

Book Review

Australian Predators of the Sky

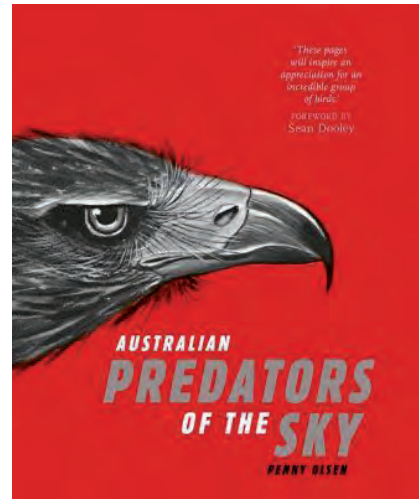
PENNY OLSEN, 2015

*National Library of Australia, Canberra. \$39.99
Paperback, 207 pages.*

Penny Olsen's latest volume bringing together art and birds showcases the work of artists curated at the National Library of Australia. As the title suggests this is also a book about Australian raptors – here including the Accipitriformes (hawks, eagles and allies), the Falconiformes (falcons and allies) and the Strigiformes (owls).

Introductory chapters document the European discovery of Australia's raptors and provide a brief introduction to their biology and ecology. As we would expect from Penny Olsen, the text is engaging and accessible and manages to both educate and entertain. I discovered a wealth of information about both the history of Australian ornithology and bird illustration.

William Dampier is thought to have been the first European to document Australian raptors in 1699, although Cook and Banks took a closer look in 1770, Cook commenting in his log, 'some time ago we learned to eat every identical species which came our way: a hawk ... was to us as delicate ... as a partridge.' The book is liberally furnished with quite delightful historical anecdotes and quotes and I must say that despite their predilection to kill everything that they saw my respect for the early taxonomists and collectors has been strengthened by learning some of these stories. John Gould himself is



quoted bemoaning the persecution of Wedge-tailed Eagles, Whistling Kites and Brown Falcons, which is a side of him I hadn't read before.

The species accounts cover 25 diurnal birds of prey and 9 owls and each is sumptuously illustrated. I won't dwell on the text, which is succinct and interesting, with notes on the naming of each species, and variously, collecting anecdotes, geographical notes or interesting aspects of biology or ecology. First and foremost this book is about the artworks displayed, and these are dominated by four artists: the lithographs of John Gould and Henry Richter, and the paintings of Ebenezer Gostelow and Henrik Grønvald.

The earliest of these were Gould and Richter, working in the 1840s. Their lithographs accompany 26 of the species and probably represent the finest art in the volume. I must confess I wasn't a huge fan of any of these artists before turning through the book half a dozen times (my tastes run more to Frank T. Morris and Ray Harris-Ching) but I am now an enthusiastic convert, and for that alone the book is worth owning.

Gould's and Richter's illustrations are the ones which perhaps best portray birds in life-like poses (although it must be remembered that all of these artists were working from skins). Their Black-shouldered Kites are wonderfully alert and

full of movement; their Pacific Baza, Whistling Kites and falcons possess a softness and tactility that demonstrate the sheer luxury of Gould's *Handbook to the Birds of Australia*.

Of course Richter only came on the scene after the tragically early death of Gould's wife, Elizabeth. John and Elizabeth worked together throughout the 1830s and Elizabeth's are amongst the first illustrations ever made of several species. Almost every species carries an exquisite head portrait by the Goulds and these are amongst my favourite pictures in the book, as are their Square-tailed Kites and Peregrine Falcon.

Grønvold's paintings were done largely in the 1910s and are reminiscent of the style of John Keulemans, whom he replaced in working for Gregory Matthews illustrating *The Birds of Australia*. His work accompanies 26 species and although they might at first glance appear 'sketchy', they carry a certain grace and power that is unique. His Black Kite, Wedge-tailed Eagle, Australian Hobby and Boobooks (of which there are four thanks to Matthews' tendency to create species) all stand out.

What to make of Ebenezer Gostelow? This retired school-teacher took it upon himself to paint all the birds of Australia for his own entertainment, and this he duly did during the 1930s, starting next on the butterflies. We get to know him a little, this remarkably prolific man, and I'm sure that if I were to meet him I would like him immensely. His work is shown with 25 species and the paintings are meticulously detailed with every feather and footscale beautifully drawn. It is a simple fact that his paintings do not look like living birds. The proportions are wrong and the postures are sometimes a little disturbing. There is something, though, about knowing that Gostelow was doing these paintings for pleasure, that draws one into them. His Australian Hobby is mesmerizing, and his Brown Goshawks are captivating; he draws the plumage wonderfully and colours it generously.

Many of my remaining favourites in the book are by the Port Jackson painter (one or more artistically-inclined convicts with the First Fleet). These are among the early European representations that at first look seem to be barely recognizable as the birds which they portray. Some of them appear little more than drawings of the skins of collected specimens. However, having reset my gauge while reading this book, I found myself really looking at these pictures for the first time and some of them are extraordinary. The Red Goshawk springs from the page, he's alive; you could reach out and touch the Australian Hobby, and the Wedge-tailed Eagle is entrancing. One is transported back to a time when no European had seen these birds alive and their first impressions. They are incredibly powerful drawings bridging history and the acquisition of knowledge.

Mention must go also to Gracius Joseph Broinowski, whose pictures are like those of Edward Lear – not his magnificent illustrations for Gould, but the cartoons he did to accompany his nonsense. His owls are smiling. Once again my appreciation was heightened once I read the biographical notes and realized that these paintings had been commissioned for school-children. Many must have been inspired into an interest in the natural world by looking at his paintings.

In conclusion this is a book that any raptor devotee or bird art appreciator would be delighted to own, and I strongly recommend it for the latter. I learnt a lot from it in areas that surprised me, such as history and taxonomy, and the reproductions of the art are exceptional. There are people here too, and we get to meet them and understand their motivations and ambitions and why they were painting, and what it was that made each of them connect with birds.

REFERENCES

Gould, J. 1865. *Handbook to the Birds of Australia*.
London, John Gould.

Matthews, G.M. 1910-1927. *The Birds of Australia*.
London, Witherby.

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Species list

Pacific Baza, *Aviceda subcristata*

Brown Goshawk, *Accipiter fasciatus*

Wedge-tailed Eagle, *Aquila audax*

Black-shouldered Kite, *Elanus axillaris*

Whistling Kite, *Haliastur sphenurus*

Square-tailed Kite, *Lophoictinia isura*

Black Kite, *Milvus migrans*

Red Goshawk, *Erythrotriorchis radiatus*

Brown Falcon, *Falco berigora*

Australian Hobby, *Falco longipennis*

Peregrine Falcon, *Falco peregrinus*

Southern Boobook, *Ninox boobook*