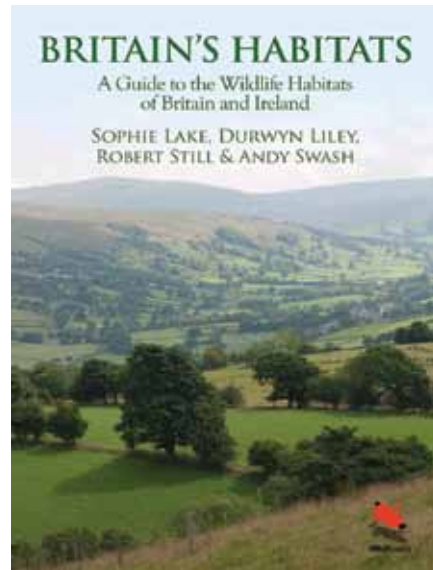


Book Reviews



BRITAIN'S HABITATS A guide to the wildlife habitats of Britain and Ireland

Sophie Lake, Durwyn Liley,
Robert Still, Andy Swash
Princeton University Press,
2015, 276 pages
Hbk £29.95 ISBN 9780691158556

The first thing I did on receipt of this book was use it - and it proved very helpful. I expect many other professional ecologists will find it useful, perhaps particularly so since it is written by consultant ecologists who will understand better than most the practicalities of conservation in Britain. It's a beautiful book, which I imagine practitioners of all types, and amateurs as well as professionals, will enjoy and value.

The book only covers coastal, not marine or estuarine areas. It has entries on artificial habitats, such as arable, orchard, brownfield and coniferous plantation - which are open-minded in noting some conservation value but arguably understate the interest of exotic plantations (on current evidence Britain's most diverse terrestrial habitat per square metre!). It provides a useful overview of linkages and correspondence between the various subjective habitat classification schemes.

The target audience is broad, and the technical level and style is intermediate between natural history and ecology - being professional, concise and clear. It has a large number of fine and useful photographs, and whilst I would quibble at the disproportionate use of a predominantly non-forest taxon (butterflies) to illustrate forest wildlife, photos of mosses, lichens, and a few vertebrates provide variety. The bulk of the photos are botanical or of landscapes. A longer index would have helped make the most of the text.

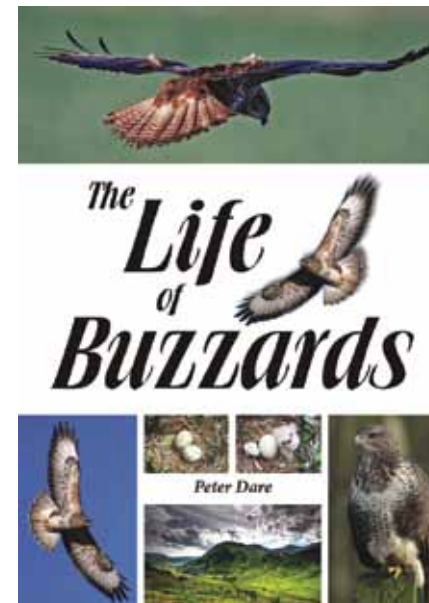
The book does a good job of clarifying the semi-natural nature of many habitats, and explains why it's worth representing them in the conservation network. The cultural origin of many habitats is still surprising to many of the public who have been brought up on conservation propaganda from Britain's NGOs and agencies. Inevitably the ecology is sometimes debatable: not everyone would agree that ravine woodlands" are perhaps amongst the most natural of our habitats", given the numerous extinctions from such sites; credit to the authors for acknowledging the uncertainty.

There are maps showing the location and approximate scope of each habitat

type, and this is revealing in identifying knowledge gaps: for example, how can it be that in the age of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the extent of 'Lowland mixed oak and ash wood' in Northern Ireland is not known! This tells us something about the extent to which conservation resources have been squandered in the UK.

This book is very highly recommended to all who enjoy or work on Britain's habitats.

