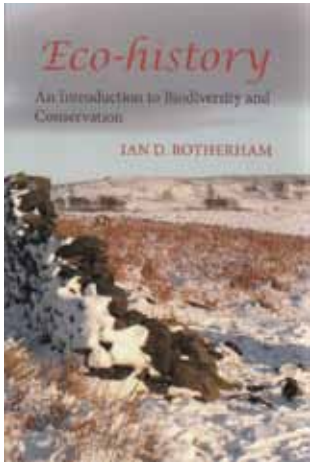
# Book Reviews




**ECO-HISTORY:**
**An Introduction to Biodiversity and Conservation**
Ian D. Rotherham
The White Horse Press, 2014, 268 pages
Pbk, £25, ISBN 978-1-874267-81-2

Ian Rotherham is one of Britain's most productive and distinguished ecological and environmental geographers, and this very personal book contains a great deal to interest and dismay a thoughtful British conservationist.

Ian's central tenet is that of "cultural severance". Until essentially the end of the middle ages, people managed the land and its resources in a consistent and relatively low-impact manner, creating a mosaic of different high biodiversity habitats which, while not being "natural", were related to the early post-glacial "natural habitats" they replaced. To do so, successive generations of people built an affinity and detailed knowledge of their area, and refined the management techniques used to exploit them for food and resources. The habitats they created sustained a great number of species, including the many stress-tolerant specialists that are lost in a more homogeneous landscape. With changes in land tenure, population growth, division of society into rural and urban communities, and more recently coal and petroleum based economies, this close relation to nature has been lost. Overwhelmingly, we are now city and suburb dwellers. We might join the RSPB and Wildlife Trusts, but we know little about our local ecology, and are disenfranchised from any say in land management. We are culturally severed from nature.

This is bad enough, but Ian contends that this simple fact is ignored or misunderstood by government agencies and theme-based NGOs, with potentially dangerous results. Instead there is central focus on climate change issues, and the new concept of "re-wilding". Unfortunately the latter tends to be taken to mean the withdrawal of management from an area of land, so "letting nature take its course". The problem is the prefix "re-". Abandonment of management does not take a site back to where it was before human meddling. It doesn't even take it back to the medieval human-adapted landscape. It merely initiates a succession process which after a transient biodiversity gain may lead to a lower biodiversity outcome.

This is a deeply pessimistic book that catalogues the decline and collapse of biodiversity and habitats in Britain, while pointing out the inadequacy of even the most ambitious restoration projects currently taking place. There really is





no attempt to suggest ways forward, and indeed I suspect there may be little possibility of major improvement. Ian notes in the last chapter that the pessimistic tone reflects top-down changes in the last 10 years in Britain that have effectively emasculated conservation agencies, environmental planning laws, and broken the ethos of conservation for future generations in favour of short term economic gain. Had he written the book 10 years ago, at the end of the "golden age of British Conservation", the tone would have been different.

The book's 17 chapters provide brief, but sometimes jumbled and repetitive summaries of a number of important aspects of conservation ecology. Why does the important (but throw-away) line on alien species' spread being favoured by ecological disruption and gross eutrophication appear in the middle of a chapter on Democracy, Accountability and Environmentalism, and not where it belongs in the chapter on Alien and Invasive Species? These chapters also rely very heavily on Ian's own work, and have little input of ideas from outside Britain, except of course Frans Vera's work on post-glacial environments. In fact the book should really have had the words "in Britain" appended to the title. It is arguably of little relevance, other than a pointer to potential disaster, outside this country.

