

Book Reviews

Nature Conservation in Great Britain, by **Sir Dudley Stamp**.
Collins, 36s.

The Vanishing Wildlife of Britain, by **Brian Vesey-FitzGerald**.
Staples Press, 36s.

The last of four volumes contributed to the New Naturalist series by Sir Dudley Stamp, this is an authoritative account of nature conservation as practised and administered by the Nature Conservancy, with which he was closely associated. In addition to the chapters describing area by area the national reserves already established and other matters of record, more general chapters reflect the balanced outlook of a scientific geographer and ecologist whose death left a gap which few are qualified to fill. The plan of the book limits the space allowed to the general topics, and the treatment of the problem of the introduction of exotic or vanishing species, for example, is barely adequate.

The author saw no proof of his book, and it may be doubted whether he would have fully concurred in the judgment, posthumously attributed to him on page 89, that the sections of the Countryside Acts empowering the Conservancy to make agreements with owners of SSSIs (Sites of Special Scientific Interest) are really of "particular significance". In truth, a great opportunity was lost in those Acts for giving effective protection to these sites, of which there are many hundreds, against the uncontrolled onslaughts of agriculture and forestry.

Stamp was realistic about the consequences of new farming techniques and recreational pressures. Our instinct, he says, is to preserve the countryside of our childhood. This small country cannot afford the scale of conservation possible in the United States, where they have a dozen acres of land for each head of the population against our single acre. All the greater is our need for continuous collaboration between conservationists and all land users in a common desire to foster "the national pride of the British public in the native fauna and flora" and to make due provision for its conservation.

In a more popular fashion, Mr. Vesey-FitzGerald, covering some of the ground, sketches and speculates upon the probable impact of small populations of prehistoric man on wild life in Britain and concludes that it did not amount to much. In later centuries forest clearance and fen draining brought many changes, but they were gradual. "Man's hunting activities, whether for food or sport, have never seriously affected wild life; only recently, when they have been conducted for commercial gain, have they done so . . . Plants and animals and man lived in balance". But this is no longer so, and conservationists must accept the inevitable.

He makes many points with which one can agree; others are open to argument. Admitting to a bias in favour of the gamekeeper, he concedes that the "golden age of British sport" was also the "heyday of the keeper's gibbet", upon which so many of our birds of prey have vanished. Agreed that the wealthy and vicarious egg-collector is now perhaps the greater menace, far too few syndicated "sportsmen" have any ideas beyond their "bag" or exert any restraint upon their keepers. And he surely underestimates the value of even small reserves, if they are well chosen, as reservoirs of wild life, plant and animal, common or rare.

But we welcome the conclusion, which he shares with Sir Dudley, that

nature conservation can only be successful if it forms part of an integrated national policy, embracing all kinds of land use, none of which can any longer be regarded in isolation.

HURCOMB

Seals, by K.M. Backhouse. Arthur Barker, 21s.

The author "had the advantage of working with Professor H.R. Hewer for some fifteen years, sometimes in solitary confinement on lonely seal-breeding islands", but here his desire is "to produce a readable book rather than a research review". The result of avoiding scientific jargon is a plain, if sometimes awkwardly phrased, resumé of the papers on the life cycle of *Halichoerus grypus*, the Atlantic or grey seal, by Hewer and others, which accounts for about half the text of this slim volume. The balance reviews recent research on some of the other true seals (Phocidae) of the world, with brief interesting biographies of the rare monk seals, the Weddell, harp and elephant seals.

In the last chapter—on seals and man—Dr. Backhouse blames the Grey Seals Protection Act of 1932 for the great increase in this species in recent years, but does not mention that for eight months of the year grey seals can be killed legally, or that the close season of four months is little protection on lonely unpoliced islands visited by determined fishermen and pelt hunters. He states however that "the grey seal has never been numerous enough for large scale cropping, but it has played an important part in local coastal economy where it was numerous." Meanwhile *Phoca vitulina*, the common seal, ignored in this chapter, continues to be without protection and the victim of bloody battles in the Wash. He does not mention the new Seal Conservation Bill, which this reviewer and other members of the FPS hope will eventually become law and, by licensed control of killings, save both seals in adequate numbers.

As an introduction to seal study this attractively produced book is good value at the price, with 16 colour and 60 black and white photographs.

R. M. LOCKLEY

The Twilight of India's Wildlife, by Balakrishna Seshadri. John Baker, 52s.

Now that interest in India's wildlife is beginning to 'catch on', and, not a moment too soon, most states of the Indian Union at least recognise its existence and the need to do something to safeguard the resources on which it depends, the publication of this book is timely. For over twenty years the author has watched, with an uncommon understanding of what is at stake, and why, the decline of his country's marvellous heritage of animal life. In a couple of hundred pages he distils this experience, supported by avid research into the literature and a good varied selection of photographs (a third of the fifty-eight taken by himself). He does so in a readable, evocative and above all essentially Indian way, which means that sentiment, while not eschewed, is tempered by a keen sense of history and tradition, flashes of wit and real feeling for beauty.

An introductory chapter rightly makes the point that habitat destruction is the key to a gloomy picture, but also stresses more hopefully that the solution is a national conservation policy to replace the valiant but piecemeal efforts of States, organisations and individuals. The bulk of the book is devoted to a chapter each on the circumstances, or more often plight, of the 'special' Indian mammals, tiger, elephant, rhino, deer and wild oxen; but under the heading 'extinct and near extinct' short but pointed accounts