Clive Hambler



THE LIFE OF BUZZARDS

Peter Dare
Whittles Publishing, 2015, 320 pages
Pbk, £22.99, ISBN 978-184995-130-2

Buzzards were part of my holiday birdwatching as a child. As soon as we crossed the border into Wales they could be seen over hills and woods. Walks were regularly accompanied by

the familiar 'mewing' as they wheeled above us. At that time they were more or less restricted to Wales, Scotland and the west of England. Despite this, in these areas they were relatively common and a regularly seen raptor at a time when many of our birds of prey were at a low ebb.

It is surprising therefore that this is the first monograph that I am aware of since Colin Tubbs' study of the New Forest population published in 1974. It has been well worth waiting for. As the book's cover notes claim, it is "a much needed and authoritative account" of the species. It is based on the author's 60 plus years of experience studying the buzzard first in Dartmoor, then in North and mid Wales, and finally monitoring its re-colonisation of the east of England in north-east Suffolk. The author also draws widely on published and unpublished literature and contacts with fellow naturalists and enthusiasts over a wide geographical range and time scale.

The first section of the book charts the buzzard's year, looking at the annual cycle of feeding, breeding, communal behaviour and the like. It starts in winter, taking us through spring and the breeding cycle, over summer and finally full cycle into autumn. The second section provides details of key aspects of the bird's ecology through territory and food habitats through to population dynamics. The final chapter looks at its population changes over the years and brings us up to date on the buzzard's triumphant return to most of the British Isles.

The book is detailed and scholarly but most importantly a joy to read in the best traditions of natural history writing. The author's knowledge and passion for the subject comes through

without detracting from the detail of the work. Graphs and figures are used where needed with extra data given in a series of appendices and an extensive bibliography. One complaint is that I couldn't find some of the references from the main text in the bibliography. Although the author originally undertook his PhD into buzzard ecology in Devon he subsequently went on to become a fisheries scientist and conducted much of the work presented in this volume as an 'amateur' in his spare time.

I would disagree with the author when he states that it is not a "comprehensive monograph" as it seems to be just that. However, I would agree that he has achieved his aim in providing "an up-to-date summary of our knowledge of common buzzards in Britain that may not only interest raptor ecologists and enthusiast but will also inform local conservation bodies and other land managers, especially those landowners with game bird rearing interests".

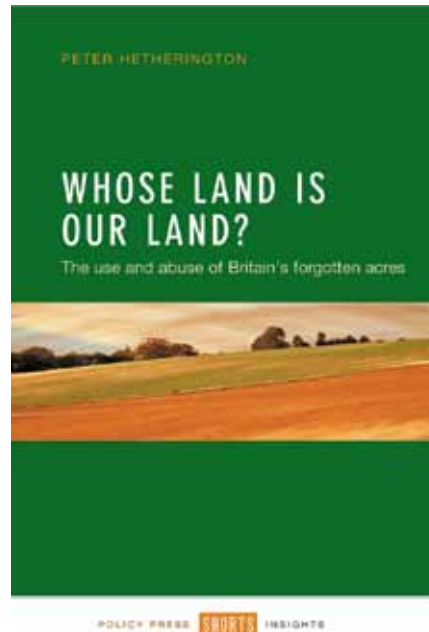
At a time when those interests are trying to legalise a new wave of persecution, purely it seems for the buzzard's temerity in winning the fight back from previous human impacts, I hope the book is widely read and the buzzard's wide-ranging and adaptive ecology is fully understood.

Mick Green

**WHOSE LAND IS OUR LAND?
The Use and Abuse of Britain's
Forgotten Acres**

Peter Hetherington
Policy Press, 2015, 72 pages
Pbk, £7.99 ISBN: 9781447325321

Despite the debate about where to put new houses and whether we



should build lots more, nobody really acknowledges the difficulty of raising these issues in a country in which the land is not controlled by the people but by a tiny minority, many of whom wield enormous power over our environment simply because of an accident of birth.

