

Green and pleasant

Richard Mabey

The Macmillan Guide to Britain's Nature Reserves.

Edited by Robert Boote.

Macmillan, London: 1984. Pp. 717. £30.

RSPB Nature Reserves.

Edited by Nicholas Hammond.

RSPB/Croom Helm: 1984. Pp. 189. £9.95.

WITH the centenary of the first nature reserve (Breydon Water in Norfolk) and the 900th anniversary of the Domesday Book both only a few years away, it is an apt moment to produce an inventory of Britain's protected acres. Macmillan have sidestepped ideological wrangles about whether reserves exist principally for wildlife or for the human beings who created them by publishing a monumental guide that is both reverent of its raw material and thoroughly populist in approach. The basis for inclusion of a site, it states, "is that members of the public should have access either by common law rights, or by membership of a club or trust". There is easy public access inside the book, too, thanks to a clear and forthright design, simple, foolproof keys (with map reference, acreage, ownership, best time of the year to visit) and vivid descriptive accounts of the natural features of each site that on the whole avoid scientific jargon.

And what a feast it all adds up to! Seven hundred pages containing entries on some 2,000 reserves, ranging across Britain from Kyemel Crease in Cornwall, a tiny patch of scrub woodland developed over 121 abandoned cliff-top fields, to the puffin-stacked cliffs of Hermaness National Nature Reserve in Shetland. Every imaginable kind of sanctuary is featured: flooded brickpits, old commons, municipal country parks, water authority reservoirs, the occasional free-enterprise

private wood and whole National Parks. The potential users of the book are just as various. For apprentice twitchers it will be an invaluable crib, thanks to its species index; for holidaymakers it would work as a rewarding alternative tourist guide. (Try it out on unpromising Notts, and read about the splendid gravel pits called Attenborough!)

It would be possible to see this book, only slightly cynically, as *The Good Habitat Guide*, and have a melancholy vision in which spontaneous encounters with nature are superseded by something approaching reserve-crawling. At £30 a copy though, I rather doubt it. In my local library they have placed it on the table between the tourist leaflets and the telephone directories, and that seems to me an accurate and rather complimentary assessment of its social role.

Those who prefer their guidebooks to provide ecological background material as well as information, can turn to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds' account of its own holdings. There are less reserves covered here (some 90, occupying over 100,000 acres) and the book is oddly evasive about access arrangements, but as a bonus there are a number of concise and thoughtful essays on the history and management of different kinds of reserve habitats.

Although I personally find the necessity for nature reserves a sad commentary on our mistreatment of the natural world, I warned to these two books. It is, after all, better that the last oases are preserved than not. And it would be hard not to be lifted by the images that shine through both guides — of natural landscapes the immense variety of which can still be experienced, and of the people whose hard work and devout attentions have saved their remaining fragments. □

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Poisoned principles

J. D. Phillipson

Poisonous Plants in Britain and Their Effects on Animals and Man.

By Marion R. Cooper and Anthony W. Johnson.

Her Majesty's Stationery Office: 1984. Pp. 305. £12.95.

A Colour Atlas of Poisonous Plants.

By Dietrich Frohne and Hans Jürgen Pfänder. Translated by Norman Grainger Bisset.

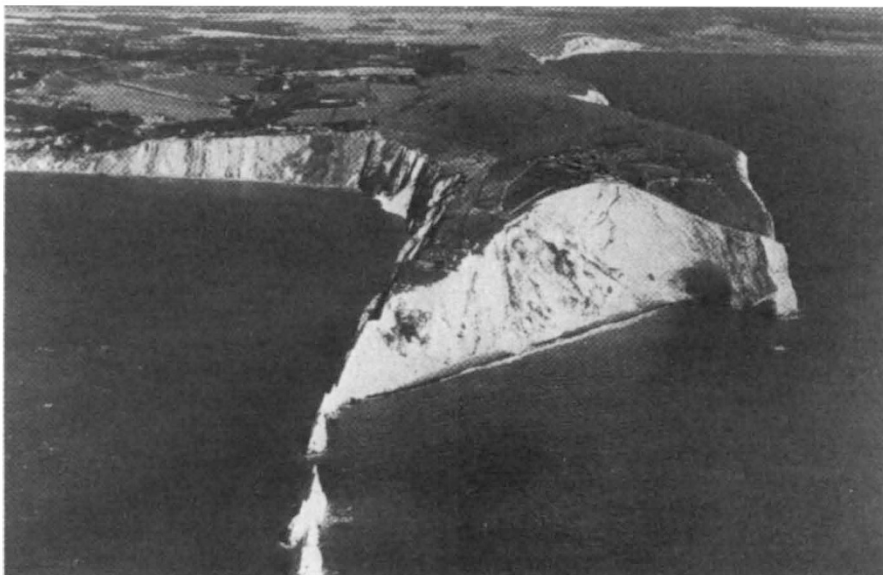
Wolfe Scientific, London/Sheridan House, White Plains, New York: 1984. Pp. 291. £30, \$38.

WHEN two books on the same topic emerge at about the same time, it might be thought that the reviewer should be able to assess which one is the better buy. In this case it is not possible because these two books in fact complement one another rather than compete.

The MAF Bulletin 161, *British Poisonous Plants*, was last reprinted in 1979 and was in need of a complete revision. M. R. Cooper and A. W. Johnson have done just that, bringing together the botanical and veterinarian aspects of poisonous plants. The most common cases of animal poisoning are due to bracken, ragwort, brassica, yew, oak and the umbelliferous plants. Treatment is briefly discussed with the sensible caveat that "the doctor and veterinary surgeon . . . should be consulted immediately". A section on poisonous principles describes various alkaloids, glycosides, nitrites, oxalates, photosensitizers, proteins, peptides, amino acids and tannins, but no structural formulae are provided for the chemically minded reader.

The book is then divided into sections on fungi, pteridophytes and the flowering plants, the species being listed within their families which are in alphabetical order instead of the former taxonomic order. Over half of the book is devoted to the families, ranging from Alliaceae to Umbelliferae, and each plant is discussed under a series of headings such as poisonous principles, poisoning in animals, human poisoning and treatment. There are some colour prints but these are relatively few, the first one not appearing until p.94, and the photographs are of plants in their natural habitat so that they are not necessarily easily recognized. Each section is supplied with a liberal number of references and there is a good general index.

How does the volume by Frohne and Pfänder differ? First, and most obviously, it is beautifully presented with much better, clear colour photographs usually taken against a light background. Each plant, again listed in alphabetical order of families, is illustrated, and in many cases there is a photomicrograph or microscopical drawing of diagnostic features



Remnant beauty — Tennyson Down and the first of the Needles, off Britain's southern coast.

From *The Macmillan Guide to Britain's Nature Reserves*.