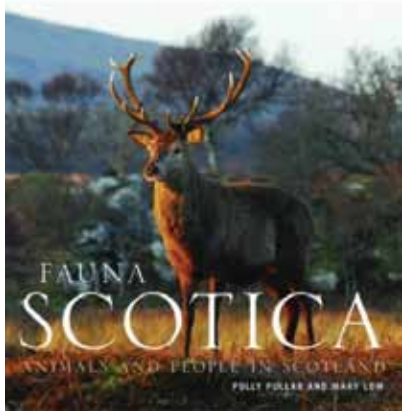
Book Reviews



FAUNA SCOTICA
Animals and people in Scotland
Polly Pullar & Mary Low
Birlinn Limited, 2012, 290 pages
Hbk £30, ISBN 978 1 84158 561 1

This book is more than just a study of natural nature. It also looks at the human relationship to nature. It sets nature wild and free alongside human nature and thereby explores the fauna of Scotland through the lens of human ecology; indeed, a very humanised ecology, because Mary Low's acclaimed Celtic scholarship, her skill in folklore, richly complements the flowing narrative and vivid images of Polly Pullar and other photographic contributors.

The work is divided into 10 sections organised according to habitats. It includes the expected with chapters on mountain, bog and moor, lochs and rivers, the sea, islands and skerries, farm and croft, about town; but also chapters on wild work which covers themes like working dogs, and, enticingly, "Creatures of the Mind". As Pullar says in her introduction, this is a study that aims to approach animals not just physically and economically, but also "at the level of feeling, imagination and belief."

For example, the two pages devoted to the mountain hare describe its ecology, provide an insight into the lore of hare shooting (no longer an enterprise to be encouraged), and a concise summary of the hare's meaning in Scots folklore. In 1662 when Isobel Gowdie confessed to changing into a hare as part of her alleged witchcraft, the spell by which she claimed to restore herself to human form was:

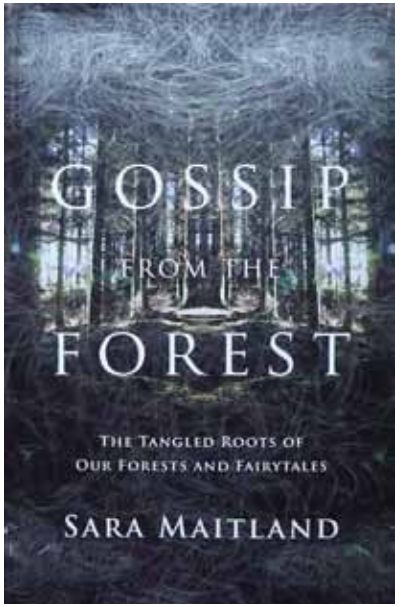
> Hare, hare, God send thee care!
> I am in a hare's likeness just now,
> But I shall be a woman even now –
> Hare, hare, God send thee care.

Similarly thought-provoking is the section on the sacred goose. Does the notion that the wild goose is a Celtic symbol of the Holy Spirit authentically come from tradition, or has it been invented by the likes of Lord George Macleod of the Iona Community? Well, I once put that question to Ron Fergusson, Macleod's biographer, who had in turn once posed it to old George. "Where did you get it from?" Ron had asked. "I've no idea!" said George. "I probably invented it!" *Fauna Scotica* hints, however, that George's intuition may have been sourced from deeper wellheads of the traditions in which he was culturally immersed; and recently, in reading the Chinese poetry of Wu Wei, I was struck by the translator's comment in the Penguin Classics edition (p. 92) that "there was a myth that wild geese – and fish – could carry messages."

I wrote this review sitting in Stornoway library, and as I worked a local Gaelic activist came up. He wished to remain anonymous and said "Just call me Will-o-the-Wisp". He said what impressed him about this book was that it gives names in English, Latin, Scots and Gaelic, and that while the English and Latin usually have just one name, the more vernacular languages have many. For example, the (Blue) mountain hare, *Lepus timidus*, in Scots can be whiddie baudrons, bawtie, cutty, donie, fuddie, lang lugs, maukin or pussy, and in Gaelic, *maigheach bhàn* or *bocaire fasaich*. If one goes to the Gaelic dictionaries, further names can be found including regional variations for the hare at different stages of development.

