates. This is a very worthy addition to the natural history shelf (or shelves...). It is unfortunate that the publisher did not see fit to include any information on the authors, but Ted Edwards has spent his working life in CSIRO Entomology, and has been a passionate advocate of biological conservation, especially of grasslands. Zborowski is an excellent photographer of insects. The task was a very challenging one indeed, given the presence of perhaps 30,000 Australian moth species. (The widely favoured sub-group which we know as butterflies comprise barely 1% of this number in Australia!) As a result, the guide very sensibly only attempts to go down to family level, with for each family a series of dot points of identifying characters, a clearly written summary of the group and photos of characteristic species. A highlight of the book is a series of information boxes on subjects as diverse as Scribbly Gum Moths, Aquatic Moths (!), Witjuti Grubs, Hairy Caterpillars and skin rashes, and Bogongs. My favourite however is on the Golden-shouldered Parrot Moth, which apparently lives only in the parrots' termite mound burrow nest. It's an endlessly fascinating world, and this book adds a bit more to our understanding and enjoyment of it.

Bettongs, Potoroos and the Musky Rat-kangaroo

Andrew Claridge, John Seebeck and Randy Rose. CSIRO. 182 pages. RRP \$39.95.

I have long been a big fan of the Australian Natural History Series, which I regard as one of the most important publishing initiatives in the field of Australian biology. The 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 authorities active in the field. Sometimes I am delighted to discover how much there is still to learn about animals we think we know fairly well; in this case it is a question of broadening our knowledge of a group which most of us are probably pretty ignorant about. These are small kangaroos which have retained primitive kanga characteristics; they – and perhaps especially the wonderful diurnal Musky Rat-kangaroo of Wet Tropics rainforests – give us an idea of what the ancestral kangaroos were like. As ever with this series, we learn about their evolution, behaviour, ecology, and conservation status and needs. This series is a path leading us to more knowledge of this wondrous land – and this book is an excellent step further along it.

Field Guide to the Birds of Australia ; eighth edition

Graham Pizzey and Frank Knight, edited by Peter Menkhorst. Harper Collins. 580 pages. RRP \$45.

A new edition of a field guide doesn't always warrant a review, but there are a couple of reasons for this one to do so (apart from the fact that it's already one of the finest and most informative guides I've used anywhere in the world). Editing subsequent editions of a work by such a truly great Australian naturalist and writer as Pizzey is a daunting task, but fortunately for all of us Peter Menkhorst took it on. This edition is not just a 'tidied up' reprint; it incorporates 46 new species! This includes the Norfolk, Lord Howe and Torres Strait Island species for the first time, 18 'new' vagrants and 15 species newly recognised as being distinct from other Australian populations. (Curiously this doesn't include Capricorn White-eye, despite its recent authoritative publication.) This is the only field guide currently using the long-awaited Birds Australia revised taxonomy. In addition the text has been updated to take account of new understandings. I hardly ever recommend replacing your field guide on the basis of a new edition; this time however there is a strong case to do so. Quite frankly, if you're using any other guide I think you're already making your task unnecessarily difficult, and the gap just increased. You might like to consider dropping your current guide in the mud and hinting to Appropriate Persons in the lead-up to Christmas.

Remarkable Birds; 100 of the world's most unmissable birds

Stephen Moss. Harper Collins. 208 pages. RRP \$55.

This is a truly lovely book, though the price is a bit daunting. It's very much in 'coffee table' genre, but not only are the photos superb, the information is well-researched and sound. It showcases 100 species, selected by a ballot of invited 'birders and conservationists worldwide', co-ordinated by BirdLife International of Britain. (One did not have to be particularly eminent to be invited to vote incidentally, as I discovered.) Each species is granted a page photo and a facing page of text. For the record, it includes five endemic Australian species (Malleefowl, Laughing Kookaburra, Plains-wanderer, Superb Lyrebird and Noisy Scrub-bird), plus another eight on the Australian list that are either cosmopolitan (Peregrine and Black-winged Stilt), introduced (Eurasian Skylark and House Sparrow!) or migratory (Arctic Tern, Ruff, Red Knot, Red-necked Phalarope). It is, as I say, a very lovely book and might well be putting in a speculative bid for if you've a birthday coming up.

