

BOOK REVIEWS

LEARNING ABOUT AUSTRALIAN BIRDS by Rosemary Balmford, 1981. Sydney: Collins. Pp. 240, col. ills. 15, b & w. figs 29. 140 x 215 mm. \$16.95.

This is a guide to the study of birds for amateurs not a beginner's guide to bird watching. The author took up ornithology without a grounding in field biology or natural history, the information gained in that process forms the body of this book and must prove invaluable to the growing number of people in a like position. In thirteen chapters and three appendices an introduction is given to many topics, including: bird watching, how to record and study. How to undertake research is discussed in one of the longer chapters, while others deal with organisations, wildlife legislation, nomenclature, biogeography and a little of some other aspects of biology. A good further reading section and a fair index complete the book. The colour photography is a highlight and includes some beautiful portraits by M. D. Gottsch, some of the black and white work however is poorly designed.

The section on starting bird watching contains some detailed recommendations in an area where opinions are numerous. I do not favour the use of so called restricted field guides. To learn bird identification one needs four main things: field guides, a local bird list, a pair of binoculars and exercise in the field with an experienced observer. The binoculars need not be the best you can afford, a good cheap pair can fall from a car hood or sink into a salt bog just as easily but are more readily replaced. The recommendation that a pair of binoculars be worn bandolier fashion, whilst being an almost embarrassing degree of detail, is not espoused by one bird watcher who cracked a rib in a fall while so encumbered. Association with experienced observers is an obvious ploy for the learner as is the need to ask many questions. In questioning it is best to avoid the "how do you know?" type in favour of the less intimidating, "how may I know?" type.

A list of field characteristics of groups occupies about ten pages. Although the list probably represents the sort of information carried in the head of all bird watchers it might add more to the book if it were organised into a key. Some of the section on expeditions and holidays seems a little out of place and perhaps best left to outback travelling guides. Ecology as a subject is mentioned

in passing under the heading of evolution and the further reading list does not compensate.

The book highlights the increasing need for wildlife research in response to the rising demands for knowledge. When discussing the mechanics of scientific work it is perhaps a good idea to stress some of the simple principles. It is useful to consider that science is the rigorous and orderly pursuit of knowledge, and that ideas (hypotheses) must be subjected to initial testing and then to further verification or falsification. This approach is often difficult to maintain in the face of pressure for results. Distinction should be made between leaders and their assistants, with the leader of a particular project accepting the responsibility for scientific content. Criticism of the work is an important function of informed assistants and others. The author states a little too simply that the leader should be the person who sees a problem and wants to solve it. In conventional jargon this would be the person who has an hypothesis and wants to test it.

An index is a most important part of a valuable reference book of this type and in this case could be expanded somewhat.

I recommend this book to all those interested in any way in the modern trend toward organised amateur research in ornithology.

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