

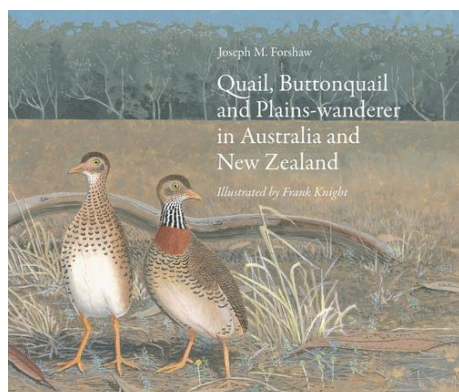
## Some Recent Natural History Publications #32 August 2023

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### **Quail, Buttonquail and Plains-wanderer in Australia and New Zealand**

Joseph M Forshaw, illustrated by Frank Knight.

Published by CSIRO Publishing. 200 pages. RRP \$170



'Forshaw and Knight' on the cover of any book is its guarantee of quality. Forshaw is one of the *éminences grises* of Australian ornithology, and a world expert on parrots. He has worked as a CSIRO wildlife biologist and as senior environmental officer with the (then) Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service. He is currently a research associate at the Australian Museum. While he is best known for his parrot work he has also published authoritatively on pigeons and doves, grassfinches, turacos and kingfishers and allies. Most of these books are an interesting combination of quality scientific reference and highly collectible coffee table books, with appropriate price tags. It's something of a niche market which he has, if not quite invented, then at least fashioned to suit. It does mean that the

information contained is not readily available to all, but if you don't strictly need to own the artwork, then the information is available through libraries and perhaps on line. Which of course brings us to the artwork. It is probably no coincidence that most of the groups hitherto featured in Forshaw's books have been colourful and charismatic, and matched by his choice of artist. Until the latter's death in 2015, Forshaw produced most of his work with renowned Australian wildlife artist William Cooper. Knight is an obvious choice as Cooper's successor, though he is best known as Australia's most prolific field guide illustrator, being responsible for the excellent illustrations in our premier field guides to frogs, mammals and (at least until recently) birds. I say 'though' in that sentence because the artwork for Forshaw's books must really be 'art' as well as accurate illustrations; Knight manages that admirably with a large portrait of each species, as well as field guide illustrations of both sexes, juveniles and chicks as appropriate. Well that's a lot about the author and artist, but not much about the book itself – except that actually it probably is. If you're even potentially interested in this book you'll already know something about the subject matter, and now you know too that the birds are covered thoroughly and with scientific depth and precision, and their illustrations are worth lingering over. A purist might raise an eyebrow at the choice of lumping four different Families (and two Orders) of birds in the book, but over the decades they have all been confused and presumed to be closely related, to varying degrees, so it makes sense to consider them together, while clarifying their distinctions. Two species included are exotic, both being New World quails (a separate family), while natives comprise six Old World quails (including an extinct New Zealand species), seven buttonquails and the almost mythically elusive Plains Wanderer. All are here considered in exhaustive detail, with reference to presumably all relevant recent work. Tables abound – in the case of Stubble Quail those analysing diet cover pages! I won't list all the subject headings used for each species, but I can say with some confidence that whatever your area of interest with regard to these birds, it is covered here. I found the General Notes, which are really historical notes, to be of particular interest. As for the big question as to whether the Buff-breasted Buttonquail really still exists, well you won't find the answer here, but you'll certainly all the other information about it you could want, to go and seek the answer yourself!

### **Guide to Native Orchids of Victoria.**

Gary N Backhouse

CSIRO Publishing. 328 pages. RRP \$50

Gary Backhouse is not making his debut to this review series with this book – early last year I had the pleasure of reviewing his collaboration with Lachlan Copeland in the excellent *Guide to Native Orchids of NSW and the ACT*. Nor is this his first contribution to demystifying Victorian orchids; I have on my shelf a good solid 1995 hardback copy of *The Orchids of Victoria* co-authored with Jeffrey Jeanes, and it has accompanied me every time I've travelled in Victoria. He is also the author of an impressive tome on every species of Australian caladenias (the finger and spider orchids). (And while not especially germane to this review, I love it that he lays claim to having photographed more than 5000 species of wild orchid around the world – the places he must have been to in order to achieve that!) The current book however is soft-



GUIDE TO NATIVE ORCHIDS  
OF VICTORIA

GARY N. BACKHOUSE

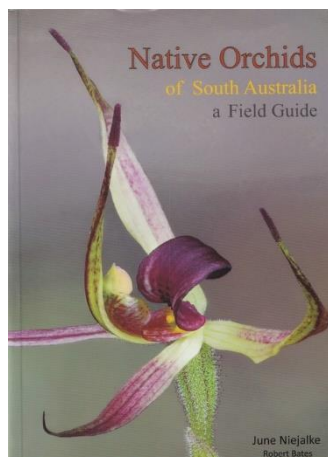


covered and very much a modern field guide. It follows the style and layout developed for the NSW and ACT guide (also a CSIRO production), which is a good basis for a field guide in my opinion. He covers the 447 known species of Victorian orchids, including some that have not yet been formally named. Each comes with a (very good) photo, or occasionally two where warranted, such as to display the plant form, plus a clear and succinct description eminently accessible to the lay reader, flowering time and a helpful and interesting few lines of Notes, which can involve a bit of conservation status and history, ecology and, importantly, which species not to confuse it with and how not to do so. I'll be putting the book (or me) to the test a couple of times this spring, even if only briefly. I look forward to the test, and have no doubts about the book at least.

### ***Native Orchids of South Australia; a field guide***

June Niejalke, Robert Bates

Self published (see end of review). 417 pages. RRP \$60



I've just acquired this splendid field guide in time for an imminent trip to South Australia, so haven't yet had time to field test it yet, but I think I know enough about orchids and their field guides to judge one, and this one is up with the best. I'm sure you'll agree that these days in Australia that's saying a lot, as the bar has been set high by publications like (but by no means limited to) the one above. What do I want in an orchid field guide (or just about any other, come to that)? In no particular order, but as a minimum, I want good clear photographs that show as many angles of the flower as are useful plus significant intra-species variation, if any, and whole plant and/or foliage where relevant; I also need a clear description of relevant details, with comparison with similar species, habitat and flowering time, plus a useful distribution map. This guide gets a tick for each of these. Niejalke also includes a dot point list of Distinguishing Features, which looks very useful as a mental check list. She can achieve all this at a species per page by the use of larger than usual pages

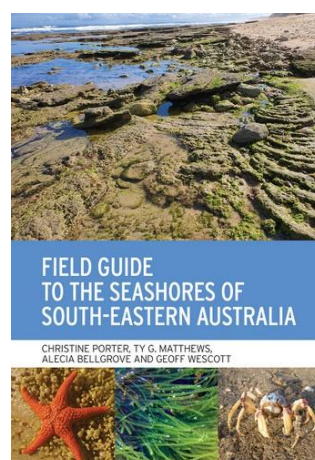
which are 70% of the area of an A4 page, compared with the 'standard' field guide size which is an A5, half the size of an A4. The photos are superb, and I notice that she has given talks on her technique of 'stacking' photos to achieve the sharpness which she requires. (There is an online video which you can find if you want to learn how to do it yourself. I know my limits.) If you're somewhere as orchidly obsessed as I am, and are likely to be visiting the state in the middle of Australia, you want this book. To obtain it, here are the directions. <https://nossa.org.au/about-us/native-orchids-of-south-australia-a-field-guide/> I have noticed in the past that orchid associations tend not to be into online shopping in the usual direct way, so it's a slightly involved process, but only slightly and it's well worth the minimal effort.

