

Some Recent Natural History Publications #26 June 2018

Recovering Australian Threatened Species; a book of hope

Stephen Garnett, Peter Latch, David Lindenmayer, John Woinarski (eds)
CSIRO. 342 pages. RRP \$60



A BOOK OF HOPE



Editors: Stephen Garnett, Peter Latch, David Lindenmayer and John Woinarski

I think the key to the significance of this book is in its sub-title. It's been a long time since the future of Australia's biodiversity looked so bleak, with governments seemingly content to oversee the continuing and accelerating loss of habitats and species. (No, perhaps not all governments, but the national and NSW governments in particular are starving key programs of resources, and watering down protection laws and even introducing horrifically retrogressive legislation.) This book does offer some hope, in the form of a series of scientifically presented case studies of targeted recovery programs which are judged to have had some measurable success. It arose from a 2016 conference organised by the National Environmental Science Program (part of the Federal Department of Environment and Energy). The editors have asked the many authors (reporting on their own projects) to use a consistent and readily accessed format – a clear Summary, Introduction, Conservation Management (the detailed story), The Future, and Conclusion. It works well

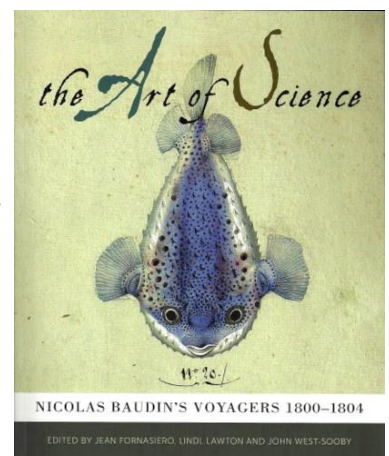
and makes it easy to compare aspects of projects, which range from removing invasive species on Macquarie Island to restoring aquatic environments and their threatened species in the Mary River Catchment, to recovery projects for organisms from Pygmy Bluetongue Lizards to Malleefowl to Norfolk Island Parrots to Yellow-footed and Black-footed Rock Wallabies to endangered orchids to Spiny Daisy Bush, amid many others. (As a former Croweater I am pleased to see that South Australia provides the most stories in the book.) It is most telling that virtually every successful project involved key input from community organisations (well, not Macquarie Island!), be they local landcare groups or remote Indigenous communities. I find it almost inconceivable these days that government would be carrying such projects alone – and I make very strong differentiation between uninterested elected governments and the numerous dedicated, determined and knowledgeable officers working in increasingly difficult situations in environment departments across the country. They too are well-represented in this book. Towards the end are chapters on the work of the Australian Wildlife Conservancy and zoo captive breeding programs, and a summarising chapter by the editors as to what defines a successful recovery program. It should be required reading for anyone contemplating such a program, but if you just need a boost in these dark days then you could do worse than dipping in. This is good science, written accessibly, and good news.

The Art of Science; Nicolas Baudin's Voyagers 1800-1804

Jean Fornasiero, Lindl Lawton and John West-Sooby (eds)
Wakefield Press. 176 pages. RRP \$39.95

'The book of the exhibition.' In particular, it's a book that was prepared to accompany the travelling exhibition of the same name, based on the work of artists Charles-Alexandre Lesueur and Nicolas-Martin Petit while on the huge Baudin expedition of scientific exploration, which extended from Arnhem Land west and south to Tasmania and Port Jackson. The collection comprises some 350 works from the Le Havre Museum of Natural History in France. I saw the exhibition very recently at the National Museum of Australia here in Canberra, and it was simply superb (it's now closed here and I'm not sure where it's going next). There has finally been some interest taken here in recent times in the story of the major contributions made by French state-sponsored scientific expeditions to Australia from the late 1780s to the 1820s, and the bones of the Baudin-Lesueur-Peron story have been pretty well exposed. It is worth reiterating however that the two artists were not originally appointed as official expedition artists, but were promoted when the three original artists left the ships before even sighting Australia.

This makes their work even more remarkable. While there is no substitute for seeing the original paintings, most, if not all, of them are beautifully reproduced here, and I would venture to say that the text is even more comprehensive and perhaps satisfying than the information at the exhibition. (Indeed I had the strong impression that the labels there concerning zoology had been neither written nor checked by anyone with

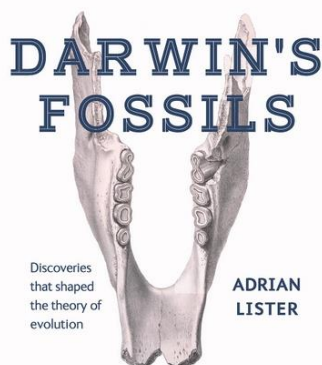


zoological knowledge.) Such expertise is certainly not lacking among the distinguished contributors to the chapters of this book. The chapters, on topics including the background to the expedition in terms of the nature of Napoleon's France, first encounters with Indigenous Australia (where the French tended to be much more sympathetic than their British counterparts), interactions with the British colony, their mapping work, and Tasmanian zoology, are each written by appropriate experts, both French and Australian, and are absorbing and readable. In fact you could usefully purchase this book for either the art work or the text – in combination they are magnificent. And don't miss the extraordinary jellyfish paintings, which must have presented an incredible challenge, but are glorious. Overall a gem.

