

## Some Recent Natural History Publications #33 April 2024

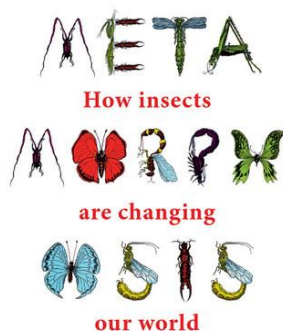
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### ***Metamorphosis; how insects are changing our world***

Erica McAlister with Adrian Washbourne.

Published by CSIRO Publishing and Natural History Museum. 216 pages. RRP \$35

'McAlister ... is erudite, irresistible' Nature



Erica McAlister with Adrian Washbourne

Whenever I see Erica McAlister's name on a book cover I am always anxious to get started on it. I have reviewed two books on flies of hers in this series (see here <https://botanicalbookshop.com.au/pages/ian-fraser-book-reviews> numbers 25 and 29). Both of them are among my favourites in the hundreds of books I've reviewed over the years – and if you think this makes me a weirdo, well I don't have much to offer in my defence except that I can't help loving a book that makes me laugh while teaching me lots of things I didn't know but am glad to have learnt. She is senior curator of Diptera and Siphonaptera (ie flies and fleas) at the London Natural History Museum. Washbourne is a lot harder to identify, and unfortunately the book doesn't help us at all! However I've finally established that he's an award-winning producer for BBC radio and, probably more relevantly here, an award-winning science writer. Together they have produced a most interesting and readable book. Her two books on flies delve into fascinating facts about various flies (and sometimes about us too, such as

maggot-containing Sardinian cheese) – and who knew there could be two books in that?! This book however takes a different tack. The authors introduce Amazing Insects – one for each of ten chapters – and discuss how these insect superpowers are being pirated by humans for their own, mostly utterly admirable, purposes. Some examples are the ability of a flea to jump 60 times its own height, and survive a force of 140g (the force of gravity) – anything over 5g is dangerously uncomfortable for us, 16g is fatal. Moreover they can repeat the feat thousands of times without tiring. While there is much about the process we still don't understand, the principles involved have led to the development of tiny robots for sensing and surveillance, such as assisting in search and rescue through disaster rubble.

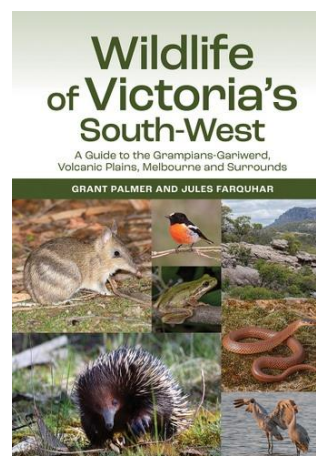
The Namib Desert in Namibia is one of the harshest places on earth, with very little vegetation and an average rainfall of 15mm a year, and sometimes none at all, and temperatures of up to 45°C. Here live beetles which do handstands in the fogs which roll in from the Atlantic, and harvest moisture using grooves along their backs to guide the water to their mouths. In this way they can harvest up to 30% of their body weight of water in a night! Other desert beetles elsewhere have developed similar strategies, but with different structures. These remarkable tricks have inspired industrial-scale fog-harvesting structures to gather and store water in places where rainfall is sparse (and of course declining). I'd love to share all the stories but that would be spoiling the surprises for you. And there's more. Each chapter includes lots of truly fascinating material on the history of the discoveries and some remarkable people (not all men) who made them, and others who could see the potential there for imaginative adaptations of these marvels. I love a good story, and enjoyed this book for that alone. And for that alone – though not only that – this book is worth its purchase price and more.

### ***Wildlife of Victoria's South-west; a photographic guide to the mammals, birds and frogs of the region***

Grant Palmer and Jules Farquhar.

