

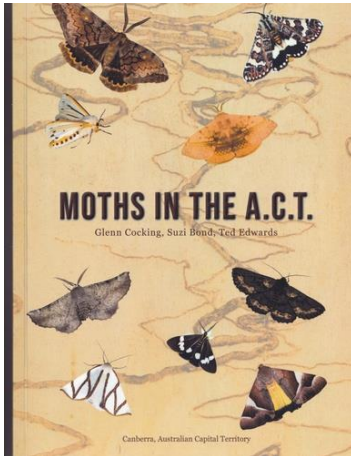
Some Recent Natural History Publications #31 November 2022

Moths in the ACT

Glenn Cocking, Suzi Bond, Ted Edwards.

Published by Glenn Cocking, Canberra. 274 pages. RRP \$50 (includes postage in Australia)

Available from <https://mothsintheact.org/>



I always regret it when conditions mean that there are delays in my publishing of a review for particular books. This is certainly one of those, especially for my ACT readers, some of whom have been waiting for this masterpiece for quite some time. There was no major publisher behind this one, just three totally committed and highly qualified local authors who are passionate about moths and want people to know and understand them better. Cocking, who actually published the book, is an amateur in the gloriously literal sense of the word. Always interested in insects, he's spent the 20 years of his 'retirement' as a volunteer collector and curator at the Australian National Insect Collection at CSIRO in Canberra. Bond is a professional Canberra ecologist, specialising in birds, butterflies (she wrote the landmark field guide to the ACT's butterflies published in 2016) and now moths. She recruited her two co-authors for this project. Ted Edwards has been the ACT's 'Mr Lepidoptera', firstly as a CSIRO scientist and continuing the role in retirement, for as long

as I can remember (which is a disturbingly long time). This is a formidable team and they have produced a formidable book.

The cover picture above doesn't convey the fact that is printed on A4 pages, which means a lot of information in 274 of them. There are well over 1000 carefully selected photographs, covering all the moth families which have a 'significant presence' in the ACT – with over 2000 species present it is clearly impossible to be comprehensive, especially as many species are pretty much indistinguishable to laypeople. Rather it is a very comprehensive 'all about moths' book, while introducing some 60 families, several of which are broken into sub-families, plus all local species we are likely to encounter and others which are simply too interesting not to introduce. There is a thorough introductory section on moth structure, ecology, behaviour, 'Moths and People' (truly a must-read essay), finding and identifying moths. From there on it is a field guide, but one replete with far more information than I'd normally expect. Every family, plus most genera and species have a fascinating little story attached. I don't usually think of dipping and browsing in a field guide but with this one it's almost unavoidable. If you're reading this review, I think you need this book. Again my apologies for being so tardy in bringing it to your attention.

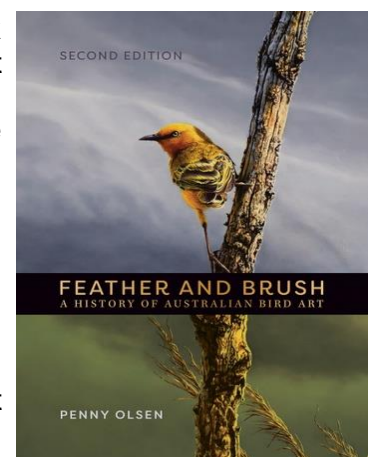
Feather and Brush; a history of Australian bird art. Second Edition.

Penny Olsen

CSIRO Publishing. 338 pages. RRP \$70

It's now 21 years since the first edition of this beautiful and fascinating book appeared (then with the subtitle 'three centuries of Australian bird art'). That was four years before this series of reviews began, which is a pity because I was interested to see what I'd said about it. The new edition has 100 more pages than the first, features 150 more artworks and nearly 60 more artists. The point of this review is not to compare the two editions, but it's worth commenting on that for those readers who have or know the first one and might be considering 'upgrading'. Simply, this is certainly based on the first, with many of the same chapter headings, but is substantially a rewrite with expanded chapters and extra ones, many extra artworks as noted above, and an overall redesign with many of the paintings repositioned in the book.

