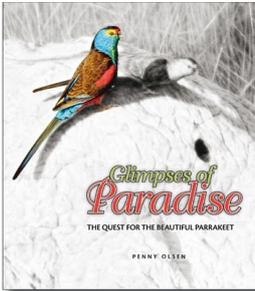


Some Recent Natural History Publications #9 March 2008

Glimpses of Paradise; a quest for the beautiful parrakeet

Penny Olsen. National Library of Australia. 259 pages. RRP \$34.95.



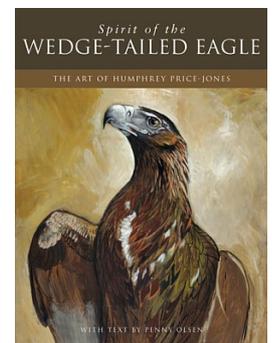
Book prices in Australia always seem to have ranged from high to exorbitant, so to find a book of this quality and quantity – of well-researched and -written information, and equally well-researched historical illustrations – and on lovely glossy paper, for less than \$35, is an eye-popping joy. It's an ongoing melodrama, of one of Australia's most beautiful birds driven to almost certain extinction by habitat clearance, and bizarrely, by the widespread use of termite mound material for homestead floors and tennis courts, thus robbing the birds of essential breeding sites. It is a story muddled by myth and misinformation, even into the 1990s, fuelling and fuelled by the passionate desire of people to prove science wrong by finding a living

Paradise Parrot (Thylacine, etc), and by people apparently driven by need of public recognition. Some of the mystery is necessitated by the dark existence of those who would profit by selling birds or eggs. One such is apparently a notorious former director of Taronga Park Zoo. A famous or infamous contemporary birding entrepreneur, still embroiled in disputed claims of finding fabulously rare parrots, astoundingly confesses – or at least claims – to have stolen no less than 30 Paradise Parrot eggs from the wild! An eminent professional ornithologist, Olsen sifts with patience and rigor through decades of evidence and claims of sightings, and convincingly debunks a depressingly high proportion of them. Maybe we don't want to have to accept our culpability. This is a superb read, a detective story, a tale of intrigue and an epitaph to a very beautiful and lamented Australian. And it's affordable!!

Spirit of the Wedge-tailed Eagle; the art of Humphrey Price-Jones

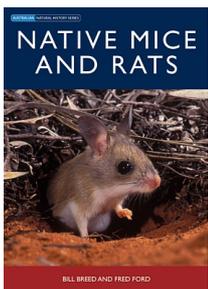
Penny Olsen and Humphrey Price-Jones. CSIRO Publishing. 90 pages. RRP \$49.95.

Penny Olsen seems to be somewhat ubiquitous in Australian ornithological publishing these days – and that can only be a good thing for us all! Canberra-based, she is in the highest echelon of Australian raptor specialists, and an important historian of Australian ornithology. Both these skills are to the fore in this book, where she offers insightful comments of her own on this superb bird and has skilfully trawled the literature for a breadth of earlier observations. However the raison d'être for this book is the art of Price-Jones, an excellent wildlife artist and southern tablelands cow cocky. I am fortunate to have on my shelf his 1983 *Australian Birds of Prey*; at 43 by 33cm it is far too big to sit *in* the shelf, so it perches on top of the books, the two Black Kites of the cover glaring at me as I work. The current volume doesn't have quite those intimidating dimensions, but it's still pretty imposing. Price-Jones has an obvious passion and empathy for raptors, and his paintings shout this out loud. He and Olsen make a good team, and they and the book do the justice to the subject that it merits.



Native Mice and Rats

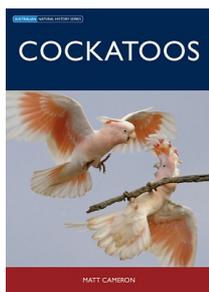
Bill Breed and Fred Ford. CSIRO Natural History Series. 185 pages. RRP \$39.95.



