

along the Platte River in Nebraska? There is an eloquent discussion about the plight of the Palouse prairie in western North America. Every ecologist should read about the author's reflections on the merits of observation based science (page 223) vs. the more modern fashionable view on experimental science to get answers to biological questions.

Rarely is there a tome that is completely devoid of shortcomings. To keep the reader's attention there are, at times, lapses of objectivity in this book. "Fetid odour of bison dung" and "red-rimmed beady eyes" of a bison bull is not something you will experience in Canada's Wood Buffalo National Park. Nor will a bull bring his "head up, and then look around searching for wolves that might mean danger". There are errors in spelling of place names and of people in the book, but these are not major shortcomings of the book. The authors have brought their world (our world) to us, and it was therefore their responsibility to capture the readers attention. In the process a bit of hyperbole is acceptable, if that is what it takes to get the job done. Hardcore science can be boring and not entertaining.

The authors' have not abandoned objectivity for clarity to deal with complex subjects. This work is written in an engaging prose, covers a broad subject and is a powerfully strong, scholarly piece of work. If only more biologists would take the time to write about the "life and times" during their professional careers in such a profound way. Future biologists will benefit from those who have come before, and they in turn should place their messages into the bigger scheme of things – how can we make this a better place for future generations? Understanding the functional relationships and processes in nature is a way of setting future agendas and apply new techniques to resolving environmental management issues. I applaud the Theberges for a job well done!

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[Book Review Editor's note: This book was a finalist for the Writers Trust Literary Prize for Non Fiction 2009-10].

The Practical Naturalist: Explore the Wonders of the Natural World

Dorling Kindersley Ltd. DK Publishing (United States), 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York. 255 pages. 22.95 CAD, Paper.

This book is interesting in concept and appealing in delivery. However, I encountered several problems while reading it. I am concerned that some of the information presented is confusing and imprecise. Reading it reminds me of reading the newspaper. If I know the subject well, I notice if the story is expressed unclearly or incorrectly. If I don't know the subject well, I might not notice, but am left suspecting that many news stories haven't got the details exactly right.

It is a very attractive-looking book. I congratulate the designers on an eye-catching cover and a comfortably-sized volume with an accessible, friendly interior. The book presents the budding "practical naturalist" with a gallery of different landscapes, ecosystems and environments to explore, a hint at the range of beings and relationships found there, and tools and skills to help one along. It includes activity suggestions. These sections are well-organized and lavishly illustrated with drawings and photos in the typical Dorling Kindersley (DK) style. You are reminded that you can explore nature in your own house and backyard, but that there is a great big world out there full of wonderful stuff too. I believe the book could be truly educational and inspiring for an audience ranging from older children to adults.

Unfortunately, I ran into trouble by page 10. Early sections discussing "Nature of the planet" (page 10) and "Climate and seasons" (page 20) attempt to show global biomes and climatic regions on world maps.

These maps are cartographically murky. The "Mature of the planet" page suggests readers find their own biome on a world map. I attempted that, to find that Lake Superior and Lake Huron drain directly into a river that flows to the Atlantic Ocean. Lakes Ontario and Erie are detached and landlocked to the south. The easternmost point of North America, which should be the Avalon Peninsula of Newfoundland and Labrador, appears far south of the Great Lakes. The climate zones map shows the sub-arctic zone extending well south of the Canada-United States border judging by where the Great Lakes are on the first map. I can't make sense of the arctic coastline which is also different on each map. There is something fishy about Sweden too. Is it really all "temperate forest" from north to south while Norway and Finland are "coniferous forest"? Maybe the maps are simply meant to be impressionistic. If so, it might have been wise not to send readers on the doubtful trail of pinpointing their home biome.

I tried to set aside my frustration over the maps to move on to the rest of the book. I was tripped up again at the "Forest birds" spread on pages 98 and 99. I suspect the publisher was trying to adapt a European-focused book to market further afield. I wonder if the editors took enough care to make sure the book would honestly satisfy an audience outside of Europe. Consider this: The jackdaw "is widespread in most of the Northern Hemisphere." This makes me think the jack-

daw should be common in North America. It is absent, except as an occasional vagrant on the east coast. It might be widespread over half of the Northern Hemisphere, but not this half.

