

Book review

Life along land's edge: Wildlife on the shores of Roebuck Bay, Broome by Danny Rogers, Theunis Piersma, Marc Lavaleye, Grant Pearson and Petra de Goeij with photographs by Jan van de Kam. 2003. Department of Conservation and Land Management, 17 Dick Perry Avenue, Kensington, Western Australia, 6151. 162 pp. ISBN 0 7307 5540 1. Hardback, over 450 high quality photographs.

Copies cost A\$39.95 plus postage and can be ordered through the Broome Bird Observatory, email: bbo@birdsaustralia.com.au or mail: PO Box 1313, Broome, Western Australia 6725, Australia.

This is a celebration of Roebuck Bay in north-west Australia, one of the most sumptuously diverse intertidal ecosystems in the world. It is not a science book but it is written by scientists and carries authority. Moreover it is illustrated with 450 of Jan van de Kam's wonderful photographs.

Roebuck Bay was 'discovered' by ornithologists as recently as the early 1980s; since when a steady procession of wader people have visited the area and left with rolls of film and amazing memories of the birds, the bay and the people. This book gives a comprehensive view of Roebuck Bay from an extraordinarily wide variety of perspectives ranging from researchers to the local indigenous people.

The text is excellent, but plays almost a supporting role to the lavish photographs. Typical Broome pictures – blue sea and sky sandwiching red cliffs garnished with huge wader flocks – are scattered throughout; no Broome book can afford to be without them. But what is different are the photos of mudskippers, sea slugs, gaudy fiddler crabs, worms and bivalves, not to mention such beauties as the "Ingrid-eating snail". The latter was named in honour of Ingrid Tulp, a pioneer student of Roebuck Bay's intertidal ecosystem who sacrificed blood in pursuance of her studies. The pictures of waders in action are also a real feast. Roebuck Bay supports important populations of 30 wader species and around 50 have been recorded. Most of them are depicted in the photos, ranging from the world's largest wader, Eastern Curlew, to one of its smallest, Red-necked Stint.

The first of the eight chapters asks – and answers – the question "Why is Roebuck Bay so special?" The answer is presented logically and comprehensively, but perhaps it is all summed up in the photograph on page 5, to us the most evocative in the book, of a mixed dispersed flock of feeding waders, each one following its own agenda.

Chapter 2 covers the seasons and explains that although most Europeans consider that Broome has just two – wet and dry – local indigenous people have a different perspective which revolves around the food supply. The dry season can normally be relied on to be dry but the amount of rain in the wet season varies considerably from year to year. Local people often refer to the wet season as the 'sweat season', which may be more apt. An interesting section deals with the seasons that invertebrates recognise as well as the better known seasons of the migratory waders.

The habitats of the bay are dealt with in a chapter entitled "Mud and more" while invertebrates are covered in "Creeping crawlies". These show that there is rather more to Broome than sunbathing on Cable Beach or waiting for migratory waders to land.

Because of its wide variety of habitats, the Broome area

has a bird-list of nearly 300, but this is only slightly more than the number of invertebrate species in the mud: 265, which according to current knowledge is the world record. "Creeping crawlies" also makes brief mention of "odd animals and big beauties": turtles, dugong and Irrawaddy dolphins. The first two are illustrated; but there is no photograph of the dolphin. That this should be almost surprising is a reflection of the comprehensiveness of Jan van de Kam's photographic record.

No book on Broome would be complete without pictures depicting hordes of migratory waders roosting shoulder to shoulder in serried ranks. There are plenty enough in the "International meeting place" chapter, but there's more. What is particularly well done is the inclusion of waders on their arctic breeding grounds. Then, the authors ask us to imagine standing beside Roebuck Bay in extreme tropical heat wearing arctic clothes and surviving. They suggest this is a really dumb thing to do, but then proceed to explain how the birds manage just that. Another gem is the way that a Great Knot has been time-lapsed in the act of swallowing a shellfish.

Quite apart from the migrant waders, Roebuck Bay supports flourishing populations of resident birds and these are dealt with, though not so comprehensively, in a separate chapter on "Australian birds". Included in this section are a number of migratory terns including an Asian race of the Gull-billed Tern and probably Asian migrant Little Terns. Perhaps these should have been included with the previous chapter dealing with migrant waders. But this is just a quibble.

