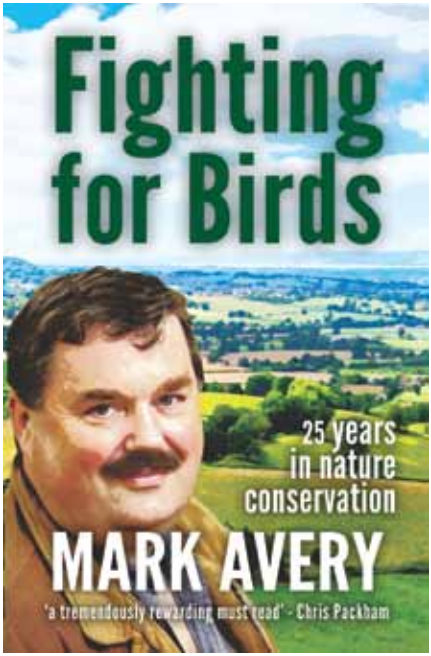
Book Reviews



FIGHTING FOR BIRDS
25 Years in Nature Conservation
Mark Avery
Pelagic Publishing 2012, 324 Pages
Pbk, £12.99 ISBN 987-1-907807-29-9

This book might be described as an analytical autobiography. It is intensely personal, presenting many details of the author's life but woven around a discussion of the development of RSPB policy on conservation of birds where the author played a central role, and drawing lessons for policy from personal experience. Each chapter finishes with a summary of the main points made; not what one would normally expect in a personal history and making the book more like a text on conservation policy. In the author's mind I think the book is both these and other things besides. It is simultaneously didactic and messianic, with the final chapter entitled `What we need to do to win'. There is evidence that the work was originally intended to be a more conventional autobiography. Thus witness a chapter called 'Snippets' containing stories and anecdotes that couldn't be fitted in the main text. Samuel Becket had something similar in his novel Watt; words and phrases thought of but not used. In that case however they were included as an addendum.

But to say that this book is idiosyncratic is in no way to condemn it. I couldn't put it down. It is a damned good read packed with interesting information and insider insights into some of the classic conservation battles of the period. All students of conservation should read it. I would particularly recommend some of the case studies in chapter 13, the chapter appropriately titled 'The raptor haters' and his assessments in chapter 16 of the conservation industry.

The author spent 25 years working for RSPB and remains deeply committed to it as the ideal model for a conservation NGO containing the optimum mix of advocacy, political pressure, direct action and scientific analysis. In his view all other conservation bodies fall short of the ideal. The Wildlife Trusts have lost their way, placing too much emphasis on people and too little on wildlife (the reviewer is sympathetic on this one). Greenpeace and FOE have other concerns, certainly no less important than wildlife conservation but to a degree in conflict with them at least in terms of resource allocation. The nearest to the RSPB perfection are recent specialist

bodies: Plantlife; Butterfly Conservation and Buglife; but these outfits are too small, lacking the membership and therefore the clout of RSPB and the last chapters speculate as to whether RSPB should extend its remit to take over their territory or otherwise help to strengthen them and how far it should become a multi-national extending the RSPB experience overseas. Undoubtedly RSPB is the largest and most successful wildlife NGO in Europe with a reach now extending outside of the continent. It is to be congratulated on its success and Mark Avery to be thanked for the pivotal role he has played in it. However it falls to the reviewer to pour a touch of cold water on the author's enthusiasm.

