

Book Reviews

The Penitent Butchers by **Richard Fitter** and **Sir Peter Scott**.
Collins/FPS, £2.50.

This history of the first 75 years of the Fauna Preservation Society takes us back to a time when expressions such as 'wildlife conservation' or 'ecosystem' had scarcely entered the vocabulary. Apart from a few notorious cranks such as St. Francis, Audubon or Waterton, there was little interest in protecting any animal other than game species until late in the 19th century; so in 1903 it was natural to lampoon this strange new breed of do-gooders as 'penitent butchers'. The founders of the FPS were pioneers, the first to promote conservation on more than a local scale; though they originally confined their efforts to the British Empire (where they had most influence) this covered a quarter of the globe and their early initiatives are still paying dividends. In particular it is difficult to imagine what Africa's fauna would be like today if they had not gone to work when they did.

Richard Fitter compresses the story of the Society's achievements into a dozen chapters: but the book is much more than that. Because of the FPS's interlocking



Nene geese *Peter Scott*

relations with other international and national organizations and with a host of specialists and learned bodies, in many of which its officers and members have been active, its influence has been out of all proportion to its size. In telling his story, the author has drawn on his encyclopaedic knowledge to give a remarkably clear and concise account not only of the FPS but also of the nature conservation movement generally in this century. He records the many successes, which show how far we have come in 75 years, but there is no complacency in his conclusions: unless habitats as well as species can be protected; unless a substantial proportion of the world's still unspoiled ecosystems can be preserved; and unless governments quickly take up the main burden, there will not be much left for the Fauna Preservation Society to do when it reaches its 100th birthday.

The book is decorated with delightful drawings by Sir Peter Scott and all royalties go to the FPS's Oryx 100% Fund.

G.T. CORLEY SMITH

'The Penitent Butchers' can be obtained from the FPS office, £2.65 including postage.

Wilderness, by **Anthony Smith**. Allen and Unwin, £7.50

This is the story of the BBC's 'Wilderness' television series. We begin with a chilly trip to Antarctica, are then whirled off to the soon-to-be devastated forests of Brazil, only to be snatched away to cope with the cruel Australian desert. On our next safari we foot-slog to above the tree-line of the Himalayas and from Nepal we shoot off to sample life on the Canadian tundra. Our odyssey ends in watery wastes, first the Nile Sudd and then the Okefenokee swamp in Georgia. But the book is much more than just the fun of jetting breathlessly from one wilderness to the next. It is a thoughtful appraisal of the terms which wilderness offers: enormous freedom on the one hand but insuperable

restraint on the other. The essential flavour of each wilderness is captured with great sensitivity. Wild animals, birds, plants, trees—Anthony Smith observes them well: but as a man-watcher he is even better. Through his eyes we see what life is really like, its glories and its miseries, for people on the edge of man's range in the world.

Illustrated by forty beautiful colour photographs the book concludes with the author's thoughts about the interplay of man and wilderness. He believes that the truly vast unfriendly wildernesses will take care of themselves for a long time to come, but he is more concerned about the smaller ones which man, especially in the USA, is trying to preserve. He fears that such areas will get over-organised and degenerate into parks. Unfortunately he offers no real solutions to the problems that must arise if a wilderness is invaded on the free-for-all lines he seems to favour. He is also unenthusiastic about protecting some endangered species: 'A rare bird nests and the people are kept from it', he complains. But what does he want to happen? I am sure that if its nests had not been guarded devotedly for many years the red kite would now be extinct in Britain. So we would have lost another precious fragment of our disappearing wilderness.

WILLIAM CONDRY

The Great Yew Forest: the natural history of Kingley Vale, by Richard Williamson. Macmillan, £5.95.

The Kingley Vale National Nature Reserve, high on the South Downs above Chichester Harbour, has a very special place in the affections of British conservationists. It combines high scientific interest with exceptional landscape and amenity value. Established in 1952 as one of the early reserves of the recently formed Nature Conservancy, it is a fitting memorial to the Conservancy's first chairman, Sir Arthur Tansley, who in the words of his memorial stone, sited at one of his favourite viewpoints, 'during a long lifetime strove with success to widen the knowledge, to deepen the love and to safeguard the heritage of nature in the British Isles'.

The reserve's 574 acres include what has been claimed as the finest yew forest of its type in Europe, chalk grassland and a well-developed acid heath. It is obvious that this unique reserve is fortunate in having as warden the author of this book, an enquiring, articulate naturalist and dedicated conservationist. His purpose, he says, 'is to describe the intricate workings of just over half a square mile of British countryside', and in prose worthy of a son of Henry Williamson, he gives an account of his efforts since his appointment in 1963 to find out the area's history, its present flora and fauna, and how best to manage them all. Naturally a detailed study of the yew forest came first in his priorities, and his account of the seed-spreading capabilities of birds such as the winter flocks of fieldfares makes interesting reading. He estimates that nearly half a million berries are scattered every year. There follow equally interesting accounts of the mammals—roe and fallow deer, fox, badger, stoats and weasels, and feral cats; the effects of the last are often overlooked.

Next in importance is the chalk grassland, and the account of its management for the two special features, the orchids and butