

Book reviews

Save the Birds

Anthony W. Diamond, Rudolf L. Schreiber, David Attenborough, Ian Prestt
Cambridge University Press, 1987, 384 pp., HB £17.50

This is a coffee-table book that has all the characteristics of the genre—sumptuous paper, beautiful photographs, lovely artwork and splendid design. It is also, like so many of its kind, the product of a ‘packaging’ operation, in this case of Pro Natur GmbH of Frankfurt. In general, books of this type are over-weight, over-priced, over-edited, over-designed and offer a watered-down, easily assimilable version of the truth.

Save the Birds is different—thank heaven. Firstly it has been produced by an organization, Pro Natur, dedicated to conservation in association with the International Council for the Protection of Birds. It has been ably written by Tony Diamond, an ornithologist with world-wide experience of bird conservation, with sections by no lesser luminaries than Sir David Attenborough and Ian Prestt. Above all, however, it has a message that shines through, section after section, chapter after chapter, page after page—save the birds. This message is ably summarized in the sections written by Rudolf Schreiber, founder of Pro Natur and publisher of *Save the Birds*.

The heart of the book is an account of each of the world’s major ecosystems together with the variety of life forms (not just birds) that it supports. Each account is followed by case reports of particular endangered species, plus a summary of the state of conservation. Such a survey must, of necessity, be selective but, in this case, the selection is excellent.

A further section deals with conservation in general and offers a variety of reasons why we should save the birds, the threats that are faced and action being taken. Finally, there is a British section (presumably a German section in Germany, Spanish in Spain and so on) that succinctly summarizes these islands’ own problems and solutions. There is also a somewhat irrelevant introduction to bird biology. All in all these are well-written, well-researched and up-to-date accounts of the state of play. They have detail where relevant, but also the range to offer a global

view of what is happening to our planet at the end of the twentieth century. If you are not worried when you start to read it, you will be when you finish. What to do?

In their foreword, David Attenborough and Ian Prestt quote ICBP’s campaign slogan ‘Think globally—act locally’. I cannot help but think that with highly mobile creatures like birds ‘Think globally—act globally’ might be a much better approach. It is the responsibility of the rich nations of the world to ensure that bird conservation is attempted wherever it is needed. That is also the message of this splendid book, which should be compulsory reading for all presidents, prime ministers, general secretaries—indeed anyone who takes power on our behalf.

John Gooders, Battle, East Sussex, UK.

Plants in Danger: What do we know?

Stephen D. Davis *et al.*

International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, Gland and Cambridge, 1986, 461 pp., SB £15.00 (US \$21.00)

This latest publication from IUCN’s Threatened Plant Unit (by an alphabetically ordered team of eight authors) is arguably the most useful they have published—at least for the general biologist. The book’s stated purpose is to ‘provide conservation organizations with a concise guide to information on threatened plants’. While the achievement of conciseness has unfortunately not been a problem in compiling the entries for many tropical countries (as little information is available), many data are provided for the ‘North’ countries, and this is an extremely worthwhile and useful summary.

Perhaps even more valuable is the book’s core (although you would not expect this from the title), which is a mind-bogglingly useful compilation of all kinds of basic information on the world’s flora. Arranged, in the main, by country, each entry starts with area and population statistics, followed by a floristic summary (estimated numbers of species, levels and distribution of endemism), then a brief account of the vegetation, and a list of the flora accounts, checklists and field guides that exist for the country in question.

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Information on threatened plants follows (including legal protection) together with (decidedly) useful addresses, including those of organizations involved in conservation, and botanic gardens. Herbaria are not included here; the Introduction provides a source reference if you want to know where these are. Any book that relies on such an extensive compilation from a wide variety of sources will inevitably harbour inconsistencies and omissions for any reviewer (this one, for instance, notices the omission of recent work on the Cape Verde flora). However, on the whole it is suprisingly free of errors and standards of production are high. One can only congratulate the authors, encourage them (or those who are left) to produce an updated edition in the not too distant future, and exhort everyone who reads this to buy a copy. A most valuable book.

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Kangaroos: Their Ecology and Management in the Sheep Rangelands of Australia

Graeme Caughley, Neil Shepherd and Jeff Short (Editors)

Cambridge University Press, 1987, 253 pp., HB £30.00 (\$49.50)

This is the first volume of a new series from the Cambridge University Press entitled Cambridge Studies in Applied Ecology and Resource Management. Although it is principally concerned with practical aspects of kangaroo management, the background information includes theoretical details of the population dynamics of the herbivores and of their food plants. The main purpose of the study was to compare plant/herbivore relations in a national park in the arid zone of New South Wales with those in a contiguous sheep station, which was ecologically similar apart from the presence of sheep. The herbivores studied were the red and the western grey kangaroo as well as the sheep. Rabbits and insects were also included in the study, but the work on these groups is not sufficiently advanced for inclusion in this book. This omission is not of great importance as Caughley mentions in his preface that neither rabbits nor insects exerted significant effects on the vegetation during the period of study.

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There is a brief introductory chapter that sets out the goals of the study and provides a short history of the sheep rangelands of Australia. The remaining 10 chapters deal in turn with a description of the rangelands, the effects of weather, plant dynamics, diets of the herbivores, factors affecting food intake, movements of kangaroos, population dynamics of kangaroos, the condition and reproductive success of kangaroos, ecological relationships and, finally, options for the management of kangaroos. Each chapter leads on from the previous one so that the book is well edited and gives the impression of having been written by a single author. The work is authoritative and provides a wealth of information on the biology of kangaroos as well as on their management. The final chapter considers the highly topical subject of the exploitation of kangaroos. It is disturbing to read that the commercial offtake from the population is regulated by market forces or the cost of harvesting, but not by the need to conserve the resource. This should, perhaps, be obvious by now from the history of whaling, but it seems that over-harvesting of wildlife in general makes economic sense even though it is ecologically disastrous.

This is an excellent book that augurs well for future volumes in the series.

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Studies of Mascarene Island Birds

Edited by A.W. Diamond

Cambridge University Press, 1987, 458 pp., HB £65.00 (US\$125.00)

The catastrophic impact of man and his associates upon the native avifauna of oceanic islands is nowhere more vividly illustrated than in the Mascarenes, the collective name for Mauritius, Réunion and Rodriguez. Hunting, habitat degradation and loss, cats, rats, pigs, monkeys, mongooses, introduced competitors and indeed virtually every force inimical to vulnerable island species has been unleashed here in a combined assault producing devastating results. The dodo has passed into legend and some 29 other endemic species into oblivion, while of the 20 endemics remaining no fewer than 11 are listed in the Red Book and include some of the most

Oryx Vol 22 No 1, January 1988