

Book reviews

Some readers might have welcomed a more comprehensive discussion summarising the biology and, particularly, the conservation of the giant otter. At the outset of this book the general reader was told that part of the aim was to produce a conservation plan, but in the end the link between the authors' findings and a conservation was only mentioned in the most general terms. Perhaps this is all that the authors wished to convey in this book and their detailed recommendations will appear in specialised reports, but to the extent that this good yarn could have been a vehicle for more complicated ideas the opportunity may not have been fully grasped.

Anybody with an interest in otters will be fascinated by these 'river wolves'. The Laidlers' expedition was to an exciting region and clearly they are a remarkable team. This is emphasised by little disclosures in the text, such as the time when they were attacked by muggers who would doubtless have been surprised to find not only that Keith was a karate brown belt and had a wooden stave-and-chain weapon (nun-chaku) in his pouch, but also that his wife had a long ice pick secreted in her umbrella!

David W. Macdonald

Department of Zoology, University of Oxford

The Wolf in the Southwest: the making of an endangered species

D.E. Brown, (Editor)

University of Arizona Press, 1983,

£19.95 (hardback), £9.95 (paperback)

The years between 1890 and 1925 saw the heyday of the wolf slaughter in the south-western United States. Wolf populations were devastated, but the ardour with which their elimination was pursued was unremitting. A total of over 50 years of constant effort, of painstaking toil, of unshakable conviction eventually brought success in the annihilation of wolves in the south-west USA. Only a handful of wolves were traced (and avidly trapped) in the 1950s. In 1960 one wolf was killed in Arizona, and in 1961 another was killed and a \$75 bounty paid for it by the Arizona Livestock Sanitary Board. In 1970 the last wolf carcass was reported in New Mexico. The only survivors remained in remote areas of Mexico. In 1980 there were an estimated 50 wolves in

Mexico, although in 1981, the same man who made that estimate reported that in the wolf strongholds of Durango and Chihuahua he found not a single sign of wolves.

David Brown has edited a devastating book. To a reader unfamiliar with the south-west the abundance of place names unavoidably makes the text difficult and anyway the detail is not easy reading, but one is nevertheless inexorably drawn from page to page with the shocking realisation that disclosures of attitudes to the wolf which were comfortingly remote in accounts of the late nineteenth century actually prevailed very recently. This is a history book and its impact lies in bombarding the reader with proof of just how recent history can be. Brown and his colleagues have exhaustively picked through a mass of government documents to unravel the development of ideas on wolf control, and the course of implementing these ideas. Their account is heavily interspersed with extracts from reports, letters and memos. In the early years these extracts report on the deaths of hundreds of bountied wolves, and the hundreds of thousands of dollars lost to agriculture due to their depredations. Later the numbers of wolves fell to single figures and then to recognisable individuals—Old Aguila, Old One Toe, the Spring Valley Wolf.

The few surviving wolves and the extraordinary, skilled and hardened men who dogged their tracks finally met in one to one combat. On horseback Roy McBride tracked a wolf called Las Margaritas intensively for 11 months, over several thousand miles before he caught her on 15 March 1971. The account of the trapper's endurance and the wolf's guile are breathtaking—in October 1970 McBride found a place where Las Margaritas had urinated, in November he found a place where she had walked on fresh dew (her prints recognisable by two missing toes on one paw). Everywhere she dodged his traps. But Las Margaritas had a fascination for the cinders of old fires. Eventually McBride set his trap, built a campfire on top of it, let the embers burn to dust and placed a piece of dried skunk hide nearby. Las Margaritas stepped on the embers and was caught by her crippled leg. By the end of the book one is torn between despising their ruthless intention to exterminate and reverence for the field-

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craft and knowledge of wolf lore of these men.

One's confusion and sadness are heightened by the clarity with which Brown exposes the complexity of the web of social, economic and biological factors that led to the wolves' demise: wolf numbers probably expanded greatly with the advent of cattle ranching and it was their increased dependence on cattle that led to their extermination. It is the stark conflict between wildlife and man and its awful consequences that makes this book devastating. The aim to exterminate the wolf was explicitly stated by honourable men very recently, and was widely welcomed. One can still hear the echoes of their forceful arguments. Today, as we might lament the cost of their success, we can also ponder which elements of contemporary wildlife management will appal a generation fifty years hence. In the meantime we can reflect on Brown's concluding words, 'More than fifty years of constant effort finally destroyed the wolf. That it took that long is a fitting testimony to his tenacity.'

David W. Macdonald
Department of Zoology, University of Oxford

Seabirds: an identification guide

Peter Harrison

Croom Helm, 1983, £15.95

Bird field guides continue to pour from the presses, but here is one that sets a new standard. To start with it is probably the first such guide where the author (who is also the artist) has taken seven years off in order to prepare it. He even went to the length of working as a deck-hand in order to get nearer his subjects. The result was well worth the effort. To include all the necessary detail, however, he has had to produce a substantial book, too big to take conveniently into the field. This has enabled him to show all the important plumages of the gulls, for instance.

The format resembles early Peterson, with the illustrations separate from the text but with convenient summaries opposite them. And, better than early Peterson, the plates are all clumped at the beginning. The large size has enabled him to give a much more complete text than is possible in the standard field guide designed to be used in the field. And with seabirds this is a great

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advantage, for most field guides (my own included) are forced by space considerations to be much too cursory about seabird plumages.

If I have a criticism, it is that several non-marine grebes have been included (presumably in order to give a complete conspectus of the grebes) at the expense of sea-going ducks and geese. It is slightly odd, for instance, to show the giant Atitlan grebe, confined to one lake in Guatemala, and another grebe known only from Lake Junin, Peru, but neither the mallard nor the brent goose, both regularly seen on the sea off the coasts of Europe and North America. I also wondered why the storm-petrel family had been changed from Hydrobatidae to Oceanitidae contrary to the taxonomic authorities quoted. Nonetheless this is a very good book and a must for future sea-watchers.

Richard Fitter

The Barn Owl

D.S. Bunn, A.B. Warburton and

R.D.S. Wilson

T. and A.D. Poyser, 1982, £12.60

Steeped as it is in folklore, the barn owl is one of the best known British birds of prey. After its sad decline in the 1950s and 1960s, due mainly to persistent chemical residues, such as DDT, there was optimism about an improvement in the 1970s, but this was short-lived. The recent acceleration in cereal growing has meant the disappearance of most of the open grassland, which is of vital importance to a species which feeds extensively on small mammals. Sadly it would also appear that the hoped for enlightenment of the shooting and game-rearing fraternity still has a long way to go, as persecution continues.

Death on the roads is a further hazard: of 320 birds ringed up until 1969, 12 per cent had died as road casualties and the extra speed and volume of traffic since then must have increased this danger. The natural factors in controlling populations are prolonged periods of hard weather and possibly diseases such as tuberculosis. Drowning is another unexplained problem especially for young birds and this is being further investigated.

The book amply covers classification of the world's barn owls and their subspecies, explains

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