

Book reviews

Grasses of New South Wales

Authors: D.J.B. Wheeler, S.W.L. Jacobs and R.D.B. Whalley (2002).

Publisher: The University of Armidale, Australia, 445 pages, A\$ 30 + A\$ 13.70 Postage

This book, now in its third revised and expanded edition, was first published in 1982 and reprinted in 1984. A second edition came out in 1990. The present, third, edition differs from the previous one by updated introductory text and nomenclature, an index to current and previous names of genera and species, the addition of descriptions and line drawings of species and an improved glossary.

A large number of well-known Australian grass taxonomists have contributed in one way or another to the various editions of this book. As a result it has become a very authoritative work. Agrostologists, farmers and interested laypersons will benefit from it for the identification of grasses growing in the State of New South Wales and bordering regions. Non-botanists can indeed use the identification keys because of the simple to follow and illustrated instructions. This will also contribute to lessen the burden on professional taxonomists to identify often unprofessionally collected specimens.

The book not only provides a means of identifying grasses, but it also teaches the reader on their morphology, classification, nomenclature and distribution. It starts with a short introduction on the importance of the grass family and grasslands in ecological and economic terms, including grasses as crops, weeds and ornamentals. However, the authors missed the opportunity to highlight the importance of grasslands as a very significant store of carbon, which in the popular press is mostly reserved for forests.

The book deals with and describes 660 species of native and introduced grass species belonging to some 165 genera. Identification starts with the genera, to which there are three types of keys. In the first the genera are divided into 16 groups on the basis of simple characteristics, the second is a dichotomous key based on "natural" relationships and the third is a pictorial key. The easiest key to use, no doubt, is the pictorial key, followed by the groups key. The latter leads the user quickly to a relatively small group of genera that can be recognised from the dichotomous key and/or the pictorial key, by elimination or recognition.

Having reduced a specimen to its proper genus the species name can be derived from the largest key in the book, that of the species within the genera, judiciously illustrated to highlight important features or differences.

The book concludes with an extensive bibliography, a useful illustrated glossary of terms and a good index. It is an excellent practical book based on sound botany. For its low price the book is also very good value for money.

The book may have limitations for use in the field, but a smaller page size would make it even less easy to use because of the resulting thickness. The wire binding may result in pages becoming loose. However, it is a must for professional and amateur field botanists who want to study one of the most important plant families for ecology and mankind.

Going through the book brought back nostalgic memories by reading about grasses, picturing them in my mind, that I used to work with in Queensland, now already so many years ago.

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