

. . . world of ornithology

William Mansell complements the pictures, informing as it entertains.

For the compulsive bird-booker, **The Birdwatcher's Companion** (Robert Hale, £15.95) offers almost limitless browsing. Subtitled *An Encyclopedic Handbook of North American Birdlife*, it is an unusual blend of fact and opinion, of fundamental bird biology and ornithological trivia. The 1,250 entries are arranged alphabetically and it is hard to find anything of significance that is not included. Though centred on North American birds — so that it includes descriptions of North American birding "hot spots", of all occurrences of vagrants and so on — there is much of general interest and the book is at least a partial substitute for Landsborough Thompson's *New Dictionary of Birds* (Nelson, 1964), now hard to obtain and outdated in some respects. Nor is Chris Leahy's text any the worse for being written with style and humour. Even egg



From *North American Marsh Birds*.

Marsh bird — a yellow-crowned night-heron, depicted by Gary Low.

collectors, whose activities are dismissed as appealing "only to a kinky few" will presumably enjoy the list of vernacular birds' names included "because they made me laugh". Birding is pleasurable after all.

The Birdwatcher's Activity Book (Stackpole, \$11.95), is designed to get browsers out of their chairs and into the field. Starting with the basics of birding skills, the author gently leads the nervous, non-scientific reader to realize that many of his identification judgements depend on knowledge about where birds live and how they behave; he thus already knows something about ecological isolation, in which case why not look at it a bit more closely? The bulk of the text is project-related, with special emphasis on water-fowl, birds of prey and town birds — perhaps the most popular or accessible groups. Because it is based on North American species, the book wouldn't much help birders elsewhere, which suggests a niche for other authors to fill.

As birdwatchers develop confidence so they travel further afield, but inevitably

there are few popular works on the birds of countries where birding is not an indigenous hobby. Majorca and the other Balearic Islands have enjoyed the attentions of many visiting ornithologists and a few residents, but lacked their own definitive work until now, with the publication of **The Birds of the Balearics** (Croom Helm, £29.50). This is, sadly, the last work of David Bannerman who died before he had completed the text: fortunately, his wife Mary was able to finish the work from their joint records. Donald Watson provides some pleasant illustrations, but the book must be used together with a field guide, its main value being the information on status and distribution of species in this island group.

On islands in particular, one becomes very conscious of the influence of weather on bird movements. Indeed, many birders travel to islands specifically to exploit the goodies which, carried off their migration routes by changing weather conditions, make landfall outside their normal ranges. It is a slightly bizarre business that twitchers take particular pleasure in these lost vagrants, each small personal avian disaster a gratifying tick on one's year list. However, that aside, weather is a most important influence on birds. Yet little has been written on the subject, so that **Weather and Bird Behaviour** (Poysner, £12.60) provides a very welcome review of the meteorological aspects of the avian environment. A meteorologist pursuing ornithology as a hobby, Norman Elkins opens the book with an explanation of how weather works and of the weather systems affecting the British Isles. Turning to the birds' response, chapters cover flight, feeding, breeding and comfort — the responses to low temperature, precipitation and wind. Four chapters are devoted to migration — its inception and progress; the phenomenon of drift and displacement; vagrancy; and the migration of soaring birds. The effects of extreme conditions are specifically discussed, as are seabirds, whose response to weather is rather different from that of land species. The text must have widespread application since, though the pattern of weather behaviour varies from place to place, its general principles and the birds' response are similar. And it is pleasant to find that, in Elkins's view, the lost vagrant is not just a wasted life: "Arguably one of the more exciting events of a birdwatchers' career is the discovery of an individual bird which is clearly thousands of kilometers from the edge of its range or migration route . . . an analysis of the details of all the records, can result in important inferences. What appear to be random occurrences may fall into a pattern which gives us a clue to the movements or population dynamics of a particular species". I stand corrected! □

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Paper snakes

Colin McCarthy

Snakes of Australia, 2nd Edn.

By Graeme F. Gow.

Angus & Robertson: 1983. Pp.118.

Pbk £6.95.

AUSTRALIANS have, over the years, been well-served by guides to their snakes. Since Krefft's *Snakes of Australia* (Australian Museum, 1869) a number of hand-books have been produced; one of the latest upholders of this important tradition is Graeme Gow. In Krefft's day only 67 types of Australian land snakes had been recorded, but now over double that number are known.

Most of Gow's book is devoted to accounts of the range, identifying features and habits of individual species. Other topics considered include a general review of habits and the care of snakes in captivity together with recommendations for the treatment of snake bite. In his introduction, Gow indicates that the aim of his book is "to assist the layman with the identification of all known species"; so it is a pity that, with the exception of one to the Blind snakes, no identification keys are provided. In this respect H.W. Cogger's *Reptiles and Amphibians of Australia*, published by Reed in 1979, is a more helpful work. However Gow's new paperback is a cheaper alternative for those whose interest in Australian herpetology does not extend beyond snakes, and it is also of a more convenient size for field use.

Owners of an early (1976 or 1980) edition are advised that the recommendation, formerly given, that a tourniquet be applied immediately in the event of snake bite, has "now become outdated"; instead immediate application of a broad constrictive bandage together with immobilization of the affected limb in a splint or sling, until medical aid is given, is suggested. This most recent edition is also quite extensively revised in other respects, particularly with regard to nomenclature and species accounts; five new colour plates have been added. Although there is a claim, on the back cover, that it is a "field guide to all Australian land snakes", there are some omissions. Readers may, for instance, be bewildered by Gow's statement (p.48) that the water snake *Enhydryis macleayi* "should produce similar litters to *Enhydryis polylepis*"; *E. polylepis* has not been included in this edition.

In spite of such minor reservations this book is undoubtedly a valuable addition to the herpetological literature; a work that anyone with an interest in snakes would be pleased to own, especially for its 48 pages of mainly very good colour photographs. □

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