But back to this book as a stand-alone work. It is massive (and given its heft and the density of finely reproduced artworks, not at all a bad price compared with many lighter paperback publications) and a pleasure to dip into or to read from start to finish, or both. It is specifically a book on European artistic responses to Australian birds, though this time there is, in the first chapter, some discussion of Indigenous art with examples. Chapters are chronological starting with pre-settlement (*New Lands, New Birds; seamen and draughtsmen. 1600-1777* is a typically engaging chapter heading), and moving through the first years of settlement to the years of exploration and inland settlement (1800-1840). These two chapters are followed by a parallel one of

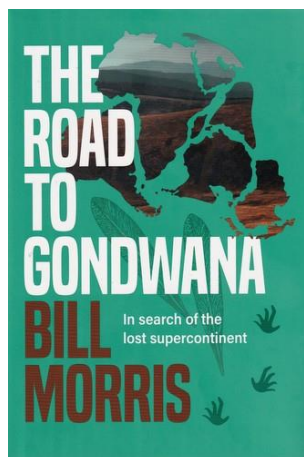


how European-based artists were seeing the new avian discoveries in Australia at the same time. The rest of the 19th century is captured in a chapter titled *A Synergy of Art and Science*, with particular emphasis on the Goulds, John and Elizabeth. It is followed by another, covering the same period, of artists working in Europe at the same time, including the Goulds' team back home in England. In the 20th century the growing availability of photography made the natural history artist's life harder, though names from that time such as Ellis Rowan, Lionel Lindsay, Neville Cayley and (I hope) Lillian Medland are well known today. Olsen sees the 20th century years from 1960 onward as a time of revival of bird painting here, driven in part by the rise of conservation as a science and an ethos and assisted by Peter Slater's long-awaited first modern Australian bird field guide in 1970, in two volumes. I am very much an amateur in this area, but along with Slater, names like Robin Hill, Raymond Harris-Ching and Jeremy Boot are familiar from this time. There is a chapter on illustration for field guides and handbooks – and with no less than five artist-illustrated national field guides, a number I believe unmatched by any other country, plus regional guides, identification posters etc (eg Gould League, NSW NPWS), there is plenty of scope here. *Art in the Anthropocene* discusses Australian artists working in the first 20 years of the 21st century, including substantial tributes to Robert Ulman, Lars Knudsen, William Cooper and Peter Slater, who all died in this period. The book ends with a long chapter on contemporary artists, in the form of an illustrated two-page essay on nearly 60 artists (including Canberra's own – for now – Peter Marsack); I learnt a lot from this one, including many artists I'd somehow managed not to meet previously. With Christmas coming, and doubtless quite a few birthdays, you could do a lot worse than this book, especially if the recipient is someone you can then borrow it from! As I said at the start, beautiful and fascinating, history as well as art.

The Road to Gondwana; in search of the lost supercontinent

Bill Morris

Exisle Publishing, Dunedin. 264 pages. RRP \$40

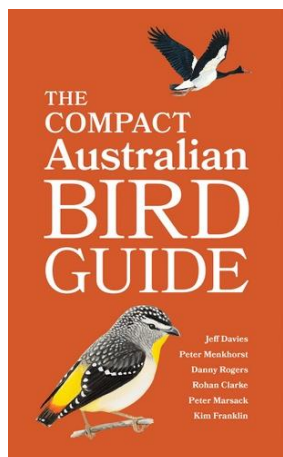


Such a title is always going to grab my attention – I am fascinated by the concept of Gondwana and all its implications for modern-day Australia, New Zealand and South America. So it appears is Bill Morris, 'writer, documentary filmmaker and musician' from New Zealand. (I am writing this in the assumption that anyone reading this will be familiar with the concept of the great southern land mass which existed for half a billion years until it started to break up about 150 million years ago.) The book follows, very readably indeed, the history of the growing understanding of Gondwana, and introduces the landscapes, plants and animals that defined it at different points in its existence. Back in the sixth century the Greek philosopher Xenophanes recognised fossil sea shells for what they were and understood that the mountains they rested on must have been under an ocean – but many a backward intellectual lapse was to come of course. Morris leads us step by intriguing step through this journey. A lot of the details and players were hitherto unfamiliar to me, which surprised me but of course that was just