Published by CSIRO Publishing. 416 pages. RRP \$50

There's been an interesting rise in the frequency of this type of across-the-board field guide of late – I understand there's even one planned for the ACT (not by me!). I think it makes sense for the nature-oriented traveller in particular, and if done well can obviate the need for a box of field guides in the vehicle, though there are some – and this time, yes me – who will never be able to leave them behind. There is already such a guide for the box-ironbark lands of Victoria (which are partly included in today's book) and very recently indeed one which covers the whole state. However this review is about the merits of the this book, and it is a very good one. The area covered defines the south-west in terms of the IRBA, a national scheme of identifying bioregions, and stretches from east of Melbourne to the South Australian border. Curiously it omits the Otway coast and much of the Great Ocean Road, but this is explained by the existence of a complementary volume by one of the authors (Palmer). He has researched the

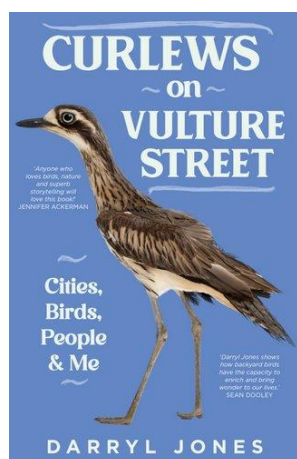


wildlife of the south-west for 25 years from Federation University in Ballarat. Farquhar is a herpetologist based at Monash University. It is an impressive guide in its scope and also, surprisingly so for a field guide, its depth. It covers every species of bird, mammal, reptile and frog in the region, and each is allotted a (good, though small) photo, a map based on Atlas of Living Australia records, description, range and status, habitat, ecology (perhaps the most impressive contribution and one which highlights the authors' credentials) and a list of locations for it. But wait, there's more! The first 88 pages discuss the animal groups, then introduce nearly 20 habitat types, with maps and photographs, and conservation and management (which includes key biodiversity areas and threatened species). The final chapter, which I'll be drawing on next time I'm in Victoria, introduces 19 'key wildlife viewing spots' (this includes national parks, so not just 'spots' in the literal sense). This information is practical and clearly written by authors who know the places well. If you're likely to be spending any time in this part of the world, this book would certainly improve your experience of it.

### ***Curlwews on Vulture Street; cities, birds, people and me***

Darryl Jones.

Published by NewSouth Publishing. 322 pages. RRP \$33



Recently I was in North Sydney (by which I mean the cluttered just-across-the-bridge North Sydney, not the leafy and affluent North Shore). While walking along busy Walker Street, lined with shops and houses, I was more than astonished to see a Brush-turkey chick scuttling along the footpath and through the gaps in a metal gate into someone's small garden. And that is essentially what this totally captivating book is all about – apart from the last word of the subtitle which modestly mentions that it's also an autobiography. I was predisposed to like it, having first been enthralled by Jones' unravelling of the totally unexpected nature of Brush-turkeys' breeding strategy many years ago, then meeting him briefly at a 'bird week' on Fraser Island where I was playing an extremely minor role and he a much more central one. He was not only erudite but generous and very amiable. However I somehow missed this book when it came out a year or so back and perhaps I wasn't the only one, hence this slightly delayed review. Jones is not only a very good research scientist, but in the course of this book he also emerges as an excellent teacher and a natural story teller. He's also someone whose story deserves to be told, as he's had a significant impact on the way we understand and appreciate the urban birds we live with. This is probably particularly true in his (now) native Brisbane, but the impact of his work is felt much more widely, even by those who haven't heard his name.