Peter Hetherington, former regional affairs editor of *The Guardian*, has produced the latest in a long line of books drawing attention to this odd state of affairs. Our ignorance is especially strange since Britain is probably the best mapped country in the world. Hetherington points out that the most recent accurate picture of who owns what dates from the 1870s. The Land Registry requires information when land changes hands, but much rural land never does. Its head of corporate legal services tells Hetherington, "We cannot force them [landowners] to register ... there is no law that says you can. ... Property can ... be passed from father to

son without the transfer of a legal estate, which would trigger first registration".

But the division between those who own and those who do not is made starker today by the great increase in land values in recent times. In the 10 years to 2014, the average selling price of arable land in Britain increased by 277%. Owners of working farmland are exempt from all or half of the inheritance tax that might otherwise be due on their death.

On the other hand, inheritance tax remains due on homes, and stamp duty has been increased to extract yet more of the value accumulating in them. Hetherington points out that the favourable tax treatment of farmland further ratchets up its value and provides an effective subsidy to landowners on top of the largesse of the Common Agricultural Policy. At the same time, the high price of land adds to the problems facing house-buyers, with first-time purchasers now having to find in real terms 10 times the deposit that was required in the early 1980s.

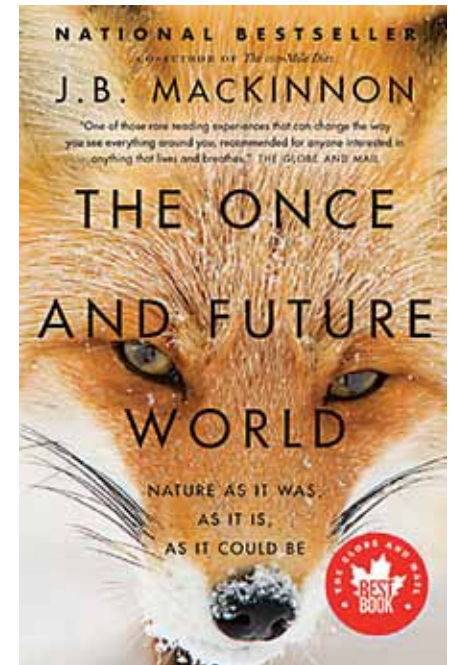
This slim volume in the Policy Press' Shorts series usefully encapsulates some of the key issues. What we now need are some ideas about what should be done.

Marion Shoard, author of *This Land is Our Land* (Gaia Books, 1997).
www.marionshoard.co.uk

THE ONCE AND FUTURE WORLD

J B MacKinnon
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013,
232pages Pbk, £17.24
ISBN 978 - 0- 544 - 10305 - 4

How did I, like many of us, miss this excellent book? It was published in



2013. Perhaps the title is too cryptic, perhaps people mistakenly thought it was just about North America. The book's section headings give the gist of what is to come: the nature of the problem, the nature of nature and finally, human nature.

The nature of the problem is how we misunderstand, how we don't see and the illusions we live with. MacKinnon tells stories and summarises other people's wide ranging research to show us what he means. "Denial is the last line of defence against memory". Denial fulfils ... "our need to be innocent of a troubling recognition". So he talks about the remembering of the great bison (buffalo) hunts but the forgetting of the near extermination of deer in North America. "...try raising this around a kitchen table in the US or Canada ... you will meet with flat disbelief. Deer? ... eat tulips in suburban gardens.

Deer show up in online videos going people's dogs within city limits..." The huge trade in buckskins before the age of denim is forgotten. Then to illustrate how we can often not notice, be blind even, he tells how in a park near home a bald eagle swooped to take a duck from the pond, but mums and toddlers feeding the ducks never saw the eagle; this did not happen.

Most people involved in nature conservation are probably familiar with shifting baseline syndrome. MacKinnon helped me to feel and stretch out (or stretch back through millennia) my understanding: "When it comes to nature, normal is in the eye of the beholder". MacKinnon also talks about Ray Rogers' ... 'double disappearance' concept which was published in 1994, a year before Daniel Pauly's 'shifting baseline syndrome' and Peter Kahn and Batya Friedman's 'environmental amnesia'. In fact the idea that we forget the natural world of the past appears to be regularly rediscovered... but note that 'double disappearance' is described as "going beyond mere memory to hollow out our sense of community with the rest of the living planet".