hubris. The often fractious story of gradually understanding the concept of plate tectonics ('continental drift') is here, as is the search for the 'smoking gun' which took all the dinosaurs 66 million years ago. He builds a theme around the ancient seed-bearing tree *Glossopteris* whose fossils eventually appeared in all the Gondwanan lands, and as a device it works well. Robert Scott carried 16kg of stones bearing *Glossopteris* fossils on the last terrible and fatal journey across the Antarctic ice. Morris makes little secret of the fact that his main passion is plants and this helps him create pictures for us. A real strength of the book is the series of 4-6 page cameo pictures of Gondwana at different stages in its history; they are compellingly evocative. Morris really does tell a good story, and his visit to the Falklands/Malvinas to collect *Glossopteris* fossils manages in a few pages to be both history and travelogue. He ends the book with a vision of the earth as it might be 250 million years into the future, but I'll leave you to discover what that could be. I commend this book to you.

The Compact Australian Bird Guide

Jeff Davies, Peter Menkhorst, Danny Rogers, Rohan Clarke, Peter Marsack, Kim Franklin
CSIRO Publishing. 264 pages. RRP \$35



Firstly I can't believe that it's now five years since the much-anticipated CSIRO field guide to Australian birds appeared. My review at the time was glowing, despite initial hesitation as to the necessity or even wisdom of introducing a *fifth* national field guide into the market, a situation I believe to be unique in the world. Aside from an unfortunate issue with the index (resolved by the time of the next printing), there was little to criticise and plenty to like. I regard it as up there with Pizzey and Knight's *Field Guide to the Birds of Australia*, which is high praise indeed. The first time I took it into the field I was able finally to identify Russet-tailed Thrush with confidence, based on the very clear two wing bars which other guides have mysteriously overlooked! I was hooked then. I was anticipating a phone application next, but instead CSIRO have opted to follow up with this compact ('pocket') guide. Michael Morcombe launched such a version of his guide back in 2004, just four years after his unexpected (but good) full field guide was published; I gather it was fairly well received, but I'm unaware of other such endeavours since then. I'm not

sure how much appetite there is for such pocket guides, but perhaps it's a compromise between a traditional hard copy guide (which very many people still greatly appreciate) and a phone app, and in any case I'm sure that CSIRO will have done their marketing research. It's about 55% of the page size of the full guide, with less than half the number of pages. They've updated some taxonomy, and followed the original scheme of ordering the species accounts to keep together 'species most likely to be found together in the field', rather than a taxonomic order; I confess to still finding this a bit unsettling. Most of the text has gone (there are illustrations on every page, rather than just on the right), along with most information on subspecies. For that we are redirected to the full guide, so it is expected that we will have both books. I don't entirely understand it, but if you feel the need for a field guide to fit into your pocket, and are happy with identifying mostly from pictures with limited assistance from text, this is a good one. I need words too though.

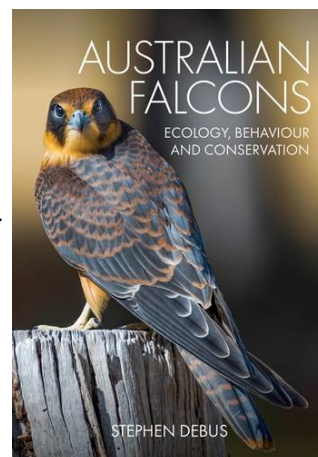
Australian Falcons; ecology, behaviour and conservation

Stephen Debus

CSIRO Publishing. 232 pages. RRP \$50

Stephen Debus is doubtless the best-known currently publishing author specialising in Australian raptors. His *Birds of Prey of Australia; a field guide* is currently in its third edition. This book however is not a field guide (after all there are only six Australian falcons, though we do get a bonus here with the inclusion of the Black-shouldered Kite as a 'falcon-like hawk'). Rather it is a compendium of the most up-to-date information on each of the species, essentially a carefully edited and condensed update of the voluminous accounts in *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds (HANZAB) Vol. 3*. That volume will soon be turning 30, so an update is not at all premature! Rather than spell out the contents of each chapter I'll leave you to imagine any aspect of a falcon's life, behaviour, ecology, diet and anything else you might want to know about and I can assure you that if it's known, it's here!

