

Book Reviews

IN SEARCH OF MERMAIDS. By G. C. L. BERTRAM. Peter Davis. 30s.

It is well known that after the discovery of the largest sirenian, Steller's sea cow, in the Bering Sea in 1741, the animal was virtually exterminated in about twenty-seven years. The hungry sailors found the meat of this inoffensive aquatic herbivore so good to eat that now all that remains are relatively few bones in museums. Unless we are careful the only other sirenians of the world, the manatees and the dugong, neither plentiful, will join their larger relative and be gone for ever. Dr. Bertram's book, stimulated by the manatees of British Guiana, makes sad reading to those interested in animals in their natural surroundings. The manatee, quietly browsing on aquatic vegetation, does no harm to anyone, but it needs peace to exist and reproduce, and the verbal drum that the author beats in his hatred of the internal combustion engine is nearly as forceful as the engine itself. Certainly the noise and wash of a fast motor boat are not conducive to the peaceful existence of either manatee or man, and man's easy access to firearms, and his not infrequent trigger-happy attitude to large prey do not increase the manatee's chances of survival. There are regulations that seem adequate on paper, but which are difficult to enforce.

Much of the book is devoted to the background of these manatees—the river systems and geography, the insects and plants, the habits and people of British Guiana, with digressions, in the author's decorative style, on all subjects from Antarctic seals to native customs. It is meant to encourage interest in these little known, but interesting mammals before it is too late.

J. E. KING.

THE HANDBOOK OF BRITISH MAMMALS. Edited for the Mammal Society of the British Isles by H. N. SOUTHERN. Blackwell Scientific Publications. 37s. 6d.

Forty-two years ago Barrett-Hamilton's ambitious attempt at a comprehensive account of British mammals limped to a posthumous close with the late Martin Hinton's accounts of the rodents, leaving undescribed all the carnivores, the deer, and the whales. Since then, although there have been a number of excellent short accounts of British mammals, by Michael Blackmore, Harrison Matthews, Maurice Burton, and others, there has been no comprehensive account that could stand beside Witherby's famous *Handbook of British Birds* or Malcolm Smith's New Naturalist book on *British Amphibians and Reptiles*. Now the Mammal Society have filled the gap, and done it so well, that apart from the inevitable process of bringing it up to date as knowledge grows, their work will stand for a generation at least.

The book is in two parts: a general account of the biology of British mammals, which covers some of the same ground as Harrison Matthews's excellent New Naturalist volume, and a systematic account, which is what everybody has been waiting for for the past forty years. The many authors who have contributed to both parts include the leading experts on their species or groups, for instance, Michael Blackmore on the bats; Ernest Neal on the badger; Harry Thompson on the rabbit and edible dormouse; the Crowcrofts on the insectivores; Jim Taylor Page on the ungulates, and F. C. Fraser on the whales. Eighty-eight species are included, of which only fifty-three, including the whales frequent in British seas, are genuine natives still surviving in the British Isles. Two, a shrew and a mouse, are