

BOOK VIEWS

by Brian E. Cassie, Millis

I have no idea of the demographics of *Bird Observer* readership. However, I assume that all of you are birdwatchers, that a few are ornithologists, and that a handful are serious book collectors. Therefore, I shall tend to look at the more popular works, leave the technical literature for the professional journals, and occasionally throw in a collector's item. Once again, if there is a book you want me to describe, let me know.

THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF BIRDS. Edited by Dr. Christopher M. Perrins and Dr. Alex L. A. Middleton. Facts on File, New York, 1985. xxxi+447 pages; 700 color photographs; color paintings. \$35.

There are a lot of things to like about *THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF BIRDS*. The book is a survey of the world's bird families and admirably succeeds such standards in the genre as Austin's *BIRDS OF THE WORLD* and Harrison's *BIRD FAMILIES OF THE WORLD*. Attractive in format and lavish in the use of color illustration, this collaboration by 90 authors and 10 artists provides up-to-date information on 180 families of living birds with handsome artwork depicting representative species and, to a lesser extent, their behavioral traits. The photographs are generally outstanding and include birds seldom seen in other photographic collections, e.g., White-winged Triller and Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, as well as imaginative portraits of commoner species. Considering the quality of the production, the price is easily justified.

A DICTIONARY OF BIRDS. Edited by Bruce Campbell and Elizabeth Lack. Buteo Books, Vermilion, 1985. xxx+670 pages; over 200 black-and-white photographs and drawings; text figures; tables. \$75.

Ask ten ornithologists to name the outstanding bird publication for 1985, and I am sure most would unhesitatingly pronounce it to be *A DICTIONARY OF BIRDS*. The editors have done a superb job of compiling the work of some 282 authorities from around the world. The dust jacket blurb speaks true of the contents: "Major, authoritative articles cover the field of modern ornithology and related subjects, many of them running to several thousand words. In addition, there are articles on all the bird families [and] numerous short entries defining special terms, application of names, etc. The total gives a text of over 800,000 words." The range of subject matter covered is nearly as impressive as the writing itself. One expects articles on echolocation, ectoparasites, and energetics, but "Birds of the Bible" and "Birds in Poetry"? In my estimation, these add a great deal to the book - a bit of literature in a sea of science. The line drawings are first-rate, and the photographs are very well chosen, although not very well reproduced. For the serious bird student, amateur or professional, this is an invaluable

reference, and while the price may seem high, it is actually moderate compared with those of some academic publications.

Please note that of over 370 authorities contributing to the two volumes just discussed, fewer than five percent are women. Are there really so few women in the ornithological world? Perhaps that question can be answered by a new release - *BIRDWATCHING WITH AMERICAN WOMEN, A SELECTION OF NATURE WRITINGS* edited by Deborah Strom, Norton, New York, 1986; 286 pages; \$17.95. This work may possibly be reviewed in the future.

THE ESSENTIAL GILBERT WHITE OF SELBORNE. Edited by H.J. Massingham, selected and introduced by Mark Daniel. David R. Godine, Boston, 1985. xx+361 pages; woodcut illustrations; paperback. \$9.95

In December, 1788, the natural history letters of a retiring curate from a tiny English parish were published in London by his brother. Gilbert White and his *NATURAL HISTORY OF SELBORNE* were an immediate success, and the book has remained more or less continuously in print ever since, the editions now numbering in excess of two hundred. (I have about thirty!) No library should be without a copy of White's writings, which James Fisher said "give an impression of simplicity but are the fruit of the endless pains of a genius." The present edition is noteworthy in that it includes not only the well-known letters to Daines Barrington and Thomas Pennant, but also excerpts from White's *NATURALIST'S JOURNAL* and *ANTIQUITIES OF SELBORNE* and several personal letters. Much of the content of White's letters concerns birds (he added three species to the British list), and birdwatcher and ornithologist alike have benefited from White's philosophy of careful observation and record keeping. The celebrated British naturalist Richard Jeffries put it this way nearly a century ago: "Part of his success was owing to his coming to the field with a mind unoccupied. He was not full of evolution when he walked out, or variation, or devolution, or degeneration. He did not look for microbes everywhere. His mind was free and his eye open. To many it would do much good to read this work if only with the object of getting rid of some of the spiders' webs that have been so industriously spun over the eyesight of those who would like to think for themselves."

Note on *A FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF BRITAIN AND EUROPE*, which was reviewed in this column in the February 1986 issue: Mr. Harry Foster, field guide editor at Houghton Mifflin, has advised me that the version of the *GUIDE* sold by this company is the one with the reworked color plates. My thanks to Mr. Foster for correcting me on this point.

BRIAN E. CASSIE is a butterfly gardener living in Millis who has recently joined the staff of *Bird Observer* to write this column.



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