This is a book that honours not just the animals, with a splendour of photography that would grace any coffee table, but also their human connections. I long for more wildlife writing and praise Polly Pullar, Mary Low, and Birlinn Limited on their achievement.

Alastair McIntosh



GOSSIP FROM THE FOREST
The tangled roots of our forests and fairytales
Sara Maitland
Granta, 2012, 256 pages
Hbk, £20, ISBN 1847084293

This is an important book. It re-connects the very practical matter of the UK's forests with our own emotional heritage of story and fairy tales. And it's a book with real heart, a book to savour.

Themes of forestry and amenity, nature and raw material, local industry and personal sense of place are all explored, in an effective synthesis of the challenges facing woodland management today. So far, so good; but there the writing departs from any other woodland book you have (probably) ever read. Coupled with visits to 12 very different woodlands across the UK, Sara Maitland has skilfully re-told many of the Grimm's fairy tales, one at the end of every chapter, linked with the issues discussed. She has taken the care to see them from different perspectives, and to include the detail and magic of the natural world – the British natural world – in each one.

Maitland's re-telling of the stories is brave. Many storytellers are content to leave it to the listener to fill in the detail around archetype and human activity in stories. But here, Rumpelstiltskin looks like hazel coppice and like juniper trees - all spiky; a grown up Hansel goes back into the forest to reconnect with his wild side and his twin sister, Gretel; and the big bad lone wolf, isolated in a conifer plantation and thoroughly disgusted by Little Red Riding Hood, has a very modern guise.

What does all this have to do with the way we see forests or, for that matter, nature conservation? Maitland would argue a great deal, and I agree with her. The booming bass drum beat of the whole book is an emotional one: a yearning for honesty within our philosophy of land management, and a recognition of the ancient archetypes that underpin many of our core beliefs. There are deeper messages within the old fairy stories, and their resonance runs deep, if you will let them in.

If you would like your memories of childhood stories cast in the context of the land itself, your understanding of our forests challenged, and your thoughts provoked, read this book.

Lisa Schneidau

BEAR WITNESS
A captivating journey to the wild side
Mandy Haggith
Saraband, 2013, 264 pages
Pbk, £8.99, ISBN 1908643292

Some years ago I spent a few days in the Carpathian Mountains of Romania, hoping to sight a bear or perhaps hear the howling of wolves. I was impressed by the prolific wild flowers and some interesting bird life, but didn't have any large carnivore experiences. Spending the last night in the city of Brasov, we were given a tip off that bears come down to the city at night to raid dustbins, and told where to get the taxi to. We found a service road next to blocks of flats, with garages and large waste containers on one side, backing onto a forested hillside. Night fell as we stood across the road from the dustbins, but not seeing any animals, we began to doubt we were in the right place. I strolled across the road to check a waste container, and as I approached a dark shape moved in the skip and a bear's head rose up and watched me. The animal seemed huge. I quickly retreated across the road. As we looked on, several more bears came out of the woodland and climbed into the containers to rummage for food. I was surprised at just how big they are. A few weeks after this encounter, I heard on the news that a tourist had been killed by a bear at this same location in Brasov.

France has hosted a bear reintroduction programme in the Pyrenees since 1996. At that time there was a remnant population of about 12 bears in the western Pyrenees, which is now reduced to about 4 individuals. 3 bears were initially introduced to the central Pyrenees. Breeding and further introductions have increased this number to around 15. This programme has not been without difficulties. Within a year of introduction one of the females had two cubs. However, she

was shot dead by a local hunter, aged 20. He claimed self-defence, but in his trial it was revealed that he had boasted he was going to find and kill the bears. The court found that he had deliberately set out to kill the bear, and he was given a prison sentence for the crime. Happily for the cubs, they were adopted by the other female. The reintroduction programme has continued at a steady pace since then, much slower than originally planned by government conservationists, but in the face of massive opposition from local farmers, despite compensation arrangements for loss of livestock. The programme is highly controversial.

