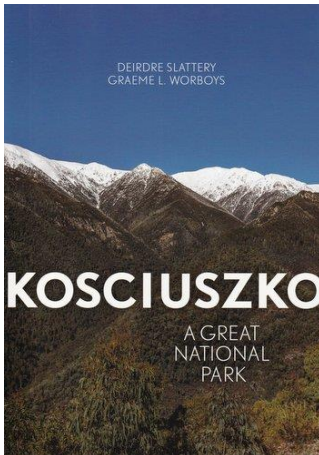


Some Recent Natural History Publications #29 February 2021

Kosciuszko; a great national park

Deidre Slattery and Graeme L Worboys
Envirobooks. 433 pages. RRP \$75



This is a truly monumental volume in a couple of ways. Its 433 pages are large format (nearly A4 in size) and it weighs in at an imposing 1.6kg, with *lots* of information per gram! It is a monument both to one of the great parks and to the deeply qualified authors, especially to Graeme Worboys who tragically died soon after the book appeared. Worboys worked for decades in and on Kosciuszko, eventually having oversight of it as NSW NPWS Southeast Regional Manager. (His other achievements and recognitions are too numerous to detail here but are worth looking up for yourself.) Slattery has also served for decades in the high country, especially in Victoria and particularly as an educator; her *Australian Alps; Kosciuszko, Alpine and Namadgi National Parks* (2015) is *the* definitive work on the natural and cultural values of the high country parks. Perhaps in part because of this previous work the current book is not a catalogue of Kosciuszko's values. Rather it is a deft and complex history of the mountains that became the bones of Kosciuszko National Park. The

focus is on European settlement (though the Indigenous mountain people are certainly not ignored) and the development of ways of seeing, understanding and using the mountain landscapes, from pure exploitation to management for conservation, and the backlash to that. Chapters are based on defined historical periods, starting with the 1820s-60s (here defined as *The Newcomers; European exploration*) and continuing to the present day. *Kosciuszko National Park in the 21st Century* was probably intended to be the last chapter before the concluding *Reflections* but "*It's a park, not a paddock*"; the 2018 feral horse legislation had to be added. This is a magnificent essay of restrained, rational anger and contempt for 'the single greatest regression in the protection of Kosciuszko National Park in 75 years'. (The issue is the NSW state legislation to guarantee unprecedented protection to feral horses in the park.) Then Minister Gabrielle Upton ("who?" indeed) and John Barilaro are named, exposed and shamed.

In between these chapters is a vast wealth of research, interpreted with admirable clarity and insight. Each chapter features a series of one-page biographies of some key players, from European explorers and pioneering scientists, influential politicians (eg Tom Lewis, William McKell) and conservationists (eg Myles Dunphy), park managers (eg Nev Gare, Bruce Leaver) and modern scientists (including Alec Costin, Roger Good, Dane Wimbush, Andy Spate, Linda Broom, Ken Green).

Every key issue and event in the history of the park, the struggles to protect the mountains and the often savage reactions to those attempts, are reported and explained. These events include the vast scope of the Snowy Scheme, the development of the powerful skiing industry and attempts to manage it in the park context, controversies over alpine grazing and research on its impacts, fires in the mountains, climate change and individual incidents such as the Thredbo landslide. Throughout is a plethora of relevant and often fascinating photographs dating back well over 100 years, and lots of delicious maps.

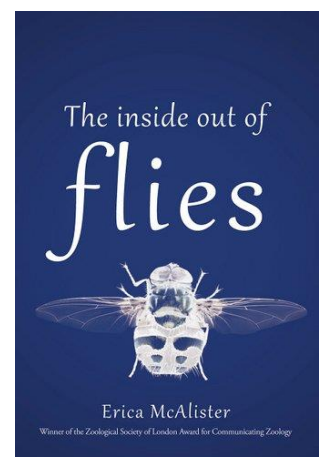
It's a grand story, told grandly, by two superbly qualified and committed narrators. It's a treasure befitting this splendid but often ill-treated park, and I'm sure that appropriate awards are in the offing.

