

BOOK REVIEW

Wildlife of the Box-Ironbark Country

Chris Tzaros. 2005. CSIRO Publishing. 256 pp., paperback, audio CD, maps, colour photographs. RRP \$39.95. ISBN 0643069674.

The term Box-Ironbark refers to a dry-sclerophyll vegetation alliance based around species of *Eucalyptus* that have thin and flakey bark, or deep, tough highly fissured bark, respectively. In its mature state, Box-Ironbark woodland provides important habitat for many bird and mammal species because the characteristic eucalypts provide several key habitat components: dense crops of eucalypt flowers during autumn and winter, providing reliable and profuse nectar at a time when it is less readily available in other vegetation alliances; a large foliage surface area, providing extensive feeding substrate for insects and insectivorous fauna; and broad spreading canopies with flaking bark and numerous hollows, providing multiple foraging and shelter opportunities. In its pristine state, the understorey can also be floristically diverse, further adding to the resources available for wildlife.

Box-Ironbark communities occur along the inland slopes of the Great Dividing Range from southern Queensland to western Victoria. What the title of this book fails to communicate is that the book refers only to Victoria's Box-Ironbark region — a deeply indented, narrow diagonal band across central Victoria from the north-east to the mid-west. However, virtually all the species considered here occur far more widely in Box-Ironbark (and other) communities, so the book definitely has wider relevance.

It is only in relatively recent decades that the biodiversity significance of Box-Ironbark forests has been widely appreciated. In Victoria this began with the Land Conservation Council's review of Crown Land in its North Central Study Area during the late 1970s, and came to a head with a follow-up review in the late 1990s by the Environment Conservation Council (ECC). The second review culminated in the establishment of a greatly improved conservation reserve system for the Box-Ironbark region, although the author is not correct in claiming that 'only in the past decade has the region seen its first examples of national parks and dedicated conservation reserves'. In fact, of the 16 sites he has selected as being particularly fine wildlife areas, all but two had been reserved, at least in part, prior to the ECC review.

In the past, Box-Ironbark forests were heavily exploited for timber products, gold mining, and eucalypt oil production. One serious result of past management was the conversion of spreading old-growth woodlands to dense straight pole stands designed to produce power poles, fence posts, railway sleepers and fuel. This change greatly reduced the habitat value of a large proportion of Victoria's Box-Ironbark forests, and Parks Victoria is now embarking on a programme to reverse this process in some of the newly declared parks — a programme that will not be finished in our lifetimes.

The book comprises three primary sections: 1) an overview of Box-Ironbark habitats, wildlife and conservation issues, 2) species accounts

for mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians that regularly occur in these communities in Victoria, and 3) tips on finding wildlife in Box-Ironbark habitats, including recommendations and descriptions of selected sites that provide good Box-Ironbark wildlife watching.

For each species, information is presented under the following headings: Range and Status [within Victoria's Box-Ironbark region], Habitat, Habits, Locations, and Similar Species. The Habitat and Habits sections are particularly informative and provide information that is not readily available elsewhere. The author's passion for the region and its wildlife, and his detailed knowledge of it, shine from every page.

The coloured distribution maps are imaginatively presented showing locality records over-layed with Crown Land boundaries, with an inset map indicating the statewide distribution of the species. However, printing them within a column width has meant that their size presents a challenge for those of us with fading eyesight — a magnifying glass could be a useful optional extra for some. A scan of the statewide distribution maps indicates that few, if any, species are specialized to Box-Ironbark — most have broad distributions outside that zone, either in the drier inland areas or damper coastal habitats. That is, the Box-Ironbark region represents an overlap zone, partly explaining its species richness, a point conceded by the author but at variance with some statements in the Preface.

As if the information contained on the pages of this book was not adequate, a CD of sound recordings of Box-Ironbark wildlife is a delightful and instructive extra housed in a plastic envelope inside the back flap. Made by Andrew Skeoch of 'Listening Earth', the recordings are expertly interpreted by the author and perform very well as either an instructional resource for identifying calls, or as relaxing background 'music'.

This is an unusual, even ground-breaking, and ultimately highly satisfying book. Not really a field guide — because it does not provide details on how to distinguish species — and not quite a handbook, it never-the-less crams an astonishing amount of valuable information into a very manageable format. Anyone with an interest in the wildlife of the inland slopes of eastern Australia will find it very worthwhile, not least because of the high quality of the photographic portraits of every species. Unfortunately, in the key to the map showing the locations of the 16 recommended wildlife viewing sites (Pp. 184–185), the numerical codes are jumbled — but a corrected version is available from the publisher's website.

Chris Tzaros and his collaborators have produced a wonderful summary of the terrestrial vertebrate fauna of Victoria's Box-Ironbark forests, and expert advice on how to enjoy it, all beautifully presented by CSIRO Publishing. Congratulations to all concerned.

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