Explore Australia's National Parks

Explore Australia. 402 pages. RRP \$49.95

A great deal of research and effort has gone into this book, but... I started off being exasperated by an apparent lack of ISBN or publication date, but that was just me – I found them eventually tucked away at the back of the book. I then went looking for the ACT's Namadgi National Park – and eventually found it under NSW! The real problem with such a book however is always intrinsic to it; how to do justice to an entire continent, and in this case, over 240 parks. If one was travelling more or less randomly for an extended period, this book might well provide a useful aide to planning a route, and to that end the map section is excellent. In general though I would imagine that most people would want more information on a given park than can be provided here, and would already be carrying good maps. Minor annoyances include the total inconsistency in use of scientific names and the anachronistic and confusing use of lower case for species names. For Namadgi, though not for other parks, only the most vague and generic activities are included in the 'Must see, must do' box, suggesting a total unfamiliarity with the park. I was also somewhat surprised to read that among the five most conspicuous birds in the park are Spotted Quail-thrush. All this stems of course from the problem of finding an author who is personally familiar with all the parks in a state – and in fact one person 'did' NSW and Victoria (and Namadgi!). I think that for most of us, a bit of time on the net before setting out would provide more targetted and useful information, but there is still a lot of information here, so have a look and see what you think.

The Ferocious Summer; Palmer's penguins and the warming of Antarctica

Meredith Hooper. Profile Books. 299 pages. RRP \$32.95

'The Antarctic Peninsula is unstitching.... The stitches were held together by cold... Now it is warming... The ecology slides down the peninsula like the skin off a snake.' This is urgent, spare, immediate writing, and I love it. Hooper is an Australian living abroad, who has written a great deal of children's material, both fiction and non-fiction, and has come to specialise in writing on Antarctica. In the summer of 2001-2 she returned to the Antarctic Peninsula for a second stint, specifically to write about the bird research work at Palmer Station co-ordinated by eminent US Antarctic ornithologist Bill Fraser. The focus is on the Adélie Penguins, one of only two penguin species entirely dependant on the ice. The story was not to be specifically about the warming, but the summer turned out to be a very bad one for the penguins, with melting ice and deadly soaking rain instead of snow. As a result the book is not just a rivetting account of day to day life in a dedicated Antarctic research station, but of the profound impacts of climate change. Writing in present tense can be very forced and awkward, but done properly it is a great tool for capturing the immediacy of a narrative, and Hooper does it very well indeed. We are carried along with the yarn, almost as if we were in a play, complete with dialogue from the cast, who we come to know well. The central characters though are always the penguins, brought to life with total empathy and not a shred of anthropomorphism. No-one who has looked at the literature with any objectivity and honesty doubts the full-blown existence of human-generated climate change. This book however gives as powerful a sense of its significance to real, living organisms and ecosystems as I could imagine. A very important book indeed in fact, in addition to being superb literature.

Antarctica; a different adventure

Jason Kimberley. Hardie Grant. 307 pages. RRP \$39.95

A very different book on Antarctica, and one which I'm afraid suffers badly by comparison with the previous title. The cover features – prominently! – a naked man walking across an Antarctic landscape. The reason is not clear (other than marketing); I have to admit that I wasn't inspired to read every word of the book, but I didn't find a rationale for it anywhere. However, it does serve to warn us before we open the book that it is all about Kimberley, in considerably more detail than I can imagine needing. He is fascinated by explorers (by Burke and Wills anyway) and thence the early Antarctic explorers, and wants to follow in the latters' footsteps, with two colleagues. Each takes the name (and apparently the persona) of an early explorer; all very Boys' Own it seems to me. The photos are certainly the highlight of the book, both Kimberley's own and historical reproductions. With stories of the early expeditions (interesting) and details of his training regime (rather less so) it takes us 130 pages to get to Antarctica. Before that though they visit Punta Arenas, in Chile on the Strait of Magellan. He dismisses the town as a 'desolate, wind-swept rubbish dump'; of course I don't deny him his opinion, but it creates a problem for me. I visited it in the same year and found it an attractive, thriving, friendly community, with no unwonted rubbish that I can recall – it seems that he and I see the world through very different eyes indeed, so his perspective on it might not be relevant to me. Then they did the trek, and we get a step by step account, with word for word quotations of largely banal dialogue. Then it finishes, except for a final brief philosophical manifesto called 'Where are we going?'. Oh well, the photos are nice. (After the front cover...)