

Reviews

A New Dictionary of Birds.—This book, edited by Sir A. Landsborough Thomson was published in 1964 by Thomas Nelson & Sons in London and McGraw Hill in New York on behalf of the British Ornithologists' Union. It is a B.O.U. Centenary celebration publication and represents the cooperation of 172 contributors from 22 countries, welded into a whole by the able editorship of a former President of the British Ornithologists' Union, Sir A. Landsborough Thomson. The work contains 928 pages of text and 48 plates, 16 of which are in colour. In it are articles covering every facet of ornithology from *Archaeopteryx* to the birds of Shakespeare, illustrated with numerous line drawings in the text. In addition each family of birds is discussed in a major article, and many species are listed by their English names in the appropriate alphabetical sequence. Each major article is accompanied by a short list of references.

Although most of the general articles have been written by United Kingdom residents, articles on specialized groups and areas have been contributed by ornithologists with specialized or local knowledge. Articles dealing with anatomical features, sometimes of considerable length and detail, are well illustrated with clear line drawings.

In the articles on particular families the general biology of each is given first, followed by summaries of the present state of knowledge of each of the subfamilies or major groups. It is particularly refreshing to find that a fair balance has been maintained, in most cases, between anatomical detail and field observation. The detailed articles on techniques and on ancillary sciences are another commendable inclusion, for example sections on the ornithological aspects of radar and of meteorology.

The editor is to be specially commended upon his choice of illustrations. Care has obviously been taken to select representative forms from many different parts of the world, wherever this is appropriate, and the beautiful half-tone illustrations give a remarkably comprehensive sample of the work of contemporary bird photographers. It is pleasant to find a work of such scholarship enlivened by the odd splash of humour and the satirical account of the Western Australian emu war of the 1930's cannot be read without a chuckle.

In the articles which deal with the individual families of birds one feels that the editor has sometimes not made the most of his resources. The account of the penguins, for example, has six different authors, each dealing with that genus of which he has personal experience. It is a pity that this plan was not used more extensively. The sole author of the article on the Meliphagidae can only have had limited field experience of the honeyeaters from his home in Denmark. Again the sole author of the article on Magpies, covering currawongs, bell-magpies and butcher-birds says of *Gymnorhina* that 'during the breeding season pairs defend their respective territories resolutely', omitting all reference to the interesting group territory held throughout the year by at least two species of the genus and described for one of them in papers cited by the author of the article.

Such shortcomings are of very minor importance and it is impossible to overstate the worth of this work. It is a worthy successor to its prototype, *A Dictionary of Birds* (1896) by Alfred Newton and Hans Gadow, both as a work of serious reference for the research worker, and as a fascinating encyclopedia of ornithology through which to browse at leisure.—S. J. J. F. DAVIES.

Biology of Birds, by Wesley E. Lanyon. Thomas Nelson and Sons, 163 pp., 64 illustns., 35/-.

Modern readers usually look askance at sub-titles and publishers' 'blurbs', but the sub-title of this comprehensive little work on bird-biology — "A concise, vivid introduction to the life of birds" — does not over-praise the book. Lanyon who is Associate Curator of Birds at the American Museum of Natural History, has the ability to write concisely and yet retain clarity and pleasant style.

This ability is evidenced from the very first section of the first chapter on the origin and evolution of birds, in which he deals so well with the first bird, *Archaeopteryx*, that the reader will finish this passage with a much greater awareness of the significance of those three fossil creatures and their structures than he might gain from reading many longer and more detailed scientific descriptions.

And through the remaining divisions of the book, which deal with design for flight, variations on this general theme, migration and navigation, distribution, courtship and reproduction, and growth and survival, he stresses the significance of the structures and behaviour he describes. This makes the book an excellent introduction to bird-study for new-comers and a valuable refresher course for those with more knowledge.

Its one drawback, from an Australian point of view, is that, naturally, most of the book's examples are drawn from American birds, but this could easily be overcome for ornithology classes by a lecturer sufficiently conversant with Australian birds to make the necessary comparisons and substitutions.

For students engaged in such classes and for all who wish to go further in bird-study than mere identification, this is possibly the best simple text-book available.—JACK HYETT.