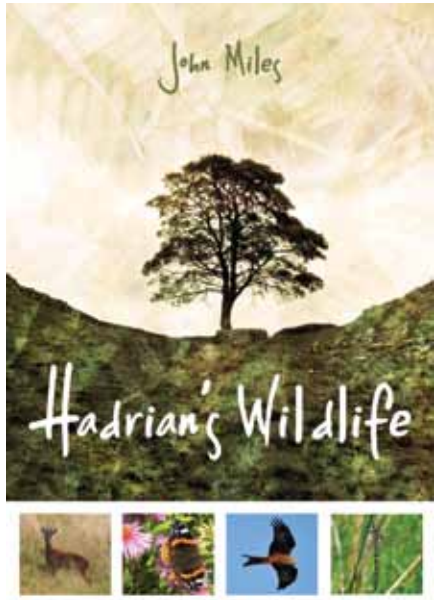
From its inception, and written into its charter, the RSPB has been restrained from attacking the interests of the landed gentry; most obviously preventing any challenge to the upper class obsession with killing animals and birds, categorised as hunting or vermin control. These constraints remain and Avery confesses to wanting to launch a campaign against grouse shooting but knowing that within RSPB he could not do so. But the interests of the landed classes extend beyond the slaughter of innocent raptors, game-birds and Mustelids; they are reflected in received understanding, or lack of it, of the economics of farming and forestry. While regarding the NFU as part of the enemy, Avery none-the-less subscribes to the hoary old lie that intensification with its resulting monocultures is the consequence of economic pressures facing farmers. It isn't. It is the result of the reduction and distortion of risk brought about by agricultural support and protection. If this support were wholly withdrawn then farm enterprises would perforce shift back to crop rotations, lower intensity of cultivation and mixed farming as a rational strategy to minimise financial risk. Ricardo demonstrated this in the nineteenth century; that in adversity agriculture would retreat on both the intensive and extensive margins. But you don't have to be an historian of economic thought to understand it. It was explained to the conservation community in the late 1960s, and in the 1970s and 80s I was involved in explaining it to the RSPB. I'm afraid that I failed; the message was well understood in some quarters but the constraints on the organisation meant that it was never acted on. The reasons are obvious. Agricultural support does not benefit tenant farmers who simply face rising rents and land prices; it enriches their landlords. But the principal social cost of our obsession with looking after farmers and wealthy landlords is the destruction of wildlife habitat and the decimation of birds and other taxa. Any realistic programme to reverse these trends has to start from there.

The economics of forestry is subject to a similar fallacy and this one too has been repeatedly demonstrated. It is not economic to grow trees for commercial purposes in the UK – which is not to say that we should not maintain and manage semi-natural woodlands. Commercial forestry exists to supply tax concessions to the wealthy and increasingly to multi-national companies with a by-product of providing shelter for pheasant rearing. What Mark Avery saw in the Flow Country where the trees would often not even properly grow is equally true in the lowlands. The starting and finishing point of any forestry policy as with agricultural policy therefore is the interest of those who pay the piper.

But despite the constraints facing RSPB it has come a long way and has done a lot at least to mitigate the environmental

consequences of land-holding. Avery's book explains and celebrates this progress. The hope for Buglife and the other conservation bodies that Avery admires is that their power base is mainly urban not rural. Let us hope it remains that way. Meanwhile I look forward to meeting him on the picket line on August 12th.

John Bowers



HADRIAN'S WILDLIFE
John Miles
Whittles Publishing, 2012, 134 pages
Pbk £16.99 ISBN 978–1–84995–063–3

Quite why the Emperor Hadrian had this wall built is, to me at least, a mystery. It defends nothing and played no further part in history. To me the Wall seems more akin to the vanity projects of retiring French presidents awaiting trial. The last miscreant coming down from the north, Charles Edward Stuart, the well known Italian, went round the western end of what was left of the Wall to Carlisle, since the only other possible route lay through thoroughly unsympathetic Newcastle posted at the other end. The centrally placed A68 crosses the line of the Wall at Corbridge, a route of Roman origin that leads nowhere fast. This inconvenient siting has protected the landscape from much of the impact of the motor car in modern times; a landscape that looks after itself. It does cross superb countryside, nowhere more so than at Tyne Gap, where the high Pennines are split geologically from the wild fells to the north and through which famous rivers flow.

Thus Hadrian's Wildlife presents as a guide book to the complex landscapes, social and natural history of a narrow strip of country whose axis lies east-west across the narrowest part of the island of Great Britain. It is, in fact, rather more than that and better for it.

John Miles was sometime RSPB warden for Geltsdale, itself part of a slab of high moorland that lies just to the north of the line of the wall. Memories of his experience in this role informs the text to great advantage. Tasked with protecting birds on a reserve surrounded by grouse moors – a reserve moreover where the shooting rights had been retained – was awkward, given the birds to be protected, hen harriers, are anathema to gamekeepers. Red Grouse management does not get a good press in this guide.

