

Urban Wildlife

Peter Shirley (1996). Whittet Books: London. 128pp. Paperback. Obtainable from the publishers, 18 Anley Road, London W14 0BY, UK (ISBN 1 873580 23 1). Price £7.99.

My opinion is genuinely divided on this book. Like most of the Whittet British Natural History series it is a welcome and laudable attempt to bring information in an easily assimilable form to an interested readership. The style of this book, including a mix of straight and semi-humorous black and white line-drawings, matches the style of writing in the rest of the series.

On most of the subject sections of the book Peter Shirley successfully tells the story using his experience of writing and broadcasting to pitch the topics at the correct level for a popular audience. For example, he reassures us that far more people die from bee and wasp stings than from spider bites and that the residents of Tokyo swatted an estimated 117 million houseflies on National Fly Day in 1933, without having any significant effect on the fly population!

My reservation about the book is not about what is there but what is missing. The book opens with a chapter on habitats and is followed by one on introduced plants that have been able to exploit features of the urban landscape just as well as relic native species. The book then works its way through a number of animal species encountered in the urban jungle; badgers, bats, foxes, hedgehogs and so on. Having recorded a different London wildlife slot at locations across the capital every Sunday on LBC for seven years, I know from experience about the huge wealth of material that could be incorporated. The problem, as always, must have been what to leave out of the book.

I think it was unfortunate not to give feral cats a section of their own. As I have been studying them for a couple of decades it perhaps could be anticipated that this would be my sentiment. Indeed, I am aware that if reviewers avoid falling into the trap of being negatively critical for its own sake, or alternatively overgenerous in praise, they can lapse into talking of a book's alleged shortcomings when they are really saying 'this is not how I would have written it'. Clearly I am guilty of this last charge for I would find it hard to talk of foxes, rats and gull populations as partly dependent on scavenging and not to put them alongside the feral cat (this may be the author's omission or may be an editorial one, for I note in the list of publisher's books in this series that they do not include their book on wildcats). My concern is not just because cats are the commonest urban and suburban predator of that particular size but also because of the emphasis that could have been strengthened on the availability of food for scavenging within changing population levels.

However, the author does make references in other sections to the role of cats, making the important point that domestic cats, tame or feral, probably present no more of a 'problem' than other predators that are supplanted by the town. There is an apparent inconsistency in that the author suggests that as predator numbers are controlled by prey numbers cats do not control mice, while at the same time they are 'lethal to lizards', and while welcoming magpies says that cats will have an effect on small bird populations. In fairness, there is currently strong debate over these issues but there is no convincing data to show that cats in the UK have an overall effect on garden songbird populations.

Cat reservations aside, this is an excellent book that I have no doubt will encourage many new naturalists to take an active interest in urban wildlife. There is a pressing need for books

on urban wildlife, for as the author notes by the year 2020 it is estimated that 80 per cent of the world's human population will be living in towns and cities. The urban and suburban landscapes are of major significance and that significance is growing and should not be ignored.

As the author quoted Richard Fitter a number of times, I thought it a pity that in the further reading-list at the back, Fitter's seminal urban-wildlife classic *London's Natural History* was not listed. As it is just over 50 years ago that this book appeared, I hope that by mentioning it here some may take up the 'opportunity of comparing different eras of half a century apart'.

It was heartening to see the author state the point that magpies are increasing back to former numbers rather than the often stated belief that magpies are just increasing out of control at the expense of songbirds. He rightly points out that cockroaches have a 'PR problem' and having not changed much in 300 million years (predating the Coelacanth and the dinosaurs), this 'living fossil' deserves a little more respect.

Urban populations of what are viewed as 'less desirable' species are often made subjects for control whether it is needed or not and whether the control is effective or not. Cats, rats, pigeons, starlings and mice all come under this heading. These species have committed the cardinal sin of being successful and therefore too obvious. The author debates the pros and cons of pigeon control and points out that the huge starling-roosts crash as well as build up to become, for some, 'a nuisance'. For mice he assures us that at last the long awaited 'better mousetrap' has arrived and not only is it electronic and in use with pest control companies but the trap summons an operative to the trap at the capture of the mouse. Perhaps the author was right to leave out a chapter on the urban feral cat, for if these mousetraps catch one, the cat might be out of its traditional employment!

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Managing Vertebrate Pests: Feral Goats

John Parkes, Robert Henzell and Grey Pickles (1996). Bureau of Resource Sciences and Australian Nature Conservation Agency. Australia Government Publishing Service: Canberra. 129pp. Paperback. Obtainable from the publishers, GPO Box 84, Canberra, ACT 2601, Australia (ISBN 0644 358467). Price AUS\$24.95.

The Australian Vertebrate Pest Program of the Bureau of Resource Sciences is producing a series of guidelines on the management of mammalian pests. Feral horses, rabbits, foxes, feral pigs, rodents and feral goats (the subject of the booklet under review) are included. This series is being prepared under the umbrella of a booklet setting out the principles of the strategic management of vertebrate pests - *Managing Vertebrate Pests: Principles and Strategies* edited by M Braysher (in the same series).

Managing Vertebrate Pests: Feral Goats provides a well-structured, practical guide to management of a species whose dual reputations of an invaluable, domesticated ruminant in pastoral systems and an 'eco-wrecker' are legendary. There are 10 chapters ranging from introductory accounts (history, distribution and biology), economic and environmental impacts, through to management practice and deficiencies in knowledge and practice.