### ***Field Guide to the Seashores of South-Eastern Australia***

Christine Porter, Ty G Matthews, Alecia Bellgrove, Geoff Westcott

CSIRO Publishing. 228 pages. RRP \$40

This excellent-looking field guide (it's winter and I've not had the opportunity to try it out yet) has quite a history. It's the pinnacle (so far anyway) of a series which began modestly in 1980 as a self-published black and white pocket book guide to rocky shores only. That was followed by editions guided by the Victorian National Parks Association, leading to this enlarged and comprehensive full colour guide to all seashores from the Hawkesbury River mouth to Port Lincoln, including Tasmania, and published by CSIRO. The authors are mostly Deakin University academics, placing them right in the middle of the geographical coverage of the book. My knowledge of plants and animals, such as it is, doesn't reach much below the high tide mark, so I'm not the best judge I suppose, but it looks very good indeed. There are three major sections in the book, beginning with a chapter on plants of the intertidal zone, covering a range of Classes and even Phyla. Then there is one on animals of the rocky, or 'hard' shores, and another on those of sandy or muddy, ie 'soft', shores. Two hundred and forty species are thus covered, in enough detail to enable identification to species level in most cases (though not for all the plants and worms, for instance), and for those not covered, it should be possible to identify a close relation. Each entry gets a whole page, with one or more good photos, and information on appearance, plus habitat and ecology. Shellfish, starfish, crabs, worms, sponges, sand hoppers and sea slaters all get a turn in the spotlight. Towards the end even beach visitors

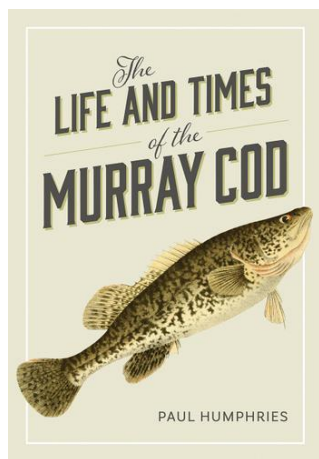


such as wolf spiders, rove beetles and millipedes get a mention. Finally there are a few pages of photos of egg masses and cases that you might come across, along with various jellyfish and cuttlebones which may have washed ashore. Something for nearly everyone in fact. I think this book should accompany you to the beach this summer; I'll be taking mine!

### ***The Life and Times of the Murray Cod***

Paul Humphries

CSIRO Publishing. 256 pages. RRP \$60



I've always been intrigued by the mighty Murray Cod, a fish of the Murray Darling system which can live to over 50 years and grow to a huge size. I don't fish, this animal has always intrigued me for its stories, and its place in this wonderful but abused river system. Paul Humphries is team leader of the river ecology group at Charles Sturt University; clearly he is highly qualified to write this book, but equally he is a beautiful writer. In the introduction he comments "Part of the reason that the Murray Cod defies simple explanation and description is because it is larger than itself.". He's not being clever for its own sake, he goes on to explain that it's also a 'symbol of Australia'. I wish I had space here to quote the rest of that paragraph, but he goes on to say that it is 'synonymous with slow-flowing meandering rivers' in arid landscapes, among other perceptive comments. Humphries is extremely respectful of First Nations people and their part of the cod story is emphasised. There is a Foreword by Yorta Yorta and Durooa woman Minda W Murray, where she talks about Christmas in the Barma

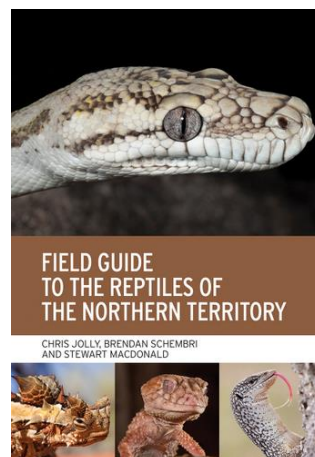
forest where her father spent his time fishing for cod, a 'seemingly religious' practice for him and her uncles and aunts. She was later an undergraduate student of Humphries. There is a chapter on our knowledge of First Nation people's relationship with the cod. I was fascinated by the revelation that they apparently used hooks long before European settlers introduced them, made from mulga wood, kangaroo teeth or fish bones. Humphries explores the evolution of the Murray Cod family and of its genus, and its environment. His section on biology ends with an intriguing investigation of the famed Walgett cod, purportedly caught in 1902, 1.8 metres long and weighing 113kg. The unravelling of this story is both illuminating and amusing. The section entitled *People and Murray Cod* starts with the chapter already mentioned on Indigenous relations with the cod, co-authored with Minda Murray. Two chapters on the European experience focus on explorers and discovery of the cod, and its introduction to western science. A history of fisheries follows, including commercial fishing, and the book concludes with the plight of the cod and its conservation (or lack of it), though he makes the point that attitudes are changing for the better. Nonetheless the problems facing those who would begin to restore its numbers are serious indeed. Humphries concludes with his very well-crafted and -argued 'guiding principles' for cod conservation. What a pity the wonderful fish's future is the hands of politicians, not scientists such as Paul Humphries.

