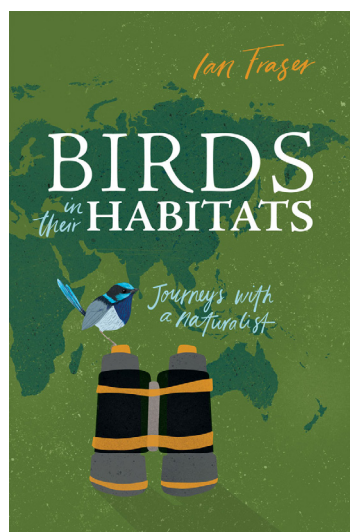


Book Review



Birds in their Habitats

Ian Fraser 2018. CSIRO Publishing, Clayton South Vic. Softcover, 240 pp, 16 colour plates. ISBN: 9781486307449. RRP \$A39.95.

Not having read any of Ian Fraser's previous books or been familiar with any of his radio appearances, I did not know what to expect when asked to review his latest book *Birds in their Habitats* – that was until I opened the book to the

Contents. What appeared were three pages on a plethora of topics ranging from morphology to habits and taxonomy, just to name a few. These were all listed under seven broad habitats (deserts, rainforests, oceans and islands, mountains, wetlands and rivers, suburbia, and woodlands and grasslands) featuring countries from around the globe. What a smorgasbord!

This book is targeted at the amateur 'birder' and general reader but not so much at the professional ornithologist, many of whom would be up-to-date with the current literature so that this publication would hold few surprises. What the author presents is a mixture of travelogue narratives, interesting twitching escapades, political comments, environmental observations, comments on specific morphological features (e.g. the alula), taxonomy (e.g. an examination of Passerines) and broader issues such as why some birds gave up 'flying'.

The author has set out to present current knowledge about birds, not as a text book but in a more interesting and unique way. He has interwoven snippets of relevant and up-to-date information on birds with a series of personal stories. This book is more akin to the transcripts of a dialogue from a series of conversations around an outback campfire. It is a bit of a ramble where, like typical bush camp talk, it bounces from topic to topic: "I remember when I was visiting"; "I was just reading some stuff the other day and did you know that?". References are added to validate most comments, but then some other important topics, such as the description and relevance of the 'Bassian Plain', lack any references – most unfortunate, as I was particularly interested in following up this topic. Some readers may find this mixture of topics and writing style, where easy-flowing narratives transform into referenced, scientific descriptions and then slip back into colloquial storytelling, a little off-putting to begin with, although I am sure they will warm to the author's style as they journey deeper into the book. The author dabbles in geology, plate tectonics and the effects of climatic change as they affect different species around the world, while wider and more complicated issues are inserted in separate grey boxes, with some extending over

several pages (e.g. El Nino and La Nina). References are presented at the end of each chapter so that readers, if they wish, can track down any extra information in which they were interested.

I found most of the anecdotes amusing and informative, but others, which mainly comprise a list of birds sighted, became rather boring, although these lists may whet the appetite of the global twitcher looking for the more elusive species. I am familiar with Australian species but I am not *au fait* with species from other countries, so being presented with a list with some or little description left me rather cold. A limited number of species were featured in a series of photographs, but to really get a grasp on the others I had to delve into the internet to fully appreciate their beauty and unique features (perhaps this was the author's purpose?). At the end of each chapter there is a list of 'leftover snippets' that did not fit in with the overall narrative of the chapter. I am not sure if these added anything special to each chapter or to the book in general, although most were quite interesting to read.

I note that the author has travelled widely across several continents, but I found it a little disconcerting when in one chapter we are in Australia, Cameroon and then Chile, whilst in another extended 'trip' we are taken from Cameroon to Queensland, then to Borneo, back to Cameroon and on to Ecuador, Peru and finally back to Australia, sometimes with no obvious specific links apart from the general chapter topic.

I think that the great selling point of this book is the colloquial style which the author has utilized to get his message across to a diverse readership. In this vein, he does not force environmental issues onto the reader, but one is left with many questions to ponder regarding the multitude of negative effects on the avian world resulting from global climatic change (particularly global warming) and the plight of many vulnerable species. I can recommend this book, as it contains lots of interesting and very relevant, up-to-date information. I am sure that both amateurs and professionals would be able to relate to the many funny, exasperating, exciting and thought-provoking experiences that the author has encountered – I certainly did.

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