I've said before that 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. Rodents are new-comers to Australia, rafting aboard as we've closed on Asia in the last 5 million years or so, but already they've evolved to represent some 25% of our native mammal species. That alone makes them a very important part of our fauna, but they're probably not as appreciated or valued as much as they deserve. As ever with this series, the book covers origins and evolution, biology, ecology and evolution. And as ever the authors are involved in ongoing research on their topic, and are skilled communicators.

Cockatoos

Matt Cameron. CSIRO Natural History Series. 220 pages. RRP \$39.95.

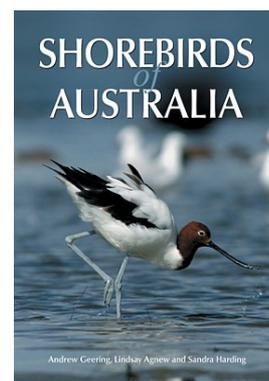


And yet another! A long shelf is becoming necessary for this series, and a well worthwhile investment it is too! This book deals with one of the most familiar of Australian animal groups, to both urban and rural Australians, and as ever helps to remind us how much we don't know. Another relatively unfamiliar field that it wanders into is by way of including information on the seven species from Indonesia, the Philippines and Melanesia. Cockatoo-specific topics also covered are the illegal trade in them, and cockatoos as pests. This volume maintains the normal high standards of the series and I'm afraid is another must for the natural history shelf. Sorry...

Shorebirds of Australia

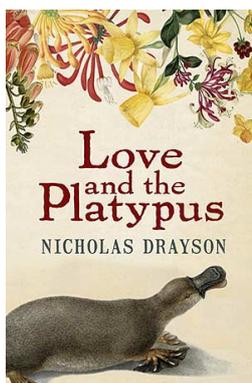
Andrew Geering, Lindsay Agnew and Sandra Harding. CSIRO Publications. 242 pages. RRP \$49.95.

Fortunately one of the few aspects of CSIRO that seems to have been quarantined from the sustained government assault on it over the past few years has been its publishing arm. For some reason this volume seems not to be regarded as part of its Natural History Series, but for all intents and purposes it follows the pattern with chapters on all aspects of evolution, ecology and biology. One obvious difference from other bird titles in the series is the size of the subject; nearly 78 species are covered here, including 23 vagrants. This represents well over 10% of Australia's non-seabird species. They have also interpreted their topic in a taxonomic sense, so that 'non-shorebirds' such as Bush Stone-curlew and pratincoles are included. The species accounts comprise a large part of the book, with two pages, usually three photos and a very detailed distribution map per species. This represents a very impressive field guide in fact, especially for those of us still challenged by wader identification. I've long been on record as not being a big fan of photographic field guides, but these photos are superb, and show a range of plumages per species, so work surprisingly well. It's almost worth buying for that section alone, but there's a lot more to this book than that.



Love and the Platypus

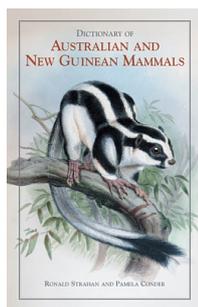
Nicholas Drayson. Scribe. 341 pages. RRP \$32.95.



The only thing about this book that annoys me is that it took me so long to find it, and I have to admit that it's hardly its fault. To be honest I heard of it last year, but for some reason wasn't inspired to go and find it. Bad choice!! This is a scientific historical novel, in that the central character, young English zoologist William Caldwell, other key figures of the day and the basic facts of the story, are true, but are woven into a plausible fictional tapestry. I understand that some historians have some concern with this writing genre, but as long as the science isn't compromised I have no problems with it all. Drayson, another Canberran, knows the bush – his descriptions of animal behaviour, seen through William's ever alert and enquiring eyes, are superb, and I loved this aspect. This is a detective story – or rather two, that of the unraveling of the mysteries of platypus birth, the culmination of a decades-long search tangled by passion and prejudice, and the dark historical secret that lowers over Gayndah on the Burnett River. (Gayndah incidentally also features strongly in the story of the Paradise Parrot.) In this it's a nice change too to see the local troopers portrayed as empathetic and astute. It's also a strange and engaging love story. A good read all round, even if you just read it as a novel. If you're also interested in the history of our understanding of the fascinating nature of this land, you'll get even more out of it.