### ***Field Guide to the Reptiles of the Northern Territory***

Chris Jolly, Brendan Schembri, Stewart Macdonald

CSIRO Publishing. 424 pages. RRP \$50

This is truly the age of the field guide! If you have much to do with the reptiles of the Northern Territory, and want or need an up-to-date field guide specific to the territory, then in your shoes I wouldn't be waiting for a better option to come along. As the foreword points out, the Northern Territory covers some 20% of the continent, despite having only 1% of the human population. It is then unsurprising that it has nearly 400 species of reptiles, and this guide covers all of them. This was never going to be as relatively straightforward as a bird guide for instance. Many reptiles, including many of the skinks, require handling and counting scales or other tricky measures to differentiate similar species. Such strategies are not available to most of us, perhaps especially when snakes are involved! However the well-constructed keys to genera, and then to species within each genus, mean that the book will be of great value to field researchers who are handling live animals or specimens. This doesn't mean though that it won't also be of use to the rest of us. In most situations it will allow us to get down to a couple of species or so, which is really enough for most of us. It's the same situation that applies to field guides for

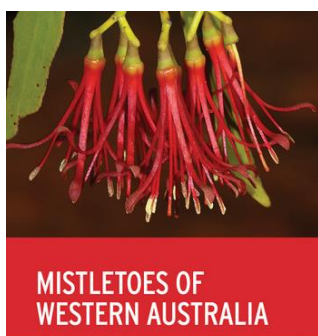


dragonflies or even butterflies for instance. A combination of dot-based distribution maps, the descriptions and of course the photos will go a long way towards identifying our animal in the field or from our own photograph. Indeed, while some reptiles are notoriously variable, the guide responds by offering multiple photos per species when required. I'm looking at the page with the White-bellied Mangrove Snake with four photos, of individuals ranging from black and white to yellow to red with white stripes! Only you can know if you need or want such a guide; my job is to tell you that if do, this book is likely to give you satisfaction.

### **Mistletoes of Western Australia.**

Tony Start and Kevin Thiele

CSIRO Publishing. 152 pages. RRP \$60



This is somewhat esoteric book for a Canberra-based review series, but mistletoes fascinate me, and I'm half Western Australian, so I couldn't ignore it. The authors are or were closely associated with the Western Australian Herbarium, Thiele heading it up for many years. There are over 40 introductory pages, with lots of good information. Though much of it has been well-covered in *Mistletoes of Southern Australia* by David Watson (reviewed in number 15 of this series, back in 2011), there is new information here, and of course the geographical coverage is different. The hoary old story about mistletoe leaves mimicking their host to hide from possums is still heard from time to time, and I was glad to read a thorough debunking of it here. The bulk of the book deals with the 32 species of WA mistletoes, with a generous two page spread for each, including some very handsome full page photos. Otherwise nearly every species has up to three photos, covering fruit, foliage and flowers. The Atlas of Living Australia has revolutionised the preparation of distribution maps for field guides, and I assume that maps here are from that source; I couldn't find that information. The expected topics are all covered for each species, including distinguishing it from similar species, and conservation status, plus hosts (of course), threats and useful Notes. If this topic falls in your ambit of interest, this book's for you.

*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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