The Inside Out of Flies

Erica McAlister

CSIRO and Natural History Museum, London. 288 pages. RRP \$35

In 2017 I described McAlister's previous book on flies, *The Secret Life of Flies* (yes, she's now written two of them!) as 'one of the natural history books of the year for me so far', so I was delighted to receive this one. McAlister is a rare creature among scientific authors – a feted expert in her field (she's the Natural History Museum's fly person after all!) who can write rivetingly for laypeople. And, counter-intuitive as it may sound, McAlister is often very funny indeed; I've gone through all amused stages from a grin to a silly guffaw while reading (though that could be just me of course). First things first; how and why a second book on flies?! *The Secret Life* looks at the multifarious and marvellous lifestyles and diets of flies throughout the world, their interactions with humans (including the Sardinian cheese internally softened with maggots) and a wealth of snippet-

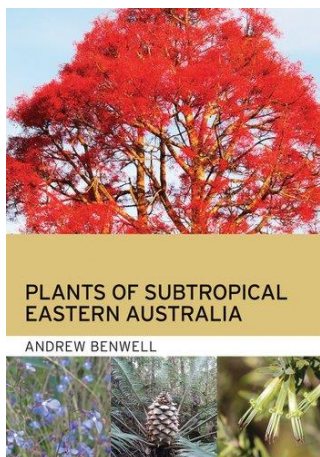


stories. *The Inside Out* takes a different approach, looking at the amazing mechanical engineering of fly anatomy – yes, for 288 fascinating pages! The promotional blurb cleverly refers to it as ‘getting under the bonnet’. I should warn that McAlister delights in what might be termed the ghoulish. While still reading the introduction I learnt that a fly can lay eggs through a sealed zipper, while the newly hatched maggots can also squeeze through the zip to reach a body tucked inside. She also has what could be misinterpreted as an excessive fascination with fly genitalia; indeed the whole final 26-page chapter is devoted to the topic. Before that are chapters on heads, antennae, mouthparts, thorax, wings, legs and abdomen. Some botflies have enormous calypters (read the book) which assist them being able to fly for 12 hours at a time, which would enable them to cover some 900km, after which they manoeuvre in flight in order to squirt larvae into a reindeer’s nostril. (You may be pleased to know that the larva later drops out in order to pupate.) Despite my selectivity here, this is not just a book of interesting click-bait factoids. Every story has a purpose (which of course includes intriguing us enough to want to learn more) and there is a wealth of accessible up to date science in every chapter. It was only in 2015 that it was learnt how a female mosquito (which is a fly) locates blood vessels and feeds without being detected. McAlister then goes on to describe how study of the mosquito’s fine piercing mouthparts is enabling the development of minute and painless hypodermic needles. You can just dip into the book and guarantee satisfaction, or better still you can read it right through and come out the other end a more informed person. Author and book are both scientific gems.

Plants of Subtropical Eastern Australia

Andrew Benwell

CSIRO. 400 pages. RRP \$50



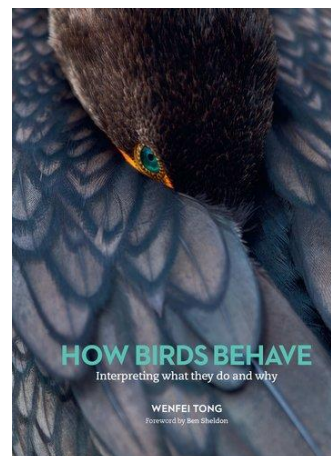
When I arrived in Canberra some 40 years ago, one of my first tasks was to start learning about eastern plants; fortunately Costerman’s now classic *Native Trees and Shrubs of South-eastern Australia* had recently been published and I’ve relied on it ever since. When I began to travel however, I discovered that there was nothing equivalent for north-eastern NSW and south-eastern Queensland, which was a source of frustration. It’s taken a while, but now that gap has been substantially filled. My analogy isn’t perfect of course – Costermans only dealt with larger woody plants while Benwell tackles the herbs as well. As a result it’s necessarily far from comprehensive – it covers some 500 of approximately 3000 species according to its own estimate – but it probably contains most of the ones most likely to be encountered by an interested amateur from Gladstone to Newcastle. There are brief introductions to climate, topography, geology and a good area map, then it focuses on the plants, divided into general vegetation types. This can be helpful in focussing a search for an identification, but also contains perils in that many plants don’t restrict themselves to one habitat, but it shouldn’t be a serious problem for a determined plant detective. (On the other hand organising by taxonomy is also problematic, since it relies on the reader being familiar with plant families, and moreover keeping up with changing taxonomies! There is no one clearly superior approach.) Photos are good, text is adequate, there are good distribution maps and a helpful identification summary for each species. I can’t wait to use it in the field.