In some parts of the world, including some parts of Europe, people are proud of their bears. But where they are re-introduced, there tends to be controversy, with communities divided. Generally farmers oppose the presence of bears, and the hunters, the men with guns, are predominantly farmers. One factor in the success of bears seems to be whether the local human population is used to living alongside them. It is a cultural question. Farming practices need to be adapted to allow for the presence of bears, and farmers resist change. And it's not just about farmers: people living in bear country develop a culture with the right degree of respect for this creature so that conflicts can be avoided. I have a hunch that nasty accidents with bears usually involve tourists who are not familiar with the animal.

In Bear Witness Mandy Haggith portrays the bear sympathetically, and vividly describes a journey of discovery in Romania. It is a powerful experience where the scientific mind is displaced by an emotional response to this formidable animal in the wild nature of the Carpathians. The bear is a powerful symbol in many cultures, including in Britain, playing a big role in myth and legend. It is an animal loaded with meaning far beyond its ecological role. *In Bear Witness*, this is not analysed, but breathes through the story. Alongside this, the ecological importance of the bear is well presented, with consideration of how habitats are impoverished in a wide range of aspects when this element is missing.

The writing is inspired, ranging from imagery and description to the immediacy of dialogue and emotion, it is honest, even brutal, which enhances the interest. The story is captivating and the characters are convincing. The controversies, the hopes, the disappointments that are all too clear from actual bear programmes, are vividly and intimately portrayed through the life of the main character.

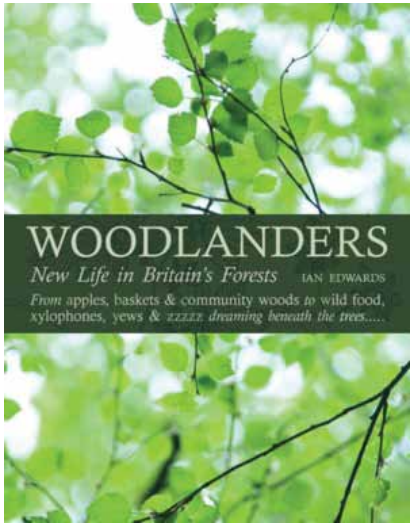
The story is set slightly in the future. Although not specified, it could be 5 years from now, or is that wishful thinking? The world depicted, including the social context, is entirely recognisable with some plausible refinements. Mandy Haggith's previous book *The Last Bear* told the story of the killing of the last bear in Scotland a thousand years ago. It showed a divided society, between those trying to rid the land of predators, and those who held the land and other species with a respect that was part of their spirituality. In *Bear Witness*, the same sort of dynamic is at play, with society divided between those who fear the wild and provide rational arguments against living with large carnivores, and those who believe in restoring balance in the world, in making space for other species. Rationality and science support both sides, but ultimately it is a question

of sentiment and belief on both sides. This is why, if we have any chance of seeing our native wildlife restored, the cultural element is so important. Our connection with other species needs to be revived through the arts and through education. Mandy Haggith illustrates this message in her books, but more importantly, her work is part of the cultural process.

Another reality well portrayed in *Bear Witness*, is how radical ideas and projects are championed by one or a few individuals, and whether such initiatives get off the ground depends on individual personalities in key positions in society. Politicians and civil servants tend to play safe, so wherever government decisions are required, initiatives can fail to get the rubber stamp, or are diluted with the more radical elements dropped. The events in both Norway and Scotland in the book demonstrate the importance of full involvement of relevant groups and people. One idea not explored by Haggith is the strategy used today in some regions hosting big predators, where local farmers are paid a fixed annual payment in return for living alongside the predator species. This payment can be in place of, or in parallel with, compensation for loss of livestock to a predator. This system has managed to turn around the attitudes of farmers, from one of hostility to co-operation, for example with wolf and lynx in Sweden.

