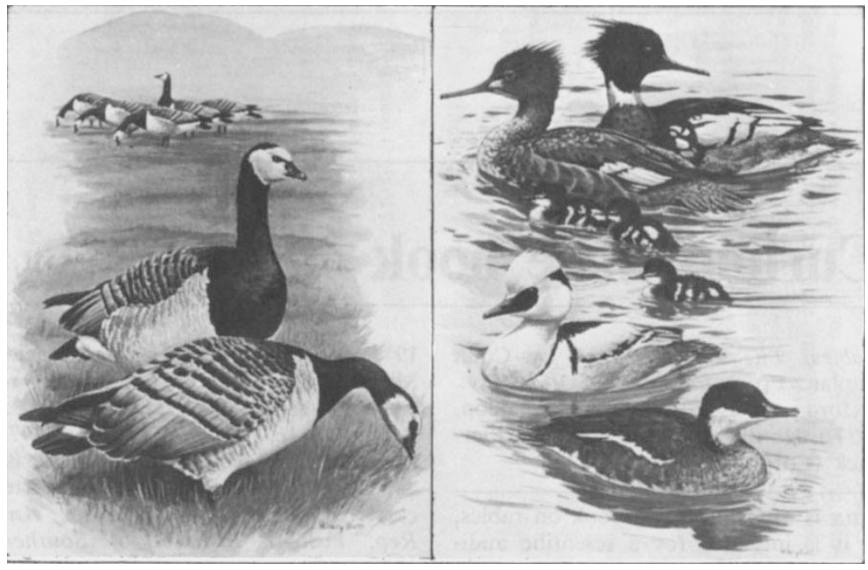
Nature Vol. 268 7 July 1977

European wildfowl

Wildfowl of Europe. By Myrfyn Owen. Colour plates by Hilary Burn and foreword by Sir Peter Scott: Pp. 256. (Macmillan: London and Basingstoke, 1977.) £15.



Barnacle Goose

Red-Breasted Merganser (above) and Smew (below)

QUITE often popular books of this sort are written to support the illustrations and this may have been the original idea for this volume. The author admits that this book does not pretend to summarise all known information about wildfowl. He attempts to cover most aspects of the birds' lives unclouded by tedious detail and he confesses to a personal bias in what he has omitted. The first quarter of the book deals with taxonomy, waterfowl movement, populations dynamics, migration and man's relation to waterfowl. Helped as he has been by the scientific staff of the Wildfowl Trust, the author has included some new quantative information in these chapters. The final chapter of this section is spoiled by his unnecessarily chauvinistic attitude, which gives the reader the misleading impression that one can only see wildfowl in three localities in Britain—three reserves administered by his own organisation.

The remaining three-quarters of the book provides a brief history of all the species of wildfowl recorded in Europe. Many chapters contain new information resulting from research undertaken by the Wildfowl Trust: particularly valuable are the figures for European populations based on counts organised by the International Waterfowl Research Bureau, and the accounts of the feeding ecology of nearly all the main species of duck. But there is little about breeding behaviour in the individual accounts. Four useful appendices summarise information about nests, eggs and young of wildfowl, winter weights and measurements, winter food and waterfowl in captivity.

This volume is illustrated by coloured plates—for which incidentally there is no index or list—by Hilary Burn, a promising young bird painter whose work has developed rapidly. But because of her predeliction for the use of black to create shadows, many of the plates of the colourful species such as wigeon, pochard and mallard are sadly lacking in natural sparkle. The design of some of the plates could show more imagination and the scale is sometimes awry. Joe Blossom's line drawings are generally competent at underlining points made in the text.

Interesting though it is, I find it difficult to accept that this rather popular volume is really worth the £15 charged for it: while the wildfowl enthusiasts will buy it, the specialist would have expected something much more comprehensive. Costs might have been less if the margin had not been so wide—75 millimetres for a single page or 150 millimetres when the book is open.

Peter Conder

Peter Conder recently retired as Director of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

Push-button biology

Human Biology: An Exhibition of Ourselves in the new Hall of Human Biology at the British Museum (Natural History), London. A permanent exhibition, admission free.

Human Biology: An Exhibition of Ourselves. Pp. 120. (British Museum (Natural History) and Cambridge University: London, 1977.) Hardback £5.00; paperback £1.95.

THE dinosaurs and whales, and halls of decorously deceased representatives of the animal kingdom, at the British Museum (Natural History) (BM (NH)) have been joined by an exhibition which requires more of the visitor than tireless legs and unglazable eyes. The Hall of Human Biology is the first fruit of the major reorganisation which is intended, during the next 30 years or so, completely to rearrange the museum's specimens. They have been presented for more than 100 years according to Victorian notions of the plan of the Creator, which are no longer deemed appropriate. In future visitors will be expected to discover as well as to learn, and the specimens will be accompanied by buttons to push, handles to turn and games to play. Although in Britain this represents a revolutionary new concept in museums, it has been flourishing abroad for some time in such centres as the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry in Portland.

In An Exhibition of Ourselves, which fills the Hall of Human Biology, visual, tactile and olfactory aids can be manipulated to reveal details of growth and development, and of the control of bodily functions and their responses to the external environment. Much of the material has been incorporated into the accompanying book, which consequently tells its story as much through pictures as through the text. In the tradition of such BM (NH) publications, the book can be used independently, although it follows closely the plan of the exhibition.

Willing learners, young or old, with some experience of biology textbooks should find that the exhibition usefully and enjoyably complements their knowledge. For them animated models will explain homeostatis and neuromuscular control; a slide show will clarify the events of gestation and birth, and an optical illusion will tell something about perception. Afterwards *Human Biology* will remind them of the concepts they have encountered.

Visitors with little or no aquaintance with biology, however, may have to concentrate quite hard on the exhibition. And that could be difficult when the maze of exhibits is swarming with exuberant youth apparently determined to flash all lights and ring all bells at once. But a subsequent session with the book will probably be very helpful for visitors who cannot absorb all the information offered by the exhibits.

The museum authorities foresee a need to control the flow of visitors through the exhibition, and they are waiting to see how it survives the rigours of the next few months.

Mary Lindley

Mary Lindley is Assistant Editor of Nature.