How Birds Behave; interpreting what they do and why

Wenfei Tong

CSIRO and Unipress. 224 pages. RRP \$40

The field of interpreting bird behaviour for laypeople is something of a boom one for authors and publishers in recent times (and I confess to a certain conflict of interest in reviewing this one). Wenfei Tong brings an interesting combination of qualifications to the task, as she is both a research associate at Harvard University and runs a wildlife tour company. She writes clearly and succinctly, though I found myself wishing she could have been less parsimonious with her words sometimes. The book is divided into six general categories of topics (*Finding Food, A Social Bird, Courtship, Family Life, Dealing with Danger, Coping with Climate*). Within each of these is a series of very short chapters – generally only one or two pages (small and generously illustrated). It is clearly a conscious choice, either by her or her publisher, to keep these mini-chapters so minuscule, as it is consistent throughout. However I repeatedly found myself left hanging as the train of

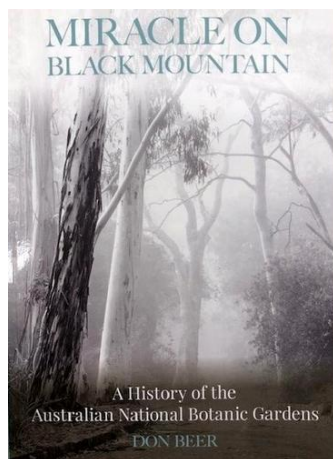


thought is suddenly cut off instead of being developed; it's a good sign that I cared though I suppose! For instance I was fascinated by the story of Superb Fairywrens teaching their unhatched chicks 'passwords' which they later incorporate into their begging calls. Any cuckoo chicks in the nest were laid later so don't learn the call and don't get fed. I was left spluttering 'what? wait, come back!' when it ended there. There are crucial unanswered questions here, not the least concerning the standard tactic of cuckoo chicks with small hosts of tossing the existing eggs and chicks out of the nest; competition between fairywren and cuckoo chicks for food doesn't happen. I love the story but I'm left unconvinced by it simply because there are clearly issues that needed further explaining, and there are no references to check or read further. (There's a four-page bibliography at the back, but no referencing to the text so all one can do is scan through the titles hoping to find key word clues.) There are lots of stories here from around the world on a wide range of interesting topics, and we should be able to trust that all of them have been properly verified. It does seem that Tong is not very familiar with Australian birds, though there are some references to them, such as the fairywrens. But in a series of chapters on cooperative breeding Australian birds rate scarcely a mention, though it is generally recognised that we have (or at least seem to have) an unusually high number of such species. In that context it is interesting to read of dramatic long-term studies exposing 'kidnapping' of neighbouring chicks by Southern Pied Babblers in the Kalahari Desert, to augment the pool of 'helpers' for their own child-rearing – but no mention of the same strategy used by White-winged Choughs, which was uncovered by Rob Heinsohn at the ANU 30 years ago. Nonetheless, for someone starting out in the truly wonderful world of bird behaviour, there is a lot of good starting material here, well supplemented by some excellent photos from a wide range of sources and some nice sketches. You'll probably want to look further when you've finished though, which is no bad thing.

Miracle on Black Mountain; a history of the Australian National Botanic Gardens

Don Beer

Halstead Press. 330 pages. RRP \$28



The depth and detail of research in this book is awesome – and that's a word I make a point of using no more than once a year on average! Beer was a professional historian at the University of New England and is now an active member of the Friends of the Botanic Gardens, so he's got both essential angles covered for writing such an opus. This story of the gardens is a major labour of love, beginning in 1901 with a conference to consider the nature of the planned national capital, where just one paper of 13 stressed the need for a botanic garden; however this one did emphasise the importance of Australian plants, surprisingly for the time. The idea flickered for years, but didn't die, until the Dickson Report of 1935 (with which I am embarrassed to say I was hitherto unfamiliar) swept aside previous doubts and went straight to the nub of how to achieve it. It became clear as I read this that these early chapters are also an excellent source of information on the development of Canberra more broadly. We meet the great Lindsay Pryor, better known as forester and Director of