For British conservationists its best feature is the 40 page 1000AD to 2000AD timeline, which summarises major changes in the factors relating to UK biodiversity. This is a genuinely useful summary, and I personally would have considered structuring the book around it. I would also have started the timeline at the Younger Dryas, so summarising the whole post-glacial, and also would have liked the disastrous years from 2000 to 2014 to be included. The rest of the book is an interesting and provocative read, but isn't a definitive account. Some comments, such as the Little Ice Age being perhaps related to human population decrease should be balanced by new knowledge of the Maunder Minimum and the role of sunspot inactivity.[1]

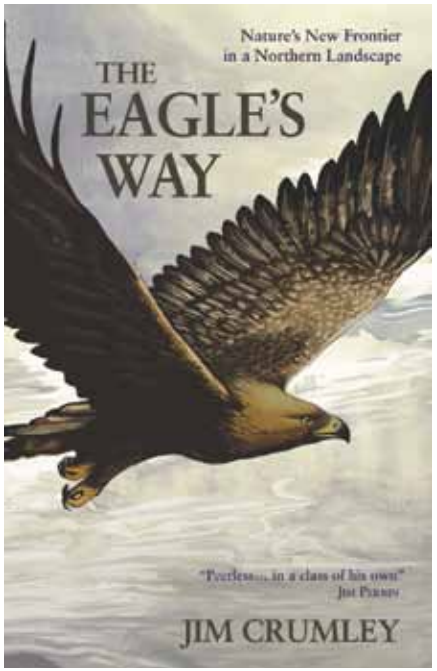
That this book is a bit polemical is actually a point in its favour. While some phrases like "A cursory look at history shows recent centuries humankind has been rushing headlong towards urbanisation and industrialisation" and "water courses spewed their load [of silt] across the vast open floodplains" made me wince, others like "The body odour of urbanisation" and the "Disneyfication of ecology and landscape" [tending to a uniform lowest common denominator] were enlivening. It's a good read.

Finally, I would suggest two topics that should have had more airing, if only because they are positive. The British National Parks were set up precisely to foster the cultural landscapes whose loss Ian regrets, and despite massive recent cuts they still focus on supporting traditional management methods and the communities needed to maintain them. Then there is the exploding evidence of the wildlife significance of gardens and urban greenspace, not just for the benefit of people's health and happiness, but for biodiversity support.[2]

## References

1. M. Lockwood, R. G. Harrison, T. Woollings and S. K. Solanki. 2010. Are cold winters in Europe associated with low solar activity? *Environ. Res. Lett*. 5 024001 pp 1-7
2. http://www.wlgf.org/wlgf_website_019.htm

*Steve Head*




**THE EAGLE'S WAY**
Jim Crumley
Colour plates by Laurie Campbell
Saraband, 2014, 216 pages
Pbk £12.99, ISBN 9781908643476

This book lends credence to an idea I once heard as conjecture 30 years ago; that the Sea Eagle was 'the' eagle of Scotland, out numbering the Golden Eagle by a large factor. Speculation had it that interpretations of Iolaire in place names were references to the former haunts of this huge bird, then extinct in the British Isles, rather than the Golden cousin. Some sites seemed very speculative indeed, since they are a long way from sea coasts, which had been the bird's last known haunt.[1] Jim Crumley's *The Eagle's Way* reproduces a chart, taken from *Bird Study*, that gives comparative numbers for the two species spanning 5,000 years, presumably based upon archeology as much as lexicography and, also, to be honest, old fashioned guesswork. The Sea Eagle was, by this reckoning, far and away the greater in numbers, surprisingly. However, in visits stretching back over 30 years I can attest to the massive expansion of the Sea Eagle in a stretch of coastline of Finnmark, Norway. In barely 10 years numbers have increased to make these huge 'flying carpets' a regular sight along that bleak shore in the High Arctic; the population was obviously constrained merely by human persecution, now ended. It flops about heedless of uninvited visitors – "this *upheaval* of a bird" as Crumley describes its take off.

The Sea Eagle, unlike the Golden, shrugs at human presence; that was its undoing. One that Sir Peter Maxwell Davies flushed from his garden in Orkney, inspired a piece from the composer.[2] I cannot imagine a Golden Eagle on Orkney and certainly not one perched on a garden fence. In the 20th century British and Irish writers excelled at travel writing by surpassing accounts given by the gentry of advice on tickets and transport, hotels and 'facilities' when in 'foreign parts', to something much deeper, richer and rewarding. Literature, in other words. This 'genius' has now migrated to nature writing making it in turn something of an art form. Jim Crumley's work is firmly placed within this *genre*.

