
REVIEW

A Field Guide to Personal Computers for Bird Watchers and Other Naturalists. Edward M. Mair, 198 , Phalarope Books, Distributed in Australia by Prentice-Hall of Australia Pty. Ltd. 207 pp., r.r.p. \$17.95.

Edward Mair is a small-computer systems consultant with considerable experience in training people. In 1983 he wrote an article for *Bird Watcher's Digest* on how the microcomputer might be used in the world of birding. His article was well received, generating a large amount of interest in using personal computing technology to develop new ways of storing, retrieving and exchanging ornithological information. This excellent little book expands on that topic in response to this interest.

This is a much needed work in that it provides both clear explanations of the terminology of personal computers, and a useful set of ideas of how a personal computer can be applied as another tool in the ornithologists inventory.

While both of these are obviously important I wish to stress the importance of providing ideas. Over the last few years large numbers of micro computers have become available at lower and lower prices. In spite of the low prices there has been a slow down in the number of people buying personal computers. What appeared to be happening was that people did not know what could be done with a "home" computer. Now almost the only people buying home computers are business people who can use at home the ideas and technology that they have learnt at the office. Mr Mair shows how ornithologists can also use this business technology for their own applications by providing some excellent ideas for applying micro computers to birding and nature study. Ideas! Knowledge of what you can do or what other people have done is always invaluable, and particularly so in relation to computing. This field guide provides those ideas and does it using words the average ornithologists will understand.

Mr Mair uses a novel and to my mind very effective method of introducing the many new words and concepts necessary to achieve an understanding of home computing. For someone new to the field of computing the jargon can be daunting. This is unfortunate as most of the concepts are not at all difficult. To introduce the jargon of computing Mr Mair uses the jargon of the ornithologist as analogy to make his definitions. This is usually effective. This field guide provides sufficient knowledge of the jargon to be able to understand the computer press, ask meaningful questions of micro-computer salesmen and effectively read the manuals for your computer.

Another strong point is the use of teaching by example approach. All of the techniques are very well illustrated by examples and amusingly captioned photographs. Usually we follow the adventures and projects of Harold and Sally Birdman and family in their use of a personal computer to keep lists and records, send letters, write reports and communicate with other ornithologists. It is effectively done.

One question which you must be asking yourself is "will the book become outdated?" My response is that

the book is not meant as a long term reference work due to the speed of "evolution" in the world of micro-computers. In this aspect it is not a field guide. The purpose of the book is to get you started as a computer user. Mr Mair's plan is to introduce the terms and provide ideas of what can be done. With your new found knowledge you will then be able to bring yourself up to date in the local computer press and determine which micro-computer is needed to carry out your projects. Moreover, most of the technology in each of the different sections is similar. For example, you can consider that most Data Base Management Systems are similar, some are merely better than others for specific tasks and some have more features. Once you know the kind of things that can be done it is usually a simple matter to determine how to do each task on the computer system you have or intend to buy.

The book is divided into two parts. Part one, Learning About the Personal Computer, describes general terminology with chapters entitled: Evolution and Taxonomy; Anatomy, Physiology and Topography; Behavior; and Observation and Collection. Part two, Using the Personal Computer, describes common useful applications with chapters entitled: Word Processing; Database Management; Electronic Spread Sheets; Graphics; Communications; and Bookware. Three sections of more complex material are appropriately relegated to appendices.

The only criticism I have is that Mr Mair sticks unwaveringly to the technique invariably seen in American training manuals: "Tell them what you're going to tell them; then tell them; then tell them what you've told them". I find this degree of repetition to be monotonous. However, it obviously works for some people.

This field guide is an excellent little book which I recommend to any ornithologists or naturalist who is interested in purchasing a personal computer.

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