Parks and Gardens in Canberra, but also 'the architect of the botanic gardens'. Partly of necessity it seems, already by 1960 the commitment was to the Gardens being totally devoted to native plantings. From about 1951 onwards for the rest of the book, the coverage of every event is intensive and one could be mired in the detail at times. However I can fully sympathise with Beer. His research, as I've mentioned, is exhaustive and it would be very hard not to use all the results of what were clearly vast amounts of archival research and interviews with those involved over the years. Moreover it would be a great loss if that material, not generally available to the rest of us, was left inaccessible. I have no idea what the compromise could be, other than a summary chapter or so. However if your interest is not in decades of minutiae of planning, development, management strategies, conflict and sometimes resolution, you could skim ahead occasionally without losing the story. On the other hand if you're interested enough to want to read the book in the first place, you will probably find yourself getting involved in the personalities – Beer does a good job in bringing the players to life – and their interactions and struggles. Conflict is an ever-present theme, and Beer offers astute comments as to why this might have been so. Chapter 5 is devoted to a cast of staff, managers, botanists and gardeners. If you're a long-time Canberran some of the names, or even the people themselves, could well be familiar to you. (I've only been here for 42 years, but I know and know of quite a few of them.) We follow the development of the plantings, including the rainforest gully and mighty rockery and the annexes – the failed one on Mount Gingera and the success at Jervis Bay. The story of the Robert Boden years (he was director from 1979 to 89) resonate with me. He was newly in place when I came to Canberra and I regard him as a friend and mentor. It was under his guidance that education and conservation became important goals of the Gardens. Beer's ability to distil complex human

interactions and Boden's management ideals, and to analyse them, is exemplary. There are chapters on visitor services, the herbarium and library, among other aspects, before an analysis of the economically tough times, including drought, the years from 1989 to 2009 and the challenges and achievements of that era. After that the key changes were the increasing involvement of the public via an advisory committee, the introduction of volunteers and the hugely successful Friends scheme. An Epilogue covers the most recent decade, when despite woefully insufficient funding, director Judy West and general manager Peter Byron have overseen some exciting developments, not least the astonishing Red Centre garden. The story ends with the coming of COVID and devastating hailstorm of January 2020, so the work is essentially current. This review has turned out to be longer than I'd intended, which probably reflects both the detailed complexity of the book and my boundless enthusiasm for the Gardens themselves. If you share this passion, or are just a committed Canberran who wants to know more of our story, this book gives great rewards for a very small financial investment on our part.

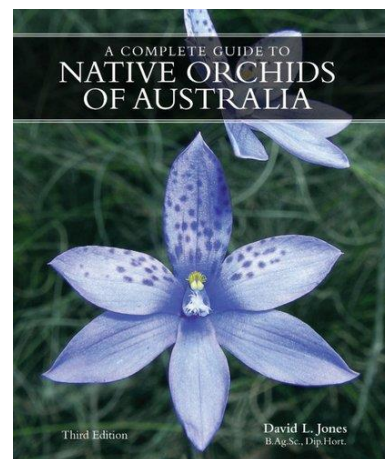
A Complete Guide to Native Orchids of Australia

David Jones

Reed New Holland. 330 pages. RRP \$*

**(not straightforward! The publisher's price is a whopping \$240, which is not unreasonable given the size and quality, but if you look on line you will find at least one much lower price from a different, completely reputable, publisher. I don't understand it either.)*

This is a truly mighty work, all 4.4kg of it! David Jones is a great Australian, who has done so much over decades in expanding our knowledge of Australian plants, in educating us about them, and in tirelessly fighting for their conservation. Above all those words apply to his passion for orchids. He's still working, in 'retirement' on the NSW South Coast, but I suspect that this may prove to be his most lasting monument. The subtitle, which doesn't appear on the cover, is *A Botanical Obsession; the legacy of a lifetime's study of Australian orchids*. His preface alone is a most powerful and important document, including a discussion of the sometimes rancorous controversies engendered by his ground-breaking series of papers introducing new genera and species over the years. With regard those controversies, his response is calm, rational and determined; very David Jones. To a large extent he has opted to yield to establishment pressure and revert to the 'mega-genus' concept for *Caladenias* for instance, while retaining 'his' genera as subgenera. I personally find that the current taxonomic trend among botanists to lump huge groups of species has the unfortunate impact of dulling the nuanced understandings employed by most zoologists, but I'm just a reviewer.



