

Book reviews

Reflections: What Wildlife Needs and How to Provide It by Mark Avery (2023) 248 pp., Pelagic Publishing, London, UK. ISBN 978-1-78427-390-3 (pbk), GBP 20.00.

In *Reflections: What Wildlife Needs and How to Provide It*, Mark Avery writes from his perspective as a British ornithologist, conservationist and author who has dedicated his career to the study and protection of avian life. Formerly serving as the Conservation Director for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), Avery's wealth of experience and passion is evident in this book, which offers a captivating and honest critique of the way wildlife conservation is being done in the UK. Throughout the book, Avery invites readers to consider their own relationship with nature and reminds them to appreciate the wildlife around them—even if daily life, as he puts it, 'does not include coral reefs, wolves, or rainforests' (p. 33). This quote particularly resonated with me, as early on in my journey into the conservation sector I had always imagined that to encounter remarkable wildlife, I had to be abroad—but that notion turned out to be far from the truth.

The initial chapter, in line with its title, offers 'glimpses of wildlife' drawn from Avery's personal encounters. We learn about the herb-Robert plant growing by his doorstep, the hedgehogs that have disappeared from his garden, and his appreciation of the now rare pasqueflowers. As expected, the book also vividly showcases his knowledge and love of birds. This sadly includes accounts of diminishing birdlife such as the quieting of nightingales, a once a familiar presence in the woods that Avery visits frequently with his family. In the second chapter, Avery examines the state of wildlife in the UK, beginning with an outline of different wildlife monitoring schemes and how they have developed over time. This is followed by well-researched sections on topics such as species extinctions, reintroductions, the loss of ancient woodlands and the role of the farming industry. I learnt a lot reading this chapter and found Avery's analogy of the Four Horsemen of the Ecological Apocalypse to be an engaging and clever way of explaining some of the main causes behind wildlife declines. Despite all the challenges wildlife conservation is facing, the book does not fall short of showcasing success stories that filled me with hope, inspiration and the conviction that positive change is attainable. A wonderful example is Knepp Estate, an area in West Sussex once intensively farmed, but which has been devoted

to rewilding since the early 2000s. Through efforts largely based around the use of free-roaming herds of large herbivores to drive habitat regeneration, the former agricultural land has been transformed into a thriving habitat for a vast array of wildlife, including many rare species, demonstrating that positive ecological outcomes and biodiversity recovery are possible.

The concluding chapters proved to be the most educational and held particular significance for me, as I read the book specifically with the goal of learning more, especially about the importance of politics in conservation. Avery not only boldly outlines where the UK government is failing but also offers an honest critique on the work of NGOs. Although I found some of his criticisms quite harsh, such as the failure of NGOs to celebrate success, I agree that it is essential for organizations to be more politically engaged and not remain in 'comfortable mode' (p. 155) amidst a worsening wildlife crisis. Delivering on the promise in its title, the book concludes with seven practical and convincing proposals outlining what wildlife needs, and the different ways we can provide it. Here, Avery urges readers to consider which NGOs they may wish to support, and encourages them to actively engage with the chosen organizations 'as they are not just the voice of wildlife, but the voice of wildlife supporters too' (p. 183).

Reflections stands as an illuminating testament to Avery's profound commitment to wildlife conservation. Through personal encounters and well-researched insights, the book not only educates but inspires a deeper connection with the natural world. As Avery critiques the state of wildlife conservation in the UK, he prompts readers to consider the collective impact we have on wildlife. The book is a compelling read and I recommend it to all those who value nature and want to learn more.

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Move Like Water: A Story of the Sea and its Creatures by Hannah Stowe (2023) 272 pp., Granta, London, UK. ISBN 978-1-78378-859-0 (hbk), GBP 16.99.

In *Move Like Water: A Story of the Sea and its Creatures*, Hannah Stowe takes the reader on a meditative, personal journey through her childhood, teenage years and into adulthood, during which she roams from the

Pembrokeshire shores of her homeland to the Azores, Tunisia and beyond. Key events, relationships, traumas and joys are viewed through the prism of seawater and its diverse inhabitants, which provide titles for the book's chapters, ranging from the soaring albatross to deep diving sperm whales and the understated, clinging barnacle. Stowe has written a beautifully constructed—if at times slightly inconsistent—memoir, interspersing her own experiences with ecological, social and historical curiosities about ocean wildlife, the myriad threats it faces, and the urgent need for its conservation.

This book is not a page-turner, compelling the reader to rush through in one sitting (or sailing?). Stowe's evocative, highly descriptive prose is better consumed in a slower fashion, so that her vivid, heartfelt style can be appreciated. Dramatic ocean-going moments are conjured up, and Stowe's narrative is at its strongest when painting pictures of starlit, wave-tossed nights on the deck of her sailboat, or of a thrilling encounter with a breaching humpback whale. She also delicately weaves her personal story into anecdotes about the lives of marine animals, creating genuinely moving moments—for instance in the Sperm Whale chapter, which starts with childhood searches for ambergris on the beach, before exploring the fascinating matrilineal structure of sperm whale family groups, and tying this back to the nurturing and inspiration that she derived from her own grandmother and mother.

Stowe is also candid about the mental and physical health struggles that have prematurely dogged her life. A violent fall from a surfboard results in a crippling back injury, which is followed by addiction to powerful painkillers, and a near-complete loss of independence, leaving her future as a sailor and marine conservationist in major doubt. Stowe's description of these agonies and her stubborn perseverance in overcoming them and returning to the sea is painful and moving to witness.

There are moments in *Move Like Water* when the richly descriptive prose becomes perhaps too weighty, which to some readers may feel like a loss of momentum—although this could equally be treated as an opportunity to slow down, pause and reflect, rather than rush onwards. Certain sections switch abruptly between such vivid language and a more didactic, informative style that Stowe adopts to explain an ecological or environmental point related to one of her focal species. At times these differing tones feel like sudden changes of tack rather than seamless transitions, and

the textbook-like sections seem comparatively bland alongside the luxurious tracts of descriptive writing. In this regard, perhaps Stowe has tried to do too much with some of her ocean-dwelling characters, unable to achieve the same richness and depth in her discussions of ecology and conservation as she does in her flowing best elsewhere. Thus, although *Move Like Water* has many triumphant and touching moments, these peaks are not evenly sustained.

Nonetheless, this book is undoubtedly ‘an ocean to hold in your hands’ as the author puts it (p. 230), and is to be recommended for anyone with an appreciation of skilfully crafted nature writing and for those who love being on, beside or beneath the sea. Stowe leaves the reader with newfound wonder at familiar and unfamiliar marine creatures, taking us through her own euphoric highs and crushing lows along the way, and calling fervently for action to undo the damage we have inflicted on the ocean and its wildlife. As the book draws to a close, the final companion creature is the aforementioned barnacle, and Stowe concludes back in her native Pembrokeshire, heartachingly once again confined to land through a recurrence of her back injury. Nonetheless, she remains determined to pursue a life dedicated to studying and writing about the ocean. Given this appears to be Stowe’s first book, there is doubtless more beautiful and evocative nature writing to look forward to.

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Platypus Matters: The Extraordinary Story of Australian Mammals by Jack Ashby (2022) 400 pp., The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, USA. ISBN 978-0-226-78925-5 (hbk), USD 29.00.

When *Platypus Matters* was offered for review, I was intrigued: I love reading non-fiction but would a solid account of Australia’s mammals be able to maintain momentum—and hold my attention—for over 300 pages? Having finished the book, I can say that the answer to this question is a resounding yes.

When I was a child, my dad (a plant biochemist who frequently travelled far and wide for his work) ventured to Australia and returned after a few weeks away with two

carefully selected mementos for his animal-obsessed daughter: an amiable, rotund furry wombat and a tiny, velvet platypus, both sparking my fascination for the captivating creatures down-under. Fast forward a quarter of a century and my work as a marine conservationist in the Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean allows much less time than I would like to contemplate the biodiversity of Australia.

Platypus Matters turned out to be the perfect way to change this and rekindle my fascination with Australian mammals, a topic covered in breadth and depth, and with infectious enthusiasm, by Jack Ashby. The book provides an engaging account of Australia’s dynamic mammal life and the pathway of evolution that has shaped the ‘platypup’ (p. 35) and ‘wombatlet’ (p. 36) we see today. Woven between accounts of the trials, tribulations and wonders of modern-day ecological fieldwork are exceptional details of monotremes (egg laying mammals), marsupials and placental mammals. The author lays out our progress through history towards understanding the unique taxonomy, traits and reproductive nuances of these endearing and complex creatures, and unravels the egotistical beliefs that placental mammals—to which we humans belong—are more highly evolved and thus somehow superior to monotremes and marsupials.

Some of the species covered, such as kangaroos and koalas, are iconic symbols of Australian biodiversity and culture, and are as widely known today as they were to my eight-year-old self. Others are more cryptic and less commonly talked of; I enjoyed marvelling at the potoroos, honey possums, orange leaf-nosed bats, bettongs, kultarrs, quolls and dunnarts, and I truly appreciate this book for having brought them to my attention. All of these mammals are frequently described with labels such as ‘primitive’, ‘weird’, or even ‘dangerous’; Ashby suggests this needless othering can be insidiously harmful to their protection and conservation, and provokes self-reflection on the words we use or associate with certain animals. The author’s conviction on this topic and the personal affront these labels cause are evident throughout the text, as is his passion as he meticulously and eloquently describes how these species are anything but inferior.

At the time of writing, Ashby is the Assistant Director of the University Museum of Zoology in Cambridge, UK, and the book unravels the extractive ways in which European explorers hunted for knowledge

on and artefacts of Australian natural history, uncovering the colonial origins of many museum collections that persist to this day. Importantly, there is a deeper narrative of the colonial exploitation and marginalization of the Indigenous Aboriginal people who knew this land and lived amongst its rich assembly of species for thousands of years before Europeans reached Australasia. The book rightly credits the Aboriginal wisdom that led to the description of many creatures unique to this continent. It highlights how this knowledge was often disregarded and ignored by Europeans, leading to delays in the progress of scientific knowledge and taxonomic advancement. Beyond the scientific discoveries, we are reminded of the sinister implications of these explorations and settlements, for all Australian life.

I thoroughly enjoyed Ashby’s writing: it is well-researched but easy going (even through some of the more serious themes) and moves at a good pace; I learnt a lot without feeling bogged down by textbook-like, science-heavy pages. The pictures included of Australian fauna are marvellous, although a map or two alongside the photos would have been useful to visualize the various Australian states and islands, species populations and climatic regions described. I was repeatedly struck by the diversity of the mammals that have engineered the Australian ecosystem over thousands of years, many of which are little known but are silently and rapidly being lost to extinction. I mourned the recent loss of the thylacine and pig-footed bandicoot, and regretted not paying closer attention to the devastating declines of these mammals, with impacts from climate change, invasive species (some introduced deliberately by colonial settlers) and hunting all playing their part.

I am left wanting to read more on the plight of the Aboriginal people and the mammals that have lived alongside them for millennia, and some books to guide further exploration of these topics are recommended in the text. *Platypus Matters* is a stark reminder of the complex natural and cultural history of Australia, the sinister impacts of colonial European exploration and settlement, and the urgency of threats of extinction, but also—and most prominently—a positive account of the wonderful biodiversity that is still left to fight for.

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