Darwin's Fossils; discoveries that shaped the theory of evolution

Adrian Lister

CSIRO. 224 pages. RRP \$29.95



If you're going to add another title to the impressive and ever-expanding canon of books on Charles Darwin, you'd better come up with a new angle or your opus is likely to vanish into the crowd. Lister, who is a lead researcher in the Earth Sciences Department at London's Natural History Museum, specialising in understandings of what ice age mammal fossils tell us about evolution and extinction, has managed that impressively. But surely there can't be new stories to tell about the famous Beagle expedition, covered exhaustively in *The Voyage of the Beagle* in addition to the wealth of subsequent publications already alluded to? Well, it seems there certainly are, at least for me, and I've read a fair bit on the topic, which is dear to my heart and mind. (For instance, for interest I cross-checked by date some of the events retold by Lister in my battered old copy of *The Voyage*, and while some were there, others were only accessible to someone with access to Darwin's notes, diaries and letters.) Of course I, and very likely you, have read about

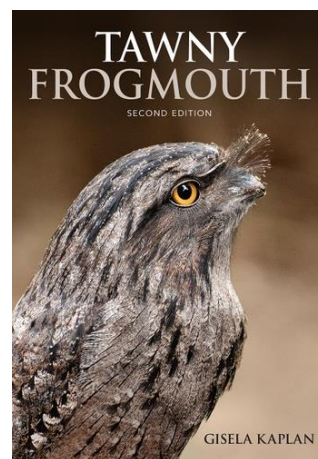
Darwin's fossil collecting, but I've never read a work with such a focus on them, interpreting their significance both in the light of modern understandings, and for what they told Darwin, and they told him more than we usually give credit for. "Darwin saw his fossils as ... witnesses to a past world as rich and varied as that of today but, crucially, different." I think we've generally accepted that the Galápagos 'Darwin's Finches' were for a long time over-emphasised in the development of his monumental theories, at least in the early stages, but the corollary is that we've probably undervalued the importance of the fossils. Even if you're not a geologist/palaeontologist (as I most certainly am not), this book should enthrall and delight you. Lister writes with lively clarity, and his text is supplemented to repletion by numerous photos and illustrations, of the sites, of fossils, of living animals and reconstructions of extinct ones, of Darwin's notes and drawings. If you're interested enough to be reading this brief review, I couldn't imagine that this superb book won't excite you as much as it has me.

Tawny Frogmouth (second edition)

Gisela Kaplan

CSIRO. 168 pages. RRP \$39.95

There was some negative reaction to the first edition of this book, 11 years ago, by some authorities (and I'm not implying that Kaplan herself isn't also such an authority), which gave me some trepidation when I was asked to review this second edition. However I don't have access now to the first edition, and more importantly any second edition deserves to be judged on its own rights. This is one in the long-running and highly esteemed *Australian Natural History Series* (spawned long ago by UNSW Press and later continued by CSIRO) though CSIRO seems to have dropped the title now, which I think is unfortunate, given its rich history. The pattern is for the author to be a recognised researcher in the field, as is Kaplan, and to cover all aspects of the species' or group's biology, behaviour and ecology. Normally the discussion also covers the evolution of the subject, but unfortunately Kaplan opts to ignore this entirely, though some information exists that could have been included. It seems that not all of the book has been updated, as the brief section on the Order Caprimulgiformes to which frogmouths belong completely overlooks the surprising but widely accepted view



that swifts and hummingbirds also perch within it alongside nightjars and potoos. She mentions that 'of late' a publication has suggested a Gondwanan origin for frogmouths, but that publication is from 2007 and the existence of European frogmouth fossils casts doubt on this suggestion. Beyond that, my main

feelings of unease are engendered by regular touches of anthropomorphism. Some examples of terms which led to this unease include “express very positive sentiments” in relation to feather ruffling, “postures of tenderness”, or describing the birds, through their vocalisations, as “expressive emotionally”. We read that they “express affection by grooming and roosting very close to other”; such behaviour is widespread among birds and seems to play an important part in pair bond reinforcement, but what does ‘affection’ mean to a bird? We need, I think, to manage such terminology very carefully in a scientific work, whether aimed at the general public or not, and it certainly needs careful definitions. As with virtually any species there is a lot we don’t know about Tawny Frogmouths, as Kaplan regularly acknowledges, but there is still a lot of information here, with comprehensive references for most of it.

Ian Fraser is a Canberra-based professional naturalist and writer who is the author of eight books on local natural history, most recently Birds in their Habitats, journeys with a naturalist, CSIRO Publishing 2018. He ran the educational Environment Tours nature-based tours program from 1984 to 2015 and was the voice of natural history on local ABC radio for 24 years. The ABC in 2004 produced a four-CD set of his ‘Around the Bush Capital’ series. In 2001 he won the Australian Plants Award, Australian Native Plants Association, professional category and in 2006 he was awarded the Australian Natural History Medallion. In 2012 he launched the natural history blog ‘Ian Fraser, Talking Naturally’, at <http://ianfrasertalkingnaturally.blogspot.com.au/> He claims no expertise and has no natural history favourites – except for birds and orchids...

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