

## Intricacies of Nature

THERE seems to be no end to the flow of new books by experienced naturalists whose purpose is partly to educate the public in the intricacies of nature and partly to provide a forum for their authors' reminiscences. *A Natural History of Britain and Ireland* by Eric Simms (Dent: London; £6.95) has a flavour of the nineteenth century about it — accentuated by Robert Gillmor's exquisitely drawn vignettes at the head of each chapter. The author describes the very varied countryside of Britain in terms of its history and of its geographical differences. The book is divided into 15 chapters each of which deals with a different region that typifies a distinctive type of habitat. The book is also largely biographical, recalling the author's many experiences of wildlife in different parts of Britain. It does not make very easy reading — many of the accounts of specific localities, such as the Cheddar Gorge, consist largely of lists of species that the author has seen there. So much information is presented that the underlying theme of the book, an analysis of the factors that have produced the natural history that we see today, is frequently submerged.

Also by Eric Simms, *Wildlife Sounds and their Recording* (Elek: London; £5.95) goes in great depth into one aspect of natural history study, the recording of animal sounds. The book deals with detailed techniques and descriptions of recording equipment, the history of wildlife sound recording and something of the biological significance of auditory communication in animals. There is much interesting information about techniques and about the kinds of sounds that animals make. Unfortunately, the chapter on biological aspects of animal sounds is rather dated. In particular there is little mention of the highly fruitful use of playback experiments in which recorded sounds are played to animals in the field. This has been notably successful in increasing our understanding of the nature of territoriality in birds, competition between red deer stags, and mating strategies among frogs and toads, where synthetic sounds have proved very useful. The book contains a number of interesting photographs, particularly those of early recording equipment.

*Encounters with Nature* by Leslie Brown (Oxford University Press: Oxford; £6.50) is more revealing of the author than informative about wildlife. Consisting of a series of essays about encounters with animals that the author calls "golden moments" in his life, there are chapters on the aardvark, badgers, flamingoes and pelicans among others, seen mostly in East Africa and Britain. Some of the

observations of animals in their natural state are evocative, exciting and informative but too much of the book is devoted to the author's opinions about the state of the world as he has found it during his life. The book is introduced by a series of contemptuous remarks about "scientists" and is punctuated throughout by comments that reveal that Leslie Brown yearns for the good old days of the British Empire when natural history was a hobby for a few privileged amateurs. While reading this book one inevitably finds that its rather sour, misanthropic tone contrasts with Gerald Durrell's much more amusing and sympathetic treatment of humans as well as animals. The book includes a series of attractive drawings by Doris Tischler.

In marked contrast to Brown's book, with its emphasis on more exotic and spectacular forms of wildlife, Ken Hoy's *On Nature's Trail* (Mitchell Beazley: London; £6.95; ALW: New York; \$14.95) brings us back to the minutiae of wildlife in our immediate surroundings. This excellent and attractive book is a practical guide, telling the reader what to look for, where to find it and how to interpret what we find. It tells us what we can learn from animal droppings and tracks, what we can do to help injured or orphaned animals, how we can appreciate the complexity of life within a single tree, and much more besides. The book is generously illustrated with excellent photographs. As well as

making a very good companion for any young enthusiast, this book should prove useful to teachers in search of ideas for nature trails and school field projects.

Another immensely useful book is *A Day in the Country* by John Gooders (André Deutsch: London; £5.95). This provides a pocket guide to naturalists and more casual observers of wildlife, telling them what they might see in any part of Britain. The book is divided into two parts. Part 1 lists all the National Parks, Forestry Commission areas, RSPB reserves, and many other official localities. Clear maps and lists of addresses make the planning of visits to such places a simple matter. Part 2, which takes up the greater part of the book, deals separately with eleven areas that together cover the whole of Britain. For each area there is information about footpaths, areas of outstanding natural beauty, wildlife parks and zoos, stately homes and many other places of interest to the naturalist. For each locality there is a list of the more interesting and unusual animals and plants that the visitor might expect to see. Illustrated by a number of very attractive sketches by David Thelwell, this book makes a truly valuable contribution to the enjoyment and appreciation of Britain's wildlife.

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## Wildlife of Europe

THE quartet of books reviewed here ranges from the broad canvas of the classification of the Animal Kingdom to narrower studies on groups and single species of carnivores. Naturalists will find the first useful, the rest diverting as well as informative.

*Mammals: Their Latin Names Explained* by A.F. Gotch (Blandford: Poole, UK; £5.95) clothes the dry bones of taxonomy for the benefit of those without a classical education. The scientific names of animals are, on the whole, indicative of their appearance, provenance or discoverers, and much is hidden from those who cannot derive the roots from which the names are composed. Thus the New World cottontail is known to zoologists as *Sylvilagus floridanus* which tells us that it is a 'woodland hare from Florida'. English names vary locally and lack the diagnostic precision of the scientific name.

The author of this book deals first with the phyla and subphyla of the whole Animal Kingdom from *Amoeba* to man, then with the vertebrates, down to orders in the case of mammals, and finally — the bulk of the book — with mammals down to families and selected species. The principles of nomenclature are explained,

although it is surprising that the importance and adequacy of the first published description of a species are not more emphasised. At every step the Latin or Greek derivation of names is carefully expounded and — particularly valuable — a biographical note is given about explorers and scientists, after whom many animals are named. There are a few misprints and the odd contentious derivation; for example, I do not believe that the name *Didelphis* for the opossum refers to the pouch as a "secondary womb" (page 37): surely it indicates the double nature of the female reproductive tract in marsupials. In any case *Didelphis* does not have a pouch.

This book is a mine of information and illumination to naturalists who have used these names for years without understanding their import.

*Carnivores of Europe* by Robert Burton (Batsford: London; £8.50) is a timely evaluation at second hand of the status and prospects of the terrestrial, carnivorous mammals of Europe. These most interesting animals have been subjected to intense persecution by man, both as competitors for his domestic stock and as providers of warm and elegant clothing. Now that predatory animals are acknowledged to play a salutary rôle in the economy of nature, Mr Burton's book, giving up-to-date results of recent researches, helps us to assess probable future trends in numbers, both down-