Reading Henry Seebohm's T*he Bird's of Siberia* (1901) in the 70s was an introduction for me, a Victorian's journal as much about incident and encounters ("Under no circumstance discuss politics, especially Liberal politics …") as ornithological study.[3] Afterwards, I read Desmond Nethersole Thompson (1908-89) who wrote books that straddled





both the monograph's purpose to inform and superb evocations of experience and place, in his books on *The Greenshank* (1951) and *The Snow Bunting* (1966).[4] Gradually more scientific demands were placed on such writing and the anecdotal lost its place. However, the desire for writing that connected readers (who might just also be scientists) with the expression of reflections and feelings never went away.

In recent years a new generation of authors have written for this receptive audience, including the prolific Jim Crumley. He writes like someone you have met; maybe, luckily, sat opposite you at a bothy fire and swapped stories composed with a poetic gift for imagery long into the night.

In *The Eagle's Way* he begins with a sort of extended preface, that ruminates on 'the eagle' as a metaphor for wildness and spiritual identity, touched upon in his earlier books. This leads to the central and longest section of *The Eagles Way*, a kind of diary of his quest to plot the birds' transits across Scotland east to west; following the re-introduced Sea Eagles and watching how these cope with the Scotland into which they have been transplanted from Norway. He examines many other things in passing – he got me well onside with some pithy remarks about the somewhat inappropriate passion for 'naming' birds on personalised web sites: The Glenelg Sea Eagles are called Victor and Orla … That and coloured tags and rings galore.

Mr Crumley rightly gives an unsentimental, modern view of his country and its wildlife. Previously, he has written on Scottish native pinewoods (the fabled Great Wood of Caledon); his thoughts on the relationship of true wildness to the human psyche; but he does not live in some imaginary 'shortbread tin lid' world of fantasy Highlands. The hard bits – forestry, tourism, increasing public exposure – are there together with the poetics. *The Eagle's Way* is a good read and not just for the Eagles he describes so well, but the reason why they are there and why that matters. The book is more than just text, with renowned photographer Laurie Campbell providing superb colour photographic studies.

## References and notes

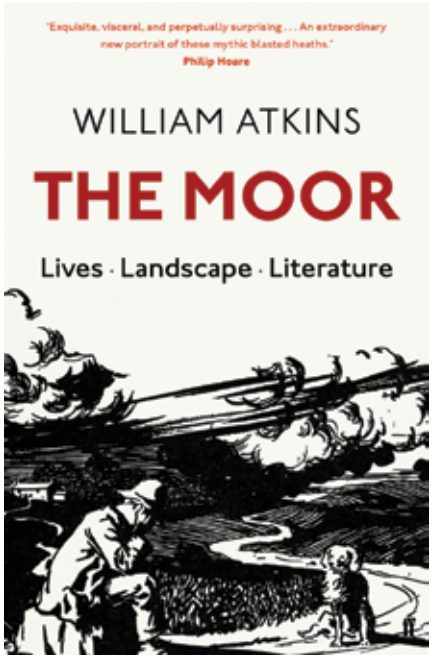
1. In other parts of the Sea Eagle's range it is a bird of forests and lakes. Today re-introductions at inland sites across northern Europe are in progress.
2. Sea Eagle, for horn solo, J. 183. Sea Eagle dates from 1982. (www.maxopus.com)
3. Seebohm (1832-95) travelled to the Yeniesy tundra in Siberia together with the great Scottish ornithologist John Alexander Harvie-Brown (1844-1916) in 1875; an epic journey.
4. Both highly collectable should you find one in an attic or charity shop.

*Barry Larking*

**THE MOOR**
**Lives, Landscape, Literature**
William Atkins
Faber and Faber, 2014, 400 pages
Hbk £18.99, ISBN: 9780571290048

Moorlands are a routine topic of debate in UK conservation and this book is an interesting contribution to an already rich subject. Atkins approaches moorlands from a social rather than ecological perspective, exploring aspects of this diverse habitat through the characters that lived on, or interacted with moors.