In *Bear Witness*, there is an authenticity throughout the narrative that suggests the author has put much time into researching the subject, and that she taps deeply into her own experience. This makes for an informative and moving read, with an optimistic message for the future of bears and the spirit of this land.

Simon Ayres



WOODLANDERS
New Life in Britain's Forests
Ian Edwards and Sarah Hunt (Eds)
Saraband, 320 pages, 2010
Hbk, £25, ISBN 1887354691

The book's full title, suggesting new life in forests, perhaps sets out an impression that the book does not fulfil. Rather than a book about woodlanders as people and their motivations, this is largely a focus on projects and certainly does not unpick the individuals who drive them. Although the book's scope is headlined as Britain, the coverage is mainly (and not surprisingly given the greater activity) a book of woodlands in Scotland.

That said the book is full of wonderful photographs and insights into a diverse range of woodland projects and lifestyles. It does exemplify the long overdue return to a woodland culture that slipped away during the 20th century, distorting the perception of the relationship between forests and people. This volume certainly recognises the woodland heritage that existed and demonstrates a growing re-birth of woodland culture. I am afraid the

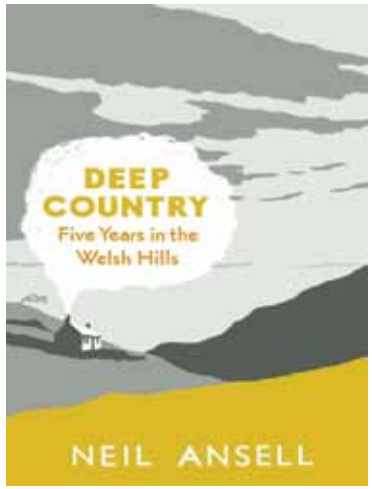
suggestion that Reforesting Scotland has had the greatest impact on British Forestry practices would not be recognised south of the border. I do support the Reforesting Scotland view of forestry with references to Rackham's woodsmanship, Peterkin's woodlands in flux and that a 'natural state' is not achievable, and Mabey's appraisal of woodland heritage. Much as I would appreciate wild camping on a woodland estate in England I am not so sure about arguing the legality with the gamekeeper. Scotland is well ahead in the public connection to forests and a more enlightened view of woodland activity, Wales is moving but England has a long way to go.

Similarly with construction, although there are a few exceptional examples, wood is not a material favoured by planners or builders in England other than for holiday chalets. I doubt timber frame has reached anywhere near 20% of houses constructed in England so care is required in extrapolating the Scottish situation as Britain. The construction and design chapter tends to be repetitive and does not get inside the builders, just the buildings. The next chapter on community enterprise does not make clear whether the projects described are all community enterprises or enterprises that work in the community. As a hard core social entrepreneur the difference can be important. The 'Living in the Round' chapter presents an opportunity to more deeply investigate the people who are the actual woodlanders but does not really attempt this.

Following a lengthy section on food and foraging, the book moves to a shorter section on woodfuel. I calculate that at 16 barrows making 2 tonnes, the annual domestic total is about 25 tonnes. Admittedly this covers heating and cooking but I use about 3-4 tonnes for annual heating. 25 sounds excessive and if purchased as split firewood it would cost over £2000. There is not enough about efficient burning, thermal mass and the first step of insulation. Just burning lots of wood is not of course a green solution.

Woodlanders is an excellent read but it does view events in England through a telescope. Maybe a follow up book would help, to examine and understand the actual 'woodlanders'.