This is not a big book, only 200 plus pages but it is rich and full of insight. Many of the stories are about other species but he is telling us about ourselves. "History has left behind thousands of traces of a former attentiveness to the living world that can only seem alien to us now". Here he goes on to talk about the *living* energy of animals depicted in cave art: "it is hyper real ... convey(ing) the most subtle and fleeting of animal facial expressions: moments of contentment, apprehension and uncertainty... it would have required a human being to be just another species on the landscape,

in the same way that, in moments of truce, lions and their prey are often seen resting nearly side by side". He then traces this attentiveness through more recent history, so we should not think of it wistfully as a quality only of the Stone Age or hunter gatherers' life. A Beautiful World is the title of that chapter and when I read it I had a spark of realisation about how being alive with more of that living energy could unfold for me – but as yet the nuance of that is still emerging, connection and awareness as well as beauty come into it.

The following chapter, Ghost Acres features us in Britain. "Of all the regions on earth, Britain, ... may tell us the most about how we accommodate the diminishment of the living world. The British countryside is deeply loved, globally influential – and almost entirely unnatural". Read on about Blake's 'heaven in a wildflower' signalling Romanticism, the price of cod, our struggles with beavers, and more, although the author is at fault for not referencing all his sources. Yes, "Britain's environmental history can approach the tragicomic..." After a mere hint at our wholesale slaughter of various species through centuries, we get "... the deep love of nature that many associate with the people of Britain, and which has so greatly influenced the rest of the world ..." Well yes, but what a funny mixed up lot we are. How is it that we Brits love our landscapes, and distinguish between one characteristic and another and yet don't give enough recognition to the parts all other species contribute to those qualities and joys? And in similar vein, we don't seem to relish enough the flow of life, the vitality of nature. Too often we manage for nature conservation's contrived goals against nature herself, against natural

processes. What does this say about our love and awareness of nature, about us?

MacKinnon deftly interweaves several accounts of the complexity of natural processes and relationships. The idea of trophic cascades has become more appreciated but Mackinnon's discussion of ecological cascades extended my understanding to take in a wider compass of natural processes and consequences, temporal and spatial. Again I have been stretched at the same time as enjoying fine writing... "imagine African elephants moving across a savannah dotted with trees...the herd seeming to move ... with the rhythm of clouds..."

A main message of the book is that "we are nature, it is us" and we are members of communities of life, other relatives of which are beyond our total comprehension. For instance MacKinnon gives us examples of how so many creatures have qualities and capacities beyond our imagination. For example "the duck billed platypus, ... can apparently 'smell' the electricity generated by the movements of prey while it feeds blindly in muddy water". And then "The planet's other life forms reveal so many ways of being that we could never imagine them if they didn't already exist in reality. In this sense, other species don't only have the capacity to inspire our imaginations; they are a form of imagination. They are the genius of life arrayed against an always uncertain future, and to allow that brilliance to wane out of negligence is to passively embrace the death of our own minds". In like vein, after writing of Michael Soulé's life and work, Mackinnon says: "Soulé's warning is the same: when we choose the kind of nature we will live with, we are also choosing the kind of human beings we will be".

"But the history of nature is not always and only a lament. It is also an invitation to envision another world." This is not a polemic; Mackinnon is not telling us what we should do. He is helping us to see for ourselves how it is and our part within it. He does say "Conservation is not dead. ... But conservation is not and has never been enough" ... "ours will be an age of rewilding".

Mackinnon is asking what is the wildest world we can live in? He is both asking us and prompting us to be in our world with more conscious awareness. "... we have been attempting to make an impossible world, in which humans are separate from the rest of life. Our greatest experiment is still pending: the making of a world in which humanity can express all of its genius, and so, too, can nature". Is this a wilder and more honest way, of being human within a culture inclusive of all life and its everyday and exceptional wildness? I hope so.