Lamb deaths — bird "predators" vindicated.—Important investigations by the Department of Agriculture in Western Australia on the causes of lamb mortalities in that State are summarised in a series of articles in the *Journal of the Department of Agriculture, W.A.*, 6 (4), April 1965: 216-250. A summary article by S. M. Dennis, senior veterinary pathologist of the Animal Health Laboratory (pp. 216-219), states that predators accounted for only 2.5% of the losses and did not play a significant part in the deaths of the lambs examined; in the previous year the figure was only 1.3%. "The predators, mainly foxes and crows, appeared to act simply as scavengers and mainly confined their attention to dying or dead lambs. This is illustrated by the fact that one-third of all lamb carcasses showed evidence of predator mutilation *after* death. This is further emphasised by the fact that 54% of the lambs which died of starvation/mis-mothering (the major cause of lamb death in W.A.) showed mutilation *after* death." The subject is presented in greater detail by Dennis and a collaborator, C. D. Gooding, vermin control research officer, in an article "Predators — Lamb killers or scavengers?" (pp. 249-250). Criteria are given for diagnosing true predator death, and also for identifying the probable scavengers involved in mutilating carcasses. The main predators attacking lambs were "foxes and crows and the odd dog, eagle and dingo". Crows (or Ravens) were opportunist feeders and foxes opportunistic scavengers. The authors comment: "If one thing is certain about both the crow (raven) and fox: if they did as much damage as people claim, it would be impossible to carry on a successful sheep raising industry in Western Australia," and "One important aspect of predator mutilation after death is that it may 'mask' the real cause of serious lamb loss in a flock or flocks on a property. This is a result of the farmer seeing the predator damage, blaming the predators and scavengers and looking no further for the answer to his problem."

These findings may compel the State Department of Agriculture to review its policy on bonus payments on the Wedge-tailed Eagle. Apart from the wasted effort in time and money by farmers in trapping and shooting eagles, the Government of Western Australia has in the past 37 years paid out, ineffectively as is now shown, bonuses (now 5/- per head) on a total of over 140,000 Wedge-tailed Eagles. Furthermore a big proportion of these payments are made in the East Kimberley Division, which is cattle-raising and not sheep country.—D. L. SERVENTY.

Europe: a Natural History, by Kai Curry-Lindahl (Hamish Hamilton, London; pp. 299; Australian price, £6/12/-). This large and handsome book carries 264 illustrations, including 108 in colour, and therefore its appeal is largely pictorial. The photographs, which feature landscapes but include many of birds, mammals, and plants, are on the whole admirable and in some instances quite beautiful. There is, for example, a revealing colour shot of a Bar-tailed Godwit at its nest in a treeless expanse of northern

Europe; and, too, the book presents numbers of arresting pictures, mainly in colour, of various birds whose groups are widely distributed.

The letterpress ranges in 19 chapters over virtually the whole of Europe. It is, of necessity, plainly factual for the most part, yet it is sufficiently engaging on an aesthetic basis, and in each instance there is a reasonably adequate summary of the area's bird-life. The observations become impressive in places, as with a reference to an aerial exhibition by about 500 Kestrels over the margins of a lake in Greece; and, naturally, the author "lets his head go" when discussing the remarkable wealth of birds at the Coto Donana and Los Marismas in Spain, to say nothing of the glory of flamingos on the Camargue in France. It is noted that in 1963 a colony of flamingos left the Camargue because of disturbance, and soon afterwards a group of 3,600 nests was found to have been established in Spain.

Kai Curry-Lindahl, who is Director of Natural History at the Nordiska Museum in Stockholm, has obviously travelled intensively in Europe. So informed, he has produced—with very material support from skilled photographers—a distinctly notable book. As the apparent precursor of a series, having the generic title "The Continents we live on", it has set a high standard.—A. H. CHISHOLM.

The Oxford Book of Birds, by Bruce Campbell, Oxford University Press, London, 1964, 207 pp. 104 plates, 96 in colour. Price £2/17/9 Aust.

Another general book on the birds of the British Isles but not recommended by this reviewer to the Australian ornithologist as the price is far too high and the scope far too limited. In fact when perusing in detail the sections on the groups of birds which contain the biggest number of species common to Britain and Australia viz. the sea-birds and waders, I was unable to find anything of interest not already to be found in either *The Handbook of British Birds* or the *Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe*. Donald Watson's plates are so attractively set, the bird portraits so vivid and full of character that one is inclined to forget that they are supposed to aid in identification.—JOHN L. McKEAN.