Dictionary of Australian and New Guinea Mammals

Ronald Strahan and Pamela Conder. CSIRO Publications. 184 pages. RRP \$49.95.

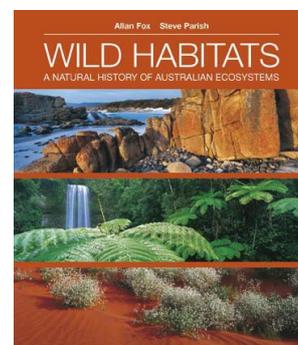


And still they come (ie from CSIRO publishing)! This is a completely revised version of Strahan's *A Dictionary of Australian Mammal Names*, taking account of the major changes in our understanding of Australian mammal taxonomy, and incorporating all New Guinea species. It is *not* a book about mammals as such, just their names, though of course the systematics of any group automatically tells us about their relationships at least. It offers us a pronunciation and interpretation for each genus and species name, alternative common names and the reference for each original publication. Realistically however such publications are not readily available to us and some selected explanations and annotations would have been appropriate; eg why has the Greater Glider genus changed from *Schoinobates* to *Petauroides*? I'm sure there is a valid historical reason, but it would be reassuring to know what it is. The expanded biographical section on 'The Describers' is useful. If you're interested in Australian biological names, this is a book well worth having.

Wild Habitats; a natural history of Australian ecosystems

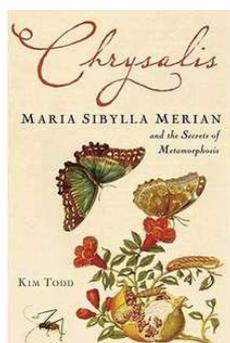
Allan Fox and Steve Parish. ABC Publications. 351 pages. RRP \$69.95.

I think that anything written by Allan Fox is worth reading. He is great conservationist and naturalist, who played key roles in the early days of Kosciuszko National Park, Uluru and Kakadu among others. This is a grand book, bountifully illustrated, with detailed information on some 40 different habitats. For an example I, naturally enough, went to 'Other Woodlands', meaning temperate non-montane woodlands (though I was confused by the inclusion in those pages of a big photo of Uluru woodlands). It's a pretty broad brush, including the Western Australian wheatbelt woodlands, but this is understandable. A map would be helpful; there is one at the beginning of the woodland chapter that covers all the woodland types, but the key doesn't correspond to the types covered in the text. Another minor quibble is the use of common names only for plants (with a few random exceptions), including in the important section on 'Classic Plants' for each habitat. This is not intended as a general negative judgement on the book, which has more than enough strengths to outweigh my small objections. The 'Other Woodlands' includes historical information on the exploitation and degradation of the woodlands, the geological base and in addition to the plants, lists of characteristic frogs and reptiles, birds and mammals. Any lay reader – including school-age ones – will learn more about Australia, and thus appreciate it better, by having this book to refer to.



Chrysalis; Maria Sibylla Merian and the secrets of metamorphosis

Kim Todd. IB Tauris. 328 pages. RRP \$54.



I will only make mention of this book at this stage; I've only begun to read it, but need to get this review edition out before I'll have time to complete it. It is the extraordinary story of Maria Sibylla Merian, a 52 year old German artist and naturalist, who "before Darwin, before Humboldt, before Audubon, ... sailed from Europe to the New World on a voyage of scientific discovery" – in 1699! She was already 20 years old when Shakespeare died!! Her task was to study scientifically, through her exquisite art, the nature of metamorphosis of insects and especially butterflies and moths. Her work was formative for 100 years, then envy and blatant sexism saw her forgotten for a long time, but she is now being rerecognised. I have been enthralled by what I've read so far and wouldn't hesitate to recommend it on the basis of that. But more next time...