As I sit down to write this I am struck by how cleverly Jones has merged the themes of his own life with the series of studies undertaken by his post-graduate students with his guidance and support. It opens with a very amusingly narrated scene in a Brisbane police station where he was being interviewed following a very sudden car stop to allow a Stone Curlew to escort her chicks across busy Vulture Street. From there the story flows into a Riverina childhood of discovering and becoming fascinated by birds, a stuttering start at New England University, a sudden year at an agricultural research station in the Sudan (!), the beginning of his affair with Brush-turkeys (almost derailed by an old-school professor who refused to accept his observations because they didn't match the untested conventional wisdom). An Honours thesis on urban birds back in Wagga Wagga and the PhD – on Brush-turkeys of course. All of this is interesting, often fun, and self-deprecating. From there the story is of the birds that inhabit cities (Brisbane specifically), the people who interact with them, and the process of understanding both so that both can coexist. I found it all fascinating, often amusing, written with a light touch but always guided by the science. His (and his students') magpie work has informed management of 'problem' magpies, though perhaps not always as much as it could and should have. Lovely studies follow, on Torresian Crows, Rainbow Lorikeets, the politics, psychology and ecology of feeding urban birds (which also became the subject of two other book by Jones) and of course White Ibis.

Reading this book is as far from being a chore as you could imagine. I read it in two days sitting under a big shady Kurrajong tree in our camp in a national park, when the day got too hot to profitably chase birds. I hated finishing it, which is perhaps the ultimate accolade of any book. Do yourself a favour.

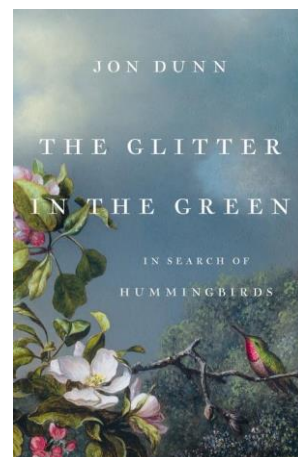
## *The Glitter in the Green; in search of hummingbirds*

Jon Dunn.

Published by Hacette Book. 315 pages. RRP \$44\*

\*(cheaper options available in Australia)

I was lent this book by someone who knows (and shares) my passion for hummingbirds; it's a couple of years since it was published and again I'm probably not the only one to have missed it at the time, so I think a late review is much better than none! Dunn comes across (with no suggestion of self-promotion from him) as an interesting character, who grew up in a very insular south-west England childhood, happiest outside and to whom a day bus-trip to London was a very rare and unsettling event. The highlight there was a visit to the Natural History Museum (at his age I'd have probably wondered where else you'd *want* to go!) and the discovery of a case of shining hummingbird skins. (Now he lives at the furthest end of Britain in a croft – a farmlet – on the Shetlands. Obviously a story there but not one for this book.) Eventually this book grew from that museum case encounter, which 'had sown a seed that had, in time, flourished into a consuming hunger'. It was some 20 years later when Dunn, now a 'natural history writer, photographer and wildlife tour leader' finally saw his first hummingbird, in the US. The book is about a grand quest to see hummingbirds throughout their range, from Alaska to the other end of the world in Argentina's Tierra del Fuego. This is a very well-crafted book; a gripping and informative travelogue of the Americas, including some pretty tricky (though never over-dramatised) situations. In Colombia a guide was murdered in front of his clients just kilometres from where Dunn and his guides were. In Bolivia he had to flee the country in the face of violent widespread protests against a dodgy presidential election result and threats to take foreign hostages as human shields. (My times in Latin America had their moments, but relatively I was very lucky in my timing.) Mostly though the travelogue involves great experiences and generous helpful local guides and others. But the book is something else too. It weaves throughout the pages the story of humans and hummers, which of course is rarely beneficial to the birds. It starts with traditional uses of dead birds as talismans and aphrodisiacs (practices which apparently still continue) and spirals into mass slaughter of hummers by Europeans, sometimes for science but mostly for gratification of the wealthy. The epitome of this lay in the dark days – decades – of the feather trade. We know the bloody story of egret plumes, but the role of hummingbirds in it is equally grotesque. In addition to the use of the tiny feathers in displays on hats and other clothing, whole birds were attached to hats, and heads to ear-rings or brooches. One Parisian milliner was reported as using 40,000 hummingbirds each season. But enough. We need to know, but sometimes knowledge can be too much. And of course there are uplifting contemporary stories, of conservation and study. Like most good stories, it's not always easy reading (well it can't be where humans and nature are concerned) but overall it's an excellent and enlightening read, which I heartily recommend.



*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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