

BOOK REVIEWS

Britain's Habitats, A Field Guide to the Wildlife Habitats of Great Britain and Ireland.

by Sophie Lake, Durwyn Liley, Robert Still, Andy Swash. Princeton Press 2020. ISBN 978-0-691-20359-1. 416 pp. Hardback £25.00

This book suits all readers – young, old, experienced and not so experienced.

It classifies habitats into 10 groups: Woodland, Scrub, Heathlands, Grasslands, Mountains, Rocky Habitats, Wetlands, Freshwaters, Coastal Habitats and Other. Each group is further divided, thus in the case of Mountains into Montane Dwarf-Shrub Heath, High Montane Heath and Snow-bed, Mountain Ledge and Montane Scrub.

Each sub-division covers a general introduction, origins and development, conservation, what to look for, how to recognise, when to visit with accompanying distribution and extent statistics, clear map and many well captioned photographs of flora and fauna. For example, Montane Dwarf-shrub Heath has 10 photographs covering Creag Meagaidh plateau, Cul Mor (Assynt) plateau, dwarf juniper, fir clubmoss, High Spy (Lake District), trailing azalia, dotterel, cloudberry, ptarmigan and Beinn Eighe.

The authors are experienced ecologists with graphic design and photography backgrounds which shows in the clear, user friendly layout and visuals. Together Sophie Lake and Robert Still founded and manage the Wild Guides series of books which include for example *Britain's Reptiles and Amphibians* and *Britain's Ferns*.

Appendices include lists of English and scientific names for flowering plants, mosses and liverworts, fungi, lichens, macro-algae, invertebrates, fishes, amphibians, birds and animals mentioned in the text.

If your experience is mainly in Scotland this book will not disappoint, since Scotland is fortunate in having a diverse range of habitats. Therefore, it will not take long to find a photograph you recognise. My recommendation would not be to read this book cover to cover but to dip into it at random and be fascinated by what you discover. Initially, I found myself trying to find as many photographs as possible of places that I had visited. I then became absorbed by the places I had not visited. Thus, the

book has become a useful resource when planning my next trip. The book would make an excellent gift, especially for the younger person. Once the book is opened the reader will experience new vistas and a greater interest in the world around them. For families planning an outing this could become a 'where to go next' book. Even those familiar with their local surroundings will get greater enjoyment and appreciation as habitats are explained and key features identified. At almost one kilogram this book is not rucksack friendly. It is, however, an excellent resource to be read on your return.

I recently climbed the Merrick, a Corbett and a County Top. Where the path moves from forest to montane a large stone slab has been placed. On my descent I placed my feet in the footprint impressions in the rock and reading the names of the two habitats I was straddling I looked about me, hoping others would do the same. Which section of your bookcase should hold such a text? My advice - leave it out! Encourage others to pick it up, dip in and see the delights it offers. For some it will bring back happy memories of places visited and friends they shared them with. For the eager, younger reader it will be 'When are we going?'

MARK PEEL

The Munros in Winter

by Martin Moran, first published in 1986 and recently republished by Sandstone Press 2020. ISBN 9781905207695. 273pp with a newly added foreword by Joy Moran. Paperback £14.99.

In 1984, the late British climber and mountain guide Martin Moran became the first person to conquer all the Munros (at that time a total of 277) in a single winter journey of 83 days. This book chronicles this incredible achievement.

It is chronologically split into areas, for example The Cairngorms Complete 17-21 February and Climax on the Cuillin 4-7 March. Each section gives lots of detail on the conditions, route, terrain and challenges encountered. At times diary excerpts of his own or his back up support wife, Joy's, add an immediacy to describe the mood or thoughts they were having that day.

Packing in their jobs in Sheffield and selling their home to fund the trip, Martin and wife Joy head for Scotland in a rented Ford Transit caravan. The aim is to complete the challenge between 21st December to 20th March. A window of ninety days holding the greatest probability of winter conditions. Bar the occasional company of friends Joy is the sole support crew for Martin on the trip completing 120 Munros herself in the process.

The couple undoubtedly experience all the weather that the mountains have to throw at them, at one point both are caught in a full-depth, slab-avalanche above Coire na Feola on Ben Wyvis.

From start to finish this book was an engaging read. Although the success of Martin's trip is known from the outset, I still felt drawn into both his highs and lows, those moments of self-doubt where a positive outcome seemed far from certain.

Martin's writing is humble and his passion for the mountains shines out through the pages. One particular highlight is the story of Joy and Martin's relationship. Three months living in a caravan, with little other for company, would be a test for any marriage. The bond between them is strong however and the affection and occasional squabble provide humour and a real lift to the writing. It's worth noting that in those pre-mobile phone days, a certain amount of telepathy was required for the caravan to be in the right place at the right time, on days when plans changed whilst on the hill.

An estimate of 1,028 miles of walking and 125,580m of ascent was required to complete the round. This averaged at 13.9 miles and 1700m ascent per day for the 74 active days not spent waiting out storms or resting.

I sometimes struggle to finish books these days so it's testament to Martin's skill as a writer that he was able to keep me engrossed to the end, including the appendices! The hand drawn maps added a nice touch to help visualise the routes taken. It's one to stay on the bookshelf and be re-read again and again.

IZY KIRKALDY

Regeneration: The Rescue of a Wild Land

by Andrew Painting. Birlinn 2021. ISBN 978 1 78027 714 1. 306pp, with 16pp of photographs, plus notes, references and index. Hardback £20.00.

This book, by the Assistant Ecologist on the NTS Mar Lodge Estate since 2016, will interest and please all members of the Club as it deals with many different ecological aspects of the estate, and the people working to conserve and enhance them. Its 16 main chapters, each of 10-15 pages, are structured into three groups: Woods (including roe deer, and grouse), Moors (including red deer, and hen harriers), and Mountains (including snow patches, and dotterel), plus an Epilogue (mainly about ‘rewilding’) and a final short Afterword on the year 2020, when “an overstretched National Trust for Scotland realised it was facing an existential crisis”.

The main chapters mix personal experiences (e.g., “we work our way up one of the burns that falls off Carn Bhac”), some science background with references for those who want to dig deeper, and the relevant management problems being encountered by the Estate. This structure works quite well, although some items have had to be fitted in somehow (salmon within Moors, footpaths within Mountains), and other topics are largely neglected, e.g., the ecology of lochs, and the terrible trio of midge, cleg and tick. Humans come into it, of course, but from an ecological perspective (field sports, camping fires, wildlife disturbance) rather than e.g., landscape appreciation (other than by the author). However, many places familiar to Club members get a mention: Derry Lodge and dam, bothies (on the estate, not the Shelter Stone etc.), and “the wild land without pretension” of Carn an Fhidhleir.

The book has been widely praised for its content and style, and rightly so. From his inside position on the estate, Painting does not duck the difficult ecological, social and political challenges: only when it comes to the meagre public funding for nature conservation does his frustration show. Otherwise, the book is full of interesting information even to those familiar with the area, and it can be warmly recommended.

KEN THOMSON