These recollections – Mr Miles is today a freelance consultant and tour leader – give the narrative an edge that a guidebook normally lacks. Perhaps too large (and handsome) for carrying outdoors, yet ideal for reading in the B&B

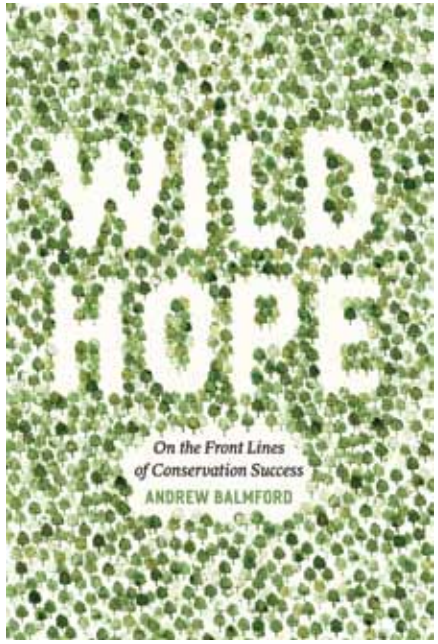
or under cover, I suspect it has a useful life as background information and species lists preceding a visit. Combined with map reading, it will give shape and focus to what is in fact a widely spread series of reserves and ecological sites along the Wall or close by. Then there is the little matter of the Wall itself and associated Roman sites. There is a lot to see, many miles to travel.

A small scale map of the entire Wall with reference points is included but does not have the detail by itself to assist visitors I feel. Good maps are as essential here as outdoor clothing; be prepared. Hadrian's Wildlife is well illustrated with drawings by Mike Henry and many excellent photographs. But do enjoy the text; for one thing, visitors from further afield may be surprised to learn that much of remote Britain is still controlled by toffs who, irrespective of the law, carry on much as they have always done when it comes to wildlife.

Barry Larking

WILD HOPE
On the Front Lines of Conservation Success
Andrew Balmford
The University of Chicago Press, 2012,
240 pages Pbk, £17
ISBN 10: 0226035927

Who can argue with a book of good news! It is as scarce a commodity in the conservation world today as some of the endangered species we are trying to protect. In this book Andrew Balmford leaves behind the world of peer review papers to give us a travelogue of conservation success. Filled with stories of the people who have made conservation work through



their innovation and perseverance, the book reflects its optimistic title.

For those in conservation the success stories are generally part of the familiar but depressingly small litany of case studies we draw on to show that the millions of dollars spent on conservation actually work. This familiarity was partly the premise of the book: a personal quest by the author to see if these successes are real and, if so, what lessons can be learnt. So Andrew confirms the continuing success of Rhino conservation in Kazaringa, India; he charts the long road to the successful protection of woodpeckers and forests in America; he relates the innovation of prioritising invasive species control for watershed protection in South Africa; he reports how the valuation of ecosystem services is providing powerful arguments for conservation in many communities in Ecuador and Costa Rica; he finds out that even large companies,

in this case Alcoa in Western Australia, are getting in on the conservation act; and he shows how consumption and conservation can coexist through using the Marine Stewardship Council's work as an example.

The approach is different from the usual heavily referenced second-hand accounts of case studies, as each chapter is based on the author's actual visits to the areas and his conversations with local people and conservationists. Of course there are facts and figures too, but these take a back seat in the book.

The question which kept popping into my head as I read each chapter was: who is the audience for this hopeful venture? For many in the conservation field this book, although an engaging read from a well respected author, probably will not tell you much. Mind you, having a book of mainly good news on one's bookshelf might be a handy tonic for conservation blues.

The final chapter focuses on what conservationists can draw from the stories told in the book. The underlying message is that to save special places you need special people, who can think creatively, be ambitious, and are politically savvy and able to engage with anyone and everyone who might be able to help a good cause. But just in case the reader gets too carried away with Andrew's hopeful vision the book ends as it began with a reminder of how fragile our planet is and how tenuous our grip is on achieving successful conservation in the face of an increasing litany of threats.

