

Book Reviews

The River People, by Philip Wayre. Collins & Harvill Press, £3.95.

Philip Wayre has reared otters in his home and suffered the inevitable consequences, kept them in the Norfolk Wildlife Park, of which he is Director, travelled to SE Asia to study them in the wild, and, just recently, established a headquarters for the Otter Trust at Earsham in Norfolk where he plans to keep as many otter species as possible. He is a man whose enthusiasm for otters knows no bounds.

Remarkably little is known about otter behaviour and ecology. Even the more familiar species, such as our own, have received little serious attention from naturalists, the reason being only too obvious—that they are incredibly difficult to study in the wild. However, much can be learnt from studying them under controlled conditions, and the author has probably done this more extensively than anybody else. By rearing them from birth, watching their first introduction to water, studying their feeding behaviour and swimming with them in the rivers of Norfolk he has learned much about their way of life. *The River People* describes his adventures with the various species he has cared for and the detailed observations he has made of their breeding habits and mode of life. He also includes two vividly written chapters about his expedition to Malaysia to search for otters and to find out about the distribution and habitat preferences of the short-clawed and Indian smooth-coated species. Otters in Britain need all the help they can get, so it is relevant that the author should also describe how their conservation can be helped.

The book is well illustrated, thanks to the author's expertise as a photographer, and can be recommended as a lively and enjoyable contribution towards the understanding of these charming creatures.

ERNEST NEAL

The Naturalist in Britain: A social history, by D. E. Allen. Allen Lane, £9.

David Elliston Allen, author of a charming little book, *The Victorian Fern Craze* (1969), now explores a wider field in this erudite and elegantly written study of the natural history movement in Britain. His story begins in the 17th century with botanising rambles—precursors of the modern field course—organised by the Society of Apothecaries for its apprentices, and ends with the government-sponsored institutions of the present day, such as the Nature Conservancy Council. The significant trends throughout more than 300 years of natural history are ably described; the fashionable accumulation of cabinets of curiosa by the wealthy, the Spartan travels of Scottish naturalists, the impact of Darwin, the interaction between the professional and amateur, and the role of the universities and government. Then there are the effects of human technology on British wildlife; the devastating overkill which followed improvements in the design of the shotgun and the timely reaction in favour of binoculars and camera, the influence of mechanised transport, and the rise of the conservation movement.

The author tells us much about people, but more about institutions. The affairs of the numerous natural history societies during the 18th and 19th centuries make a fascinating story of dedication and acrimony, frustration and triumph, which might well provide a rich and virtually untapped source of background material for the historical novelist. He has a keen eye for the social nuances and nicely delineates the touch of self-conscious eccentricity which is so endearing in many naturalists, and the subtle ways in which this conflicted with the social tabus of the Victorian age.

Yet despite his learning the author is very selective, perhaps too much so. He writes excellently about botany, geology, entomology, ornithology and the foundations of marine biology. Some may deem this enough but one might have liked more