He opens his preface with the words 'Orchids are addictive' (to which I can attest!) and ends by pleading for ongoing work on conserving our botanical, and especially orchid, heritage. This edition builds on his 2006 second edition, which occupies a battered position of honour on my shelf, but adds nearly 400 species to that work. Jones claims that the book is comprehensive as at the time of writing and no-one is better positioned to make such a claim. Indeed this book contains all the information on Australian orchids, species by species, that any reasonable person could ask in one volume. After a hugely informative introduction on orchid structure and ecology, each genus has its own introduction including notes on pollination, then each species is well-illustrated and discussed in some detail, including hints on recognition and distinguishing from similar species. I am staggered at the sheer volume of work involved – indeed, a lifetime's work as he says. If you identify as an orchid person, you really need to treat yourself to this. We won't see its like for a very long time. You'll pore over all the orchids you've not seen yet, and bring your photos to it for identification (you won't be taking it into the field!). And you'll treasure it for the future. (And please don't miss the Final Word from Barbara Jones, on the very last page after the index).

And finally, something I've not done before, a review of an online-only booklet, but I don't see that something I haven't yet done, shouldn't be done!

Made in Australia; native species introduced overseas

Maurits Zwankhuizen

Self-published, available through Amazon at <https://amzn.to/2GAGoS5>. 131 pages. RRP A\$5.98

MADE IN AUSTRALIA



Native Species Introduced Overseas

by Maurits Zwankhuizen

Maurits, a Canberran known in birding circles, though I've only met him briefly, approached me last year asking if I'd be willing to review this book, the result of ten years research on his part. I was apprehensive initially but having read the manuscript I had no qualms in agreeing to review it here. This is a neat idea to start with, looking at Australian native animal species which have been translocated to other places, rather than the well-known litany of exotic species established in Australia, usually to the detriment of local ones. Most of these exports didn't succeed in becoming established, though some notably did, and here Zwankhuizen rightly highlights Brush-tailed Possums which continue to wreak havoc in New Zealand. As he says, even the stories of those unwilling colonisers which perished on foreign shores are worth the telling, and he does so clearly, and with a lot of obvious research. He opens with the story of possums in New Zealand, and offers a history and current state of play, including impacts and control measures, and ends by noting an unsubstantiated claim that possums had also been introduced to China! Red-necked Wallabies have established isolated populations in New Zealand, various parts of Britain, France and even isolated individuals in the US. The remarkable story of the Parma Wallaby is told again, and is always worth the telling. Deemed extinct in Australia, it was found in 1965 on Kawau Island in New Zealand due to good detective work by the eminent zoologist David Ride (it had been introduced a century earlier by NZ Governor Grey, formerly governor of South Australia) shortly before an extermination program was due to be concluded. Then remnant populations were found in near-coastal NSW! You can't make this stuff up. Five other kangaroo species were also introduced to Kawau, plus emus, and most survived (not the emus though). Sugar Gliders on Wimbledon Common (escaped pets), Black Swans across Europe, Brown Quail in New Zealand and Fiji, Rainbow Lorikeets, Eastern Rosellas and Laughing Kookaburras in New Zealand, Budgies in the US, South Korea, Japan and Hong Kong, Red-browed Finches in Tahiti, Rainbow Skinks in New Zealand and Hawaii, various frogs (including some threatened Australian species) and ladybirds in New Zealand are examples of successful colonisations. Almost equally interestingly are some of the failed attempts, which include Brush Turkeys in New Zealand (again) and France, Brolgas in Fiji and Spinifex Pigeons (desert birds) in Hawaii. They're all good stories and Zwankhuizen has certainly done his homework. He has also gone to a lot of trouble to source relevant photos, including historic ones, from a range of sources. It brings together some events that almost certainly haven't been collected together before, so contributes another small tile to the fresco of our history. It's informative and entertaining, and all for a derisory \$6! How can you go wrong?

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...

This periodic review is emailed free on request, in order to help anyone interested in Australian natural history to keep up with the burgeoning literature. Previous issues available at <https://botanicalbookshop.com.au/pages/ian-fraser-book-reviews> for which my thanks to the Botanical Bookshop.

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