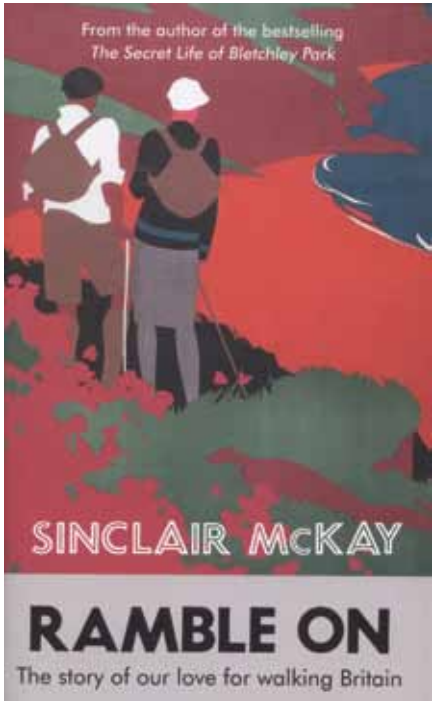
My only niggle is that the book ends with a list of actions we can all take 'to save nature' in the appendix (why the appendix one wonders – perhaps an indication of the audience confusion) which is clearly aimed at the 'western' consumer, although not actually defined as such. The first action is 'support the professionals' by giving money to conservation organisations (well I can't argue with that), followed by a call for volunteers, for letter writing campaigns, careful consumption, reduced consumption and the like. This is all perfectly sensible for a certain type of audience, but generally the list has little relation to the actual examples in the book.

Sue Stolton

R**AMBLE ON**
The story of our love of walking Britain
Sinclair McKay
Fourth Estate, 2012, 291 pages
Hbk £14.99, ISBN 978-0-00-742864-9

This book is full of interesting nuggets, and if you put the bits together there is an overall story of how rambling became popular and ramblers confronted landowners to achieve greater access to land.

McKay notes that "The story of rambling, is in one sense, a prism through which we can view the ebbs and flows of social conflict in Britain …a story of a social movement". No surprises then that the book starts with a visit to Edale to honour the 1932 Mass Trespass on Kinder Scout and pioneers like Benny Rothman. The author also shows how walking became a cultural delight and pastime, so there is Wordsworth and Wainright in the Lake District and Miss Austen's picnic on Box Hill, as well as numerous mentions of characters and settings from books and films.



Most sections feature one of the author's walks, resulting in chapter headings such as 'Rannoch to Corrour Shooting Lodge in a Howling storm; An investigation of the Lure of Wilderness, and the Earliest Days of Organised Rambling'. Or 'Warminster to Battlebury Fort, Salisbury Plain – an Effort to Reach England's inland Atlantis' and 'Exploring the Preternatural Forest of Dean and Woodland Legends – While Examining the Beguiling History of Youth Hostels and B&Bs'. These chapter titles demonstrate the populist tone of the whole book, moving the *Daily Telelgraph* reviewer to remark: "he cannot be accused of being too earnest…"

It's all very chatty, unremittingly chatty. "There we go: processing up slopes, in lines, like fluorescent ants. We are the very image of unabashed enthusiasm". "Hares go loping off in all directions", Dawlish is an "absurdly cute Devon seaside town" and there is a "mellowing light of late summer". At times there is a townee goes to the countryside and a breaking out of the M25 cordon feel to it all. For a moment I did wonder if this was all a spoof, but no, my thoughts had just strayed in a wrong direction.

Primarily about rambling and ramblers, the text does touch a little on some of the broader aspects of walking. After quoting from Robert Louis Stevenson's Walking Tours where a case is made for the freedom of journeying alone, McKay says "Surely this depends on what sort of country one is passing through. Certainly if one is ambling through the meadows of east Sussex, or dawdling along high banked Devon lanes, then certainly one's mood will be lifted like a swallow on a warm breeze. Out here in the Cairngorms, the solitary walker is not so much absorbing the landscape, as defining himself against it. Moods are not quite so osmotic or tranquil. In solitude, a walker develops a distinct relationship with the landscape around him; one that tends to intensify the sense of a spirit of the place. But just because a place has a distinct feel to it does not mean that one will feel at one with it". Mckay goes on to talk about The Grey Man of Ben Macdhui, a ghostly presence felt and heard on the mountain but there are other ways of being aware of and even utilising consciousness when walking . For instance, readers get introduced to the Sunday Tramps, a club of intellectuals, writers, scientists and naturalists, all men, who left London in the 1880s for 25 mile walks. A leader of the Tramps was Sir Leslie Stephen, enthusiastic mountaineer and Cambridge intellectual, who wrote "tramping with them, one has the world under review, as well as pretty scenery". This led me to wonder if the club consciously appreciated, as I and many other folk do, that walking is a way of having a different sort of conversation than over a desk. And I am intrigued to realise that many academics are now exploring walking as a practice and methodology, and not just in the arts.