Nigel Lowthrop



DEEP COUNTRY
Five Years in the Welsh Hills
Neil Ansell
Penguin Books, 2012, 206 pages
Pbk, £9.99, ISBN 978-0-141-04932-8

When I spotted this title in a local bookshop the sleeve notes and illustration of an isolated cottage nestled in the woods immediately drew my attention. Ansell's work seemed to

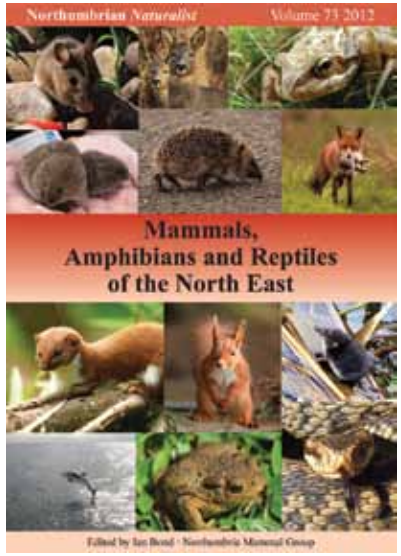
chime both with a number of other books I have read and with my own experiences as an urban escapee (or exile?). 'Getting back to nature' in one's own rural retreat has held much allure for authors, musicians, poets, mystics, artists and others of a romantic and reflective persuasion. Young and middle-aged men, in particular, seem to have sought isolation from other human beings in both a social and physical sense in order to claim time for contemplation and a re-engagement with creative flow, imagination, and play.

A further and similarly gendered aspect of escapee writing is that of robust self-sufficiency (using only archaic technology), of heightened physical sensations through raw encounters with the elements, with landscapes, and with plants and animals, in ways that no city or desk job can offer. The concept of 'escapee' is important, for those working (living out, or through) this tradition have been arrivals from the urban or suburban, who place or insert themselves into the deeply rural realm, and for some 'the wilderness'; they are not lifelong countrymen and they often form distant and uneasy relationships with the few locals they may meet. Typically, once insights have been achieved, mental issues worked through, and new skills and experiences gained, the project is complete and the escapee returns to 'normal life'. In some cases, the escapee's return is rapid and/or tragic brought on by illness, injury, or the mutation of warm solitude into bleak loneliness: a reality check.

Deep Country is a charming and sensitive contribution to the escapee tradition; an evocative account of one man's engagement with the Welsh hills, their beauty, natural rhythms, flora and fauna. Some readers (this reviewer included) may feel frustrated that Ansell does not offer more personal, confessional and autobiographical context for his five years at Penlan Cottage, particularly as the sleeve notes frame the book as a reflection on: "…where I lived and how I lived…what it means to live in a place so remote that you may not see another soul for weeks on end". In fact, much of the text is 'nature writing', derived from the author's experiences of walking the landscape. There is no grand theorising, or macho risk-taking, and little angst in Ansell's neck of the woods. The tone is upbeat, with a child-like sense of excitement and awe, conveyed through lucid descriptions of nature and especially of iconic seldom-seen birds (goshawk, merlin, woodcock). Ansell is an accomplished nature writer and the book will have great appeal to devotees of that genre.

Like many escapee stories, *Deep Country* is also a piece of travel writing, describing the secret lives of seldom-seen places and their animal inhabitants, whilst hinting at a concurrent personal and spiritual journey. For this reviewer, the book provides further insight into the contemporary disjuncture between rooted connections to the land and its people, as experienced by 'locals' and the impressions of urban and suburban visitors. The weekend 'leisure commute' sees day-trippers descend in fleets of cars in order to take a few stolen hours in the countryside outside of 'real lives' in the suburbs and the city. The romantic escapee critiques the brevity and instrumentalism of these visits, seeking deeper more 'authentic' encounters with the rural. But what are the possibilities for those who live alone and contemplate such a life change? That so few artistic escapees remain in their bolt-holes for life suggests that such transitions are difficult. The deeply rural, like the past, may be a different country; different most potently from its urban and suburban imagining.