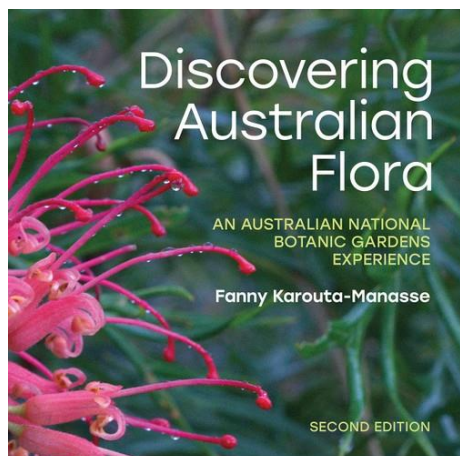
One thing I always enjoy from an author whose work I admire is when they use a preface or introduction to expose a little of their passion and its origins, as Debus does in a couple of anecdotes from his childhood and youth in the Riverina. I smiled at his obviously still-simmering annoyance at being overruled by a Primary School teacher on the identification of a dead Hobby brought into the classroom, despite young Stephen's careful reference to the relevant plate in Cayley's faithful *What Bird is That?* And I confess to being pleasantly surprised at reading that Debus has had only one more encounter with Grey Falcons than I have, for only three more birds! I feel oddly validated by that... His epilogue is sobering, an unflinching analysis of the miserable state of biodiversity conservation in Australia, our 'clearly broken' legislation and unchallenged assumptions about the best stewards of the land and the ability of birds to simply move on and start again as their habitat is destroyed. Only a few pages, but passionate and well-argued. And I can't close without drawing attention to the remarkable photos of David Whelan, of falcons in flight and interacting. This will become a minor classic to go with his earlier work on 'eagles and eagle-like birds'.



**Discovering Australian Flora; an Australian National Botanic Gardens Experience.
Second Edition.**

Fanny Karouta-Manasse

CSIRO Publishing. 126 pages. RRP \$50



This is another second edition for today's collection of reviews, appearing five years after the original (and where did those years go?!). It is some 25% longer than the first edition, partly due to extra photos (more on them soon) but mostly because of a new chapter on the Gardens' role in plant conservation, which is an underlying theme of the entire book. In particular the chapter is about the work of the National Seed Bank, whose Canberra operation is based in the Gardens. Fanny, now a Canberran, is perfectly placed for this task, as a long-time volunteer at the bank. In some ways the book is a series of photo essays, but there are also thoughtful written sections, such as on the two great Australian tree genera, the eucalypts and the acacias, on fire ecology, endemism and sclerophylly, as well as the work of the seed bank. She is no ordinary photographer, seemingly equally comfortable working with extreme microscopic

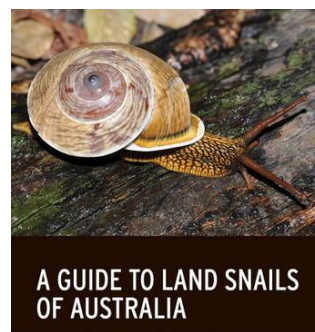
close-ups, landscapes and plant portraits with artistically hazy backgrounds. One of her microscopic seed photographs has featured in the Australian Museum's Eureka Prize. I feel privileged to have been asked to contribute a forward to the book, in which I commented that Fanny has 'the eye of artist linked to the mind of a scientist'. (She is a plant biologist with a PhD in marine ecology from Montpellier University, who went on to study seaweeds at Leiden University.) Naturally most of the photographs are of plants, but many of the gardens' animal inhabitants and visitors feature too and her eye for detail again comes to the fore as she focusses in particular on the small fauna. Alongside portraits of birds, reptiles and mammals are many beautiful butterfly shots, as well as other insect pollinators. It's a hard book to categorise. A thinking person's coffee table souvenir book perhaps? That might be the best I can do, but be aware that this is not just a souvenir for visitors – locals would benefit from it at least as much.