But back to the book where later chapters touch more specifically on topical matters such as access and the profound joy for older travellers and tourists being able to get up onto the Cairngorm via the railway, or the responsibilities of land ownership and changing attitudes post the CRoW Act and the changes in rural livelihoods while accommodating more walkers. This also prompts some discussion about the commodification and popularising of walking territory in a chapter called 'A Day Out in Bronte Country – What happens When Much-Treasured Walking Landscapes Become Theme Parks'. That is blunt but very much to the point.

Lots of people, not just ramblers, social historians and country lovers, will enjoy this easy-to-read book and will be more patient than I with the whimsical tone.

Alison Parfitt

HIGH NATURE FARMING IN EUROPE
35 European countries –
Experiences and Perspectives
Rainer Oppermann, Guy Beaufoy,
Gwyn Jones (Eds)
verlag regionalkultur, 2012, 544 pages
Hbk, £40.00, ISBN 978-3-89735-657-3

High Nature Value (HNV) farming can be used to describe certain types of low intensity farming commonly characterized by high levels of wildlife interest.

HNV farming is described as being at the centre of EU rural development policy by the publishers of this book, but it is not a commonly identifiable term in the UK within agriculture and its related environmental sectors. It is rather, a concept very much more familiar within the international and more specifically European organizations and agencies. Very broadly HNV farming in the UK would particularly equate to farmers participating in the higher tiers of agri-environment schemes including organic and a high proportion of upland farms.

Notwithstanding this circumstance, the book does provide a clear introduction to HNV farming and to its ecological context. The latter chapters that address the agricultural policy context are particularly good, but suffer the inevitable time lag difficulties inherent with publications, and inevitable with the relatively fast changing arena of CAP reform. There are subsequently some frustrating omissions and also inconsistencies within the individual country examples.

The 35 country examples of HNV farming comprise over half of the book, and are presented alphabetically as individual case studies following a broadly similar format. There is some comparative uniformity in the presentation of background agricultural information describing their respective agricultural sectors which is useful. The levels and lengths of information detailing examples and importance of HNV farming within each country are however, and perhaps inevitably, inconsistent. This also extends to presentational aspects for example the inconsistent citation of figures and tables.

The over-riding issue with this book is the question of its purpose and its audience.

It is essentially descriptive, but includes throughout advisory components and a policy lobbying content. The specialist ecological terms which are used serve to limit its readability. It is not directed at the agricultural practice and policy sectors, but rather the book can provide a broad reference into HNV farming or equivalents across Europe for ecologists and rural development policy specialists.

Will Manley

CONVERGENCE WITH NATURE
A Daoist perspective
David E. Cooper
Green Books, 2012, 168 pages
Pbk, £10.95, 978-0-85784-023-3

Cooper's closing words may disappoint some green-minded readers who may have been enthused by bubbles of wisdom gleaned from interpretations of Buddhism, Native American, Ancient Celtic, and Whatnot – not to mention Daoist (Taoist) – traditions. As usual, the situation turns out to be more subtle than the interpreters suggested. "Daoism's contribution to environmental ethics is not a new principle for governing humankind's treatment of the environment, nor a new plan to rescue the planet. It is, instead, a portrait of how an individual person, in making consonance with the source of things – with dao – may live well in relation to nature."

Daoists, explains Cooper, will be noticeably few amongst factory-farm employees, but also amongst eco-warriors. They will be found feeding birds in winter, and they have aptly been described as the gardeners of the world. He provides a succinct guide through some of the implications of what he prefers to call Daodeism (dao – usually translated as 'way' or 'path'; de – essence, power, excellence, etc.). He moves too fast at times, for instance referring to parallels in early Indian and Greek traditions, and leaving a blur between Daoism and Zen, which may indeed be there. The role of the classical Chinese language in Chinese thinking, keeping the focus on events rather than things, might have been made a little clearer. Dao does not need an external source for change comes self-motivated. His subject is by no means straightforward; his book, however, is stimulating, and likely to prove widely useful as a careful and personal insight into a philosophy that will undoubtedly continue to have a strong influence on parts of the environment and conservation movements.

He helps clarify some misunderstandings: "Give me…", he quotes Thoreau, "the wilderness". This is increasingly difficult, if not impossible; but we can certainly still have wildness, even in the midst of the city. Cooper points out that Daoism is not antagonistic towards real wilderness, but "nor is the 'wilderness experience' privileged by Daoists over engagement with human landscapes, with cultivated environments". Humans can be 'natural' as much in the garden as in the wilderness. Indeed, harmoniousness and 'convergence' would seem to imply some movement towards each other by both parties.

Martin Spray