Famous names appear such as literary giants like the Brönte and Ted Hughes, but so do the less well-known: farmers, land owners, grouse managers, military




personnel, miners and local residents from the present and the past. With their stories, and through his own experiences of walking in some of the most remote areas in England, Atkins explains moorland ecology and discusses how human activities shape landscapes. He describes a grouse shoot and the specific management practices associated with ground shooting; and he explores the MOD land in the Pennines to give a fascinating glimpse of how military land use can benefit nature conservation.

The book, which starts in the south-west of Cornwall and Devon and works its way to the Scottish borders, would have greatly benefited from an accurate map depicting the many detailed and fascinating corners of these well-trodden areas that readers might wish to visit, such as the hidden Celtic-Roman shrine along the Pennine Way. Overall, the book provides an intriguing literary and social perspective on a set of locations and habitats loved by many because of their wildness and isolation.

*Emily Adams*

**STORYTELLING FOR A GREENER WORLD**
**Environment, Community and Story-Based Learning**
Alida Gersie, Anthony Nanson and Edward Schieffelin (eds)
Hawthorn Press, 2014, 367 pages
£20 Pbk, ISBN 9781907359354

Environment and storytelling, as I have explored in these pages on a couple of occasions, is a coupling that can sometimes be the worse for over-analysis. Once you get beyond the time-honoured kids' storytelling spot at environmental events, storytelling certainly offers exciting, personal and inspiring options for exploring our connections with the natural world. Yet from experience, forcing an (often overwhelming) environmental message onto an existing traditional story can sometimes make it extremely worthy and dull. Stories are strange beasts, full of unexpected turns, and like all art forms they should not be safe. So I approached this book with a deal of nervousness.

I was pleasantly surprised. The book contains 21 chapters from different authors, exploring various ways in which story can be used to useful ends for the environment.

The chapters vary widely. Martin Shaw discusses more spiritual rites of passage and wilderness; David Metcalfe explores how a story circle can make a difference: and Chris Holland reveals his glorious blobster-building workshops. There is a great deal to learn here from the hands-on experience of the writers. Even more generously, all contribute stories which can be used and developed by the reader, making this a very practical contribution to the subject.

This is not an easy book to read, but it is a real treasury, and I mean that in a storyteller's way. It is a book with rooms tucked away that you've never discovered before, familiar pathways that suddenly lead to unexpected places, and the occasional hero. I would recommend it to anyone who would like to give a different edge to the job of explaining and inspiring environmental action.

*Lisa Schneidau*

**ECOCULTURES**
**Blueprints for Sustainable Communities**
Edited by Steffen Bohm, Zareen Pervez and Jules Pretty
Routledge, 2015, 295 pages
Pbk, £34.99, ISBN 978-0-415-81285-6
Hbk, £95.00, ISBN 978-0-415-81282-5

This book arises from a conference on Ecocultures organised at Essex University and its Sustainability Institute. Its editors argue that it "demonstrates how communities in both developed and developing countries are already taking action to maintain or build resilient and sustainable lifestyles diversely organised around an ethic of care for nature, a respect for community, high ecological knowledge, and a desire to maintain and improve personal and social wellbeing".

Case studies from countries including Australia, Brazil, Finland, Greenland, India, Indonesia, South Africa, UK and USA, show how, based on these principles, communities have been able to increase social, ecological and personal wellbeing and resilience. They also address how other more mainstream communities are beginning to transition to more sustainable, resilient alternatives. Theoretical chapters examine the barriers and bridges to wider application of these examples. The authors conclude that these examples can provide the global community with important lessons for a wider transition to sustainability and will show how we can redefine our personal and collective futures around these principles.

'The book of the conference' approach is usually a tricky read of mixed style and quality, but this one is worth the effort in places. I gain some kind of sustenance from knowing that academics are capable of effective involvement in these real world issues and this team do not get lost in over-theorising – there is a good mix of project managers and practitioners. In their summary, my heart was particular gladdened to read: "connection to the unseen is a vital part of local ecological knowledge". This team knows the indigenous mind.

The final and crucial element of 'scaling up and learning the lessons for a transition' in the unsustainable developed world, merits a few pages toward the end and really needs another book. It is one thing to protect ecocultures from economic and cultural imperialisms – and in that, the philosophy and case studies are on solid ground, but 'scaling up'? That needs another conference!

*Peter Taylor*