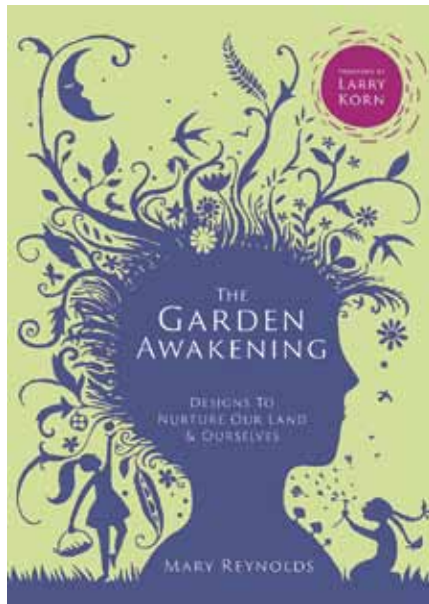
Alison Parfitt

THE GARDEN AWAKENING Designs to Nurture our Land and Ourselves

Mary Reynolds
Green Books, 2016, 271 pages
Pbk £19.99, ISBN 9780857843135

Mary Reynolds is a young Irish garden and landscape designer with a strong ethos and passion for life and the natural world. *The Garden Awakening* is as much a work of poetry and philosophy as it is a design manual, and is really at least three books in one.

"Restoring wellness" explains her philosophy of life, nature and gardens. The land is alive, we have misused it for



years, but we need gardening to link us to nature, although gardeners generally work against nature. Mary's approach is to invite Nature to assert her true self, and then work to heal and rebalance the land, interacting with us at energetic, emotional and physical levels. We must recognise the bubbling energy of creation, and our gardens become our personal churches, places of safety and peace. Mary illustrates this with parables from traditional Irish life, her dreams and childhood experiences. People who seek metaphors for their spiritual link to managed nature will enjoy these parts of the book. Active steps to take include spiritual acts like beating the bounds of your plot while singing or beating the *bodhrán*, listening and meditating, and the very practical process of restoring soil fungi and bacteria.

The core of the book is 80 pages on her practice of garden design. Mary Reynolds has won gold at Chelsea, and she includes some exciting exemplary

designs for small to large gardens. All are unconventional, embrace natural forms and powerful shapes, and frequently involve changes of level. What I personally find less helpful is the advice on using protection prayers, crystals and pagan symbols, where I use simple observation, contemplation and painting mental pictures. Nevertheless, many of the designs based on a poem or spiritual message *work*, and the practical examples of nature-inspired shapes are excellent.

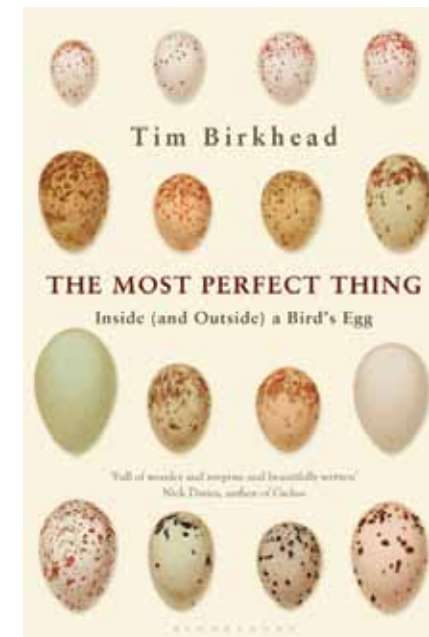
The next part could be a separate 90 page book on the nature of and creation of a Forest Garden. This is aimed at the inspired, long-term gardener with a very sizable plot, and in contrast with the design section, is full of practical advice and detailed planting information. There are some great ideas that ordinary gardeners could use, like Hügeltkultur raised beds and mounds founded on heaps for dead wood, but on balance this isn't going to be helpful for the average Brit gardener.

Finally, the book has a section on alternative management. Some advice such as mulches is fairly mainstream. Some puzzles me, like the mechanical cultivation of soil is bad, but getting pigs to do the same is good. Holy water can eliminate leatherjackets if you really believe in its power. There are descriptions of alternative ways of eliminating pests, including the rather dangerous use of "Silver water" which has been dropped because of the risk of argyria in humans.