Here is another example from the same section: "Northern parula (is) a summer visitor to northeastern USA". Ahem. It comes to Canada too. Okay, that sort of omission is nothing new. But why not mention the important fact that the species breeds where it spends the summer? It wouldn't be such a problem if "summer visitor" appeared in the glossary at the back of the book, but it doesn't. Also on that page, the European species wood warbler is called both a "summer migrant" and a "visitor" in the broadleaf woods of Britain and Europe. It's true, these species spend significant parts of their lives in different parts of the world, but to me both "summer migrant" and "visitor" imply that the species is not breeding in the location.

Speaking of wood-warblers, again on the same page the authors also refer to North American "wood-warblers". Then we read: "The robin, found widely throughout Europe ..." and then, "American robins have several call notes ..." The authors might have chosen less confusingly-named species. It seems troublesome to use robins and robins, and wood warblers and wood-warblers, as examples on the same page without explaining how distantly-related species have similar common names in different parts of the world. The "Garden birds" section on pages 56-59 is more cleverly written and avoids this sort of problem.

Do these details matter? I think they do. (The coral snake – milk snake illustration of mimicry on page 12 has me baffled.) I also find it intensely frustrating

that, for many of the species used as examples, there is no indication of from what part of the world they come. If that small detail were added I would feel much more satisfied. For instance, the "Water birds" spread on pages 144-145 includes the broad, geographic distribution for all the species used. I'm glad at least some of the authors thought that would be helpful.

Although I remain wary of the content, here is a selection of other sections that could delight and intrigue a budding naturalist: The diversity of life (although not a single micro-organism is mentioned); astronomy; a naturalist's toolkit and record keeping; what to wear and how to be safe; Forests (forest floor, logs, rot and recycling, the canopy, bark, fungi, the seasons); Tropical forests; Scrublands and heath; Grasslands; Mountains; Deserts; Caves; Cliffs; The polar regions; freshwater and marine ecosystems.

As a teenager I would have been excited to receive this book. It's sufficiently engaging to convince me to grab my naturalist's toolkit and run right out there. I'll have to leave it to the reader to decide if the captivating treatment of the book's broad concepts makes up for the content concerns. I would have loved to pass it on to the youngsters in my life, but I am reluctant to do that.

While DK is the publisher, the book also bears the National Audubon Society logo. An Audubon staff biologist is listed as a consultant and wrote the foreword. The publisher lists 26 different editors, contributors and others.

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ELECTRONIC SYSTEMS: WEB SITES

Feather Atlas <http://www.lab.fws.gov/featheratlas/index.php>

All of us have found a feather and wondered species it came from. Now you can get help from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's feather atlas website that will help feather identification. It consists of high-resolution scans of flight feathers of a selected group of birds. As this is an ongoing project the authors plan to continually add new species. So far there are samples for hawks, ducks, pigeons, nighthawks, crows, cuckoos, owls, pelicans, gulls, grouse, flamingos and woodpeckers.

The scans are of museum specimens and illustrate the dorsal surfaces of 12 wing flight feathers or remiges and six tail feathers or rectrices [from the right half of the tail]. If the species is sexually dimorphic then there are illustrations of male and female feathers as well as juveniles where appropriate. A data table of total feather lengths and vane lengths is also included. This site does not illustrate feathers the body of the bird (these are usually soft, and have soft fluff at the base).

There are three ways to search and I tried them all. They worked well and were easy to use. I thought the "Identify a Feather" search the most interesting. You can pick from 8 basic patterns and 10 colours as your search variables. This will get you a page of potential candidates for you to examine. For example, selecting "unpatterned" and "pink" will bring up a choice of Roseate Spoonbill and Greater Flamingo. Similarly "barred" and "grey" will result in a choice of 8 birds. Once you decide on the closest match you can jump to the species page.

I think this will be a very useful page for anyone who looks for wildlife. However I do have one problem, the main page states that all species of native North American migratory birds are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty and the possession of feathers is prohibited. So if you bring the feather home to identify it you are breaking US law!

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