The final chapter discusses people and the way they use and abuse the bay. It is difficult to harmonise the competing needs of all the people that feel that they have a stake in a place such as Roebuck Bay. The photograph on page 157 of two people walking towards a large flock of waders with an unleashed dog sums up the conflicts nicely, especially as the dog appears intent on giving the birds a good fright.

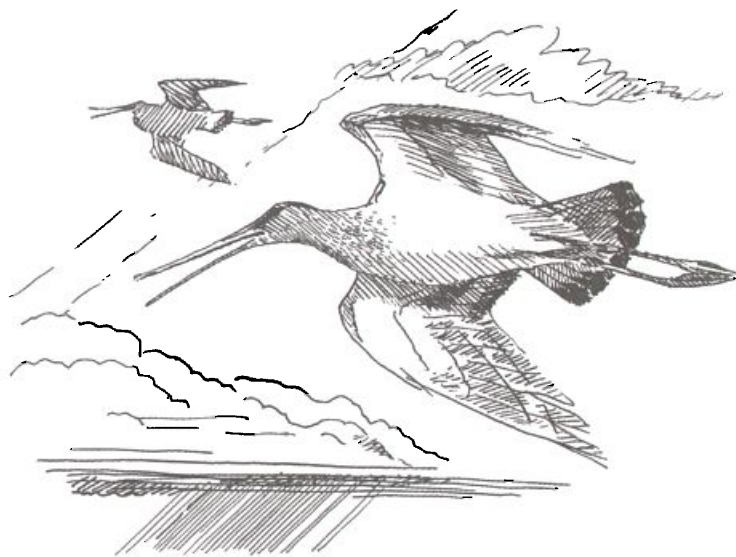
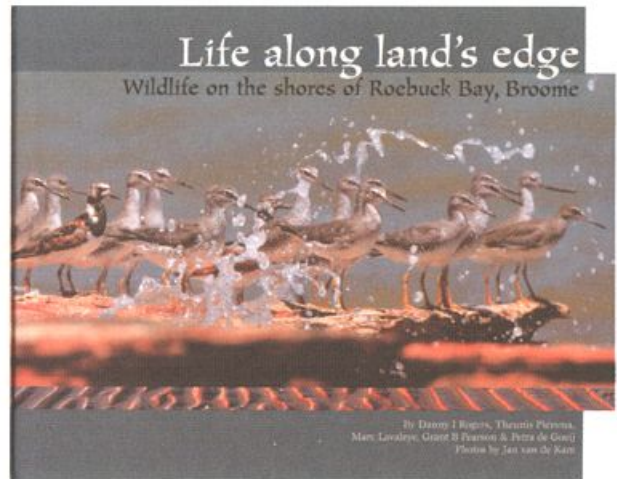
The last few pages on "enjoying the wildlife safely" emphasise the need to take care of one's personal safety in what can be a very harsh environment with all sorts of hidden dangers. We are not sure we like this section at all: 99% of the book is all about how Roebuck Bay is such a fantastic wildlife paradise and a great place to visit; then it suddenly confronts us with all sorts of deadly diseases borne by mosquitos and how dangerous it can be to go swimming (jellyfish, sharks, crocodiles, etc.). This appears to be an Australian thing: they love telling tales of dangerous beasties, especially to foreigners! But maybe a gentle reminder is needed that this beautiful area does hide some dangers.



The eclectic nature of this book is the main reason why it is likely to appeal to a wide variety of people. Casual visitors to Broome, whether or not they have any interest in natural history will find it fascinating, but so will birdwatchers and professional ecologists. A particularly nice aspect is that it is easy to dip into the book and read about a subject of interest. It also makes a good starting point for further studies. The number of subjects covered is extremely broad, ranging from the palaeogeography and the geology of Roebuck Bay to the ecology of the mudflats, the mangroves and saltmarsh, the effects of tourism and climate, aboriginal culture and wader migration.

All in all, this is a thoroughly enjoyable and worthwhile book that summarises a huge amount of information. For those who have been privileged to visit Roebuck Bay, it will revive great memories; for those not so fortunate it will act as an encouragement to go. This is not a science book but it would enhance the bookshelves of anyone. In fact my mother would love it from me as a Christmas present (but don't tell her!).

Pete Collins and Rosalind Jessop



M. Dementier