A Guide to Land Snails of Australia

John Stanisic, Darryl Potter and Lorelle Stanisic

CSIRO Publishing. 184 pages. RRP \$50

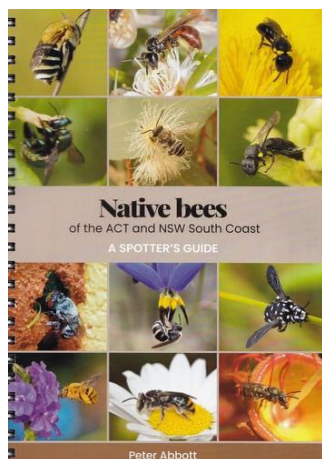
I have commented before, on several occasions in fact, on how spoilt we are in Australia in terms of the profusion and breadth of field guides on almost any animal group you can imagine (and plants of course, though those are often regional guides). And here's another one, that I suspect many of us didn't see coming! And perhaps those, on groups that most of us don't even consider most of the time, are the ones we most need. If we don't think about an animal – or a whole group of animals – we aren't going to be moved to, or even able to, do anything to protect it. (Not that I think this is the only reason to know more about animals, though it's a pretty good one – simple curiosity and enjoyment are important too.) It's unfortunate, but probably inevitable, that our only familiarity and interest in snails and slugs in Australia is in a small handful of the 47 introduced species, when there are some 2500 native species out there! All three authors are associated with the Queensland Museum, Potter having been John Stanisic's assistant and field companion for Stanisic's 26 years as Curator of Molluscs there. When it finally became possible to database the growing collection there and in the Australian Museum (Sydney) where Stanisic began his career, it was discovered that there were some 900 undescribed species in the collections! Still less than half of those have so far been described (mostly by Stanisic), and there are many more still outside the collections. This is frontier stuff, as is his work using native molluscs as 'surrogates' for other invertebrates in assessing the environmental health of a habitat. As you can probably divine, this is all new, and thus exciting, to me. As to the quality of the book as a field guide I'm in no position to judge, though I'll be trying it out. However I don't see that these authors would be capable of producing anything other than an excellent guide so I have no hesitation in commending it to you, based on what I've read and seen of it.



Native Bees of the ACT and NSW South Coast; a spotter's guide

Peter Abbott

Published by Peter Abbott. 127 pages. RRP \$40

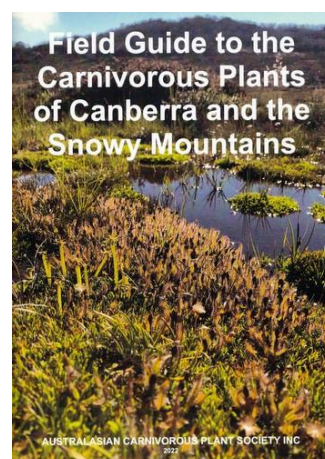


Native Bees seem to have come into vogue lately, and this is not the first book about them in recent years. However it is, I am sure, the first field guide to the bees of our region. Peter Abbott has focussed on this long-term interest in his retirement (not the first author in this collection that this applies to). His avowed aim is to encourage people to get to know the native bees better, and thus to help protect them and their habitats. A simple layperson-friendly introduction to bees and how to find and study them is a useful start for beginners like me. It is followed by a basic but seemingly helpful photographic key to the families to point us in the right direction before entering the main body of the field guide. This comprises 80 pages of excellent photos (by the author and many others) and good clear descriptions of species, and in some cases species-groups where precise identification isn't readily available by simple observation. The inclusion of a simple silhouette to indicate the size (both male and female) is a good idea. It ends with yet more useful information on bee-friendly gardens, how to contribute your observations as 'citizen scientist', further reading and a list of the 170+ species recorded in the region over the past six years. An excellent little publication.

Field Guide to the Carnivorous Plants of Canberra and the Snowy Mountains

Australian Carnivorous Plant Society. 23 pages. RRP \$10

I have to say that this is the smallest field guide that I've ever met. It contains just seven species (five sundews and two bladderworts, though one of those has two subspecies). Each gets a two-page spread comprising a full-page photo facing fairly comprehensive text and a map of selected records. One nice touch is a selected site where the species is guaranteed, with coordinates to enter into your phone. Not much more to say really, but if carnivorous plants are your thing – and I know that a lot of people are understandably fascinated by them – you should have a look.



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...

In 2018 he was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia for 'services to conservation and the environment'

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 at the National Botanic Gardens.

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