I'm a sceptical but spiritual scientist, and I found the book in turn exhilarating and exasperating – and with never the slightest touch of self-doubt, which worries me given how unconventional

some of the advice is. But for anyone wanting to be dragged out of their gardening rut, and for people who relish the spiritual side of land management – challenge yourself and read it.

Stephen Head



THE MOST PERFECT THING Inside (and outside) a bird's egg

Tim Birkhead
Bloomsbury, 2016, xvi+288 pages
Hbk £16.99 ISBN 978-1-4088-5125-8

In my experience, this is an unusual book. My experience, that is, of bird books. It is probably the only one I've read from top to bottom. Ornithology is not my thing; and oology – the study of eggs – something I'd not thought about. Tim Birkhead's book has bridged a gap in my biological understanding, and I suspect it will do the same for other people who happen on it.

Birds' eggs have long fascinated some people, most of them doubtless not scientists. The focus of their interest is on the *aesthetics* of the individual eggs and of neatly arranged collections of them – that, and the near-craving to have the biggest, most numerous collection of *something*.

The fanatical amassing of empty eggshells by *some* collectors is several times discussed, most horrendously in the 'Epilogue'. Rich and clearly eccentric Vivian Hewitt gathered hoards of them (and many other things). At his death he had accumulated about half a million eggs. Four large removal lorries took them to their new home, where their new owners, the British Trust for Ornithology, must have felt sorely daunted. The image is obscene.

It is the more so because the documentation of the 'collection' is minimal and chaotic. Nonetheless, Birkhead shows that *some* science can be winnowed from such death-piles – and, indeed, he emphasises the shift of endeavour from collecting to investigation, or to wanting to protect, that enthusiasts for birds' eggs – or butterflies, or flowers – frequently undergo. He gives as examples Mark Cocker, Bill Oddie, and David Attenborough.

But this is not the meat of the book. That is the search for an understanding of what a bird is about when it is a developing knot of cells atop a depot of food (yolk) within a water reserve and antimicrobial barrier (albumen), which its mother has just enveloped in intricate coats of calcium carbonate, and then perhaps coloured and marked (the 'shell').

The book's central chapters deal with 'Making shells', 'The shape of eggs',

'Colouring eggs', albumen and 'the Microbe war', 'Yolk, ovaries and fertilisation', and the chore of 'Laying, incubation and hatching'. The author's main interest is guillemots, but his knowledge is far wider and deeper than just these. He draws many species into his story: blue tits and blackbirds, woodpeckers and wrens, Spix's macaws and zebra finches included. And he provides a raft of references from the long history of ornithology.

The reader learns not only about bird biology. The rigorous caution and skepticism that Birkhead shows throughout his text is a good example of the way some biological science advances. Many times he has revisited an earlier, accepted, understanding, reinvestigated, and drawn fresh, different, conclusions. It is good to see a scientist conclude that he is wrong; even better to see him admit a simple - but for so many of us a painful and shameful - "I don't know!"... And it seems we don't know, for instance, why some birds lay eggs that are nearly spherical, others that are distinctly pointed; why some have plain eggs, some others have colourful or elaborately marked ones, and some lay different-looking eggs at different times.

This is not a textbook or treatise. It is lucid, written in an enthusiastic, non-scientific, sometimes colloquial, prose, although perhaps let down by some of its few line drawings being rather uninformative, and by a somewhat limited range of colour photos. However, for me an important aspect is largely lacking. What we call 'eggs' are fundamental to animal life. Reptiles, including dinosaurs, have a few mentions, as do amphibians, but there is almost nothing to remind the reader of eggs of other creatures. There is little to demonstrate how the eggs of birds are like or unlike those of other animals, how the egg-phase of animals has evolved, and indeed how one might define the avian egg to show how it is unique. Fish, slugs, moths, and earthworms have eggs, and it may be (to us) that except aesthetically they too are the most perfect things.

This latest book joins such titles as *The magpies*, *The wisdom of birds*, and *Sperm competition in birds*. I may be tempted to read some of them.

Martin Spray