Phil Hadfield



Mammals, Amphibians and Reptiles of the North East
Ian Bond (Ed)
Northumbrian Naturalist Vol 73 (2012), 246pages
http://www.nhsn.ncl.ac.uk/news/mars-ne/
Pbk £10.00 (+£3.50 P&P) ISSN 2050-4128

This is a landmark publication, with its only real forerunner being *A Catalogue of the Mammalia of Northumberland and Durham* by Mennell and Perkins in 1864. A few other key works, such as Gill's 1905 account in the Victoria County History, and Bolam's works are scattered through the intervening years. The account covers the counties of Northumberland, Tyne and Wear, Durham and the former county of Cleveland, with the information compiled by the Northumbria Mammal Group under the careful editorship of Ian Bond. The mammals includes 53 established species, plus accounts of vagrant seals (three species), cetaceans (12 species), and six species are discussed under vagrant bats. There are also accounts of species extinct since the Pleistocene and Holocene, and a brief account of records of escaped mammals (including such species as porcupine and raccoon), with a separate account for records of exotic cats. Actually life isn't quite as simple as that, such that a few species, such as black rat and yellow-necked mouse, have uncertain status in the region, the former being recorded from time to time mostly in dockland areas and occasionally becoming temporarily established, the latter with one or two reliable records, but which may refer to an accidental introduction.

Accounts are also given of six amphibian species and four reptile species. The amphibians include the introduced alpine newt, which, according to its species account is known from about 10 tetrads in the south of the region, but the editor notes that since this account was completed, the species may have made a significant extension to its range.

There is, of course, no attempt to catalogue records, but there is a list of the local relevant organisations and records centres that hold the detailed records. The authors have carefully reviewed and referenced the historical knowledge and picked out points of interest in more recent studies. There are many fascinating stories and anecdotes through the book. My own experience within the region is limited, but I was impressed with the numbers

of whiskered/Brandt's bats occurring in the area, for species that have a rather patchy distribution further south and are more or less absent further north. And from the days when it was assumed that whiskered bat was much more common than Brandt's bat, it is interesting to see that modern studies are suggesting that this may be the reverse of the situation now. Also good to see that some long-term studies are maintained, such as the observations at Brinkburn Priory, a site that has been under regular observation of its bats since 1985. I was privileged to visit this site many years ago; and while I can't remember whether the problem that the bats were disturbing the concerts was worse than the concerts disturbing the bats, it does seems that they have been able to live together with minor inconveniences on both sides.

For most of the established fauna, each species has a single map with distribution given by tetrad and with records separated into pre- and post 2000. As noted above for alpine newt, such maps have a temporary accuracy - there will be additional material collected as they are published, but they still have value as a historical distribution. What can be more of a problem is decisions about what records to accept and the means of identification for the various records. So there may be a wide variation in the reliability of the way the record was collected, but this is not reflected in the maps. This may be particularly important with groups like bats (where identification may vary between being from a bat in the hand to a bat detector record which may be more or less reliable depending on species) and cetaceans (where strandings will be much more reliably identified than some observation of cetaceans passing at sea). Similarly, the distribution maps do not differentiate between different categories of record, such as can occur between groups and in, for example, the bats between individual bats grounded or trapped, in bat roosts used either in summer or winter, of roosting bats or bats foraging in the field. But that would be beyond the scope of such a book and as presented the maps are comparable throughout the fauna covered.

I have few complaints with this important account. One minor point is that while we all struggle to keep up with the changes in scientific nomenclature in our own group, trying to keep up with less familiar groups can become an added problem when, for example, the alpine newt is included in the genus *Ichthyosaura* in the text (p.213) but *Mesotriton* in the illustration (p.129)! I congratulate all the authors and compilers and recommend this book as a valuable contribution at a reasonable price.

Tony Hutson

Coming Up

ECOS 34 (2) will include commentary on badger culling and on tree disease issues and the land-use implications of ash dieback.

ECOS 34 (3-4) will focus on sustainable farming, food and conservation, looking at emerging policies and what we can learn from UK examples which integrate sustainable agriculture, food quality and wildlife management aims.