

Book reviews

The Mammal Species of the World

James Honacki *et al.* (Editors)
Allen Press Inc./Ass. Syst. Collections,
1982, \$55.00

This checklist was compiled for the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) to provide a standard reference to mammalian nomenclature. Unfortunately, since hardly anyone present at the meeting of the Parties has any real understanding of the problems of nomenclature and systematics, it is probably an impossibility to produce a standardised taxonomy which will be universally accepted. The present volume was compiled by some 140 contributors, many of whom are not practising taxonomists, while many acknowledged experts were not consulted. Since taxonomies reflect the opinions of taxonomists, and few taxonomists are familiar with the workings of CITES, it is difficult to see how a 'standardised' nomenclature will be either acceptable to the scientific community or useful to CITES.

I find it difficult to assess what benefits will accrue from using the present work instead of Corbet and Hill's *World List of Mammalian Species*, which is much simpler, more widely available, and already published—thereby saving a lot of effort and expense. Much of the effort involved in producing this mighty force is certainly wasted. For example CITES does not require a standardised taxonomy for *Pitymys* (pine voles) and by the time it does (if ever) this one will certainly be out of date. CITES does not need the detail given—such as type locality and 20 figure 'ISIS' numbers—quite what ISIS numbers are is not fully explained anywhere.

However, despite numerous reservations, this volume will certainly be very useful to libraries, museums and other institutions.

John A. Burton

The River Wolf

Keith and Liz Laidler
Allen and Unwin, 1983, £8.95

The giant otter, *Pteronura brasiliensis*, is as dramatic as it is intriguing. The largest surviving

otters, these South American 'river wolves' may measure seven feet in length, will charge an inquisitive human paddling a frail canoe and emphasise their irritation by a gaping threat which exposes a violently red mouth. What is more, the giant otter is highly social and endangered (a single pelt may fetch US\$500). Why the giant otters travel in groups is unknown and it was to study this and other questions, and to contribute to their conservation, that Keith and Liz Laidler spent more than a year, largely afloat, in Guyana. *The River Wolf* is the story of their expedition, from its inception in a London pub, through Keith's attempt to film the otters and Liz's to study them.

It is, I believe, an important task for biologists to package their findings in a way that is palatable to a wide readership and these authors have clearly sought to do this. One can read the book at two levels, on the one hand following the authors' adventures, on the other gleaning fragments of giant otter biology. There are some interesting observations in the book, disclosed particularly as the Laidlers follow one group whose patriarch is known as Spotted Dick in reference to the pattern of dots on his throat. The otters lived in family groups occupying home ranges within which they fished on a rotational basis, visiting given areas every two weeks or so. Home ranges of neighbouring groups overlapped widely, but each probably maintained an exclusive core area. Groups seemed to avoid each other and this avoidance may have been maintained through the use of riverside latrine sites. The authors' intensive observations were rewarded with the intriguing discovery that, as Spotted Dick's two offspring matured, their group was doggedly followed by a singleton otter, presumably a suitor to either the male or female adolescent.

Although the otters, Guyana, the enquiry and the adventure are all potentially enthralling I found the book difficult to read, partly due to poor continuity and partly to an enforced jollity of style. Some of the direct speech is irksomely improbable and, for example, I found it jarring that no more lucid a simile could be conjured to describe an otter's sighing vocalisation than that it was like a 'pissed-off human'. There were, however, some pleasing quips such as the conclusion that the lack of scent marking by juvenile otters was a case of children being seen but not smelt.

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Some readers might have welcomed a more comprehensive discussion summarising the biology and, particularly, the conservation of the giant otter. At the outset of this book the general reader was told that part of the aim was to produce a conservation plan, but in the end the link between the authors' findings and a conservation was only mentioned in the most general terms. Perhaps this is all that the authors wished to convey in this book and their detailed recommendations will appear in specialised reports, but to the extent that this good yarn could have been a vehicle for more complicated ideas the opportunity may not have been fully grasped.

Anybody with an interest in otters will be fascinated by these 'river wolves'. The Laidlers' expedition was to an exciting region and clearly they are a remarkable team. This is emphasised by little disclosures in the text, such as the time when they were attacked by muggers who would doubtless have been surprised to find not only that Keith was a karate brown belt and had a wooden stave-and-chain weapon (nun-chaku) in his pouch, but also that his wife had a long ice pick secreted in her umbrella!

David W. Macdonald

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The Wolf in the Southwest: the making of an endangered species

D.E. Brown, (Editor)

University of Arizona Press, 1983,

£19.95 (hardback), £9.95 (paperback)

The years between 1890 and 1925 saw the heyday of the wolf slaughter in the south-western United States. Wolf populations were devastated, but the ardour with which their elimination was pursued was unremitting. A total of over 50 years of constant effort, of painstaking toil, of unshakable conviction eventually brought success in the annihilation of wolves in the south-west USA. Only a handful of wolves were traced (and avidly trapped) in the 1950s. In 1960 one wolf was killed in Arizona, and in 1961 another was killed and a \$75 bounty paid for it by the Arizona Livestock Sanitary Board. In 1970 the last wolf carcass was reported in New Mexico. The only survivors remained in remote areas of Mexico. In 1980 there were an estimated 50 wolves in

Mexico, although in 1981, the same man who made that estimate reported that in the wolf strongholds of Durango and Chihuahua he found not a single sign of wolves.

David Brown has edited a devastating book. To a reader unfamiliar with the south-west the abundance of place names unavoidably makes the text difficult and anyway the detail is not easy reading, but one is nevertheless inexorably drawn from page to page with the shocking realisation that disclosures of attitudes to the wolf which were comfortingly remote in accounts of the late nineteenth century actually prevailed very recently. This is a history book and its impact lies in bombarding the reader with proof of just how recent history can be. Brown and his colleagues have exhaustively picked through a mass of government documents to unravel the development of ideas on wolf control, and the course of implementing these ideas. Their account is heavily interspersed with extracts from reports, letters and memos. In the early years these extracts report on the deaths of hundreds of bountied wolves, and the hundreds of thousands of dollars lost to agriculture due to their deprivations. Later the numbers of wolves fell to single figures and then to recognisable individuals—Old Aguila, Old One Toe, the Spring Valley Wolf.

The few surviving wolves and the extraordinary, skilled and hardened men who dogged their tracks finally met in one to one combat. On horseback Roy McBride tracked a wolf called Las Margaritas intensively for 11 months, over several thousand miles before he caught her on 15 March 1971. The account of the trapper's endurance and the wolf's guile are breathtaking—in October 1970 McBride found a place where Las Margaritas had urinated, in November he found a place where she had walked on fresh dew (her prints recognisable by two missing toes on one paw). Everywhere she dodged his traps. But Las Margaritas had a fascination for the cinders of old fires. Eventually McBride set his trap, built a campfire on top of it, let the embers burn to dust and placed a piece of dried skunk hide nearby. Las Margaritas stepped on the embers and was caught by her crippled leg. By the end of the book one is torn between despising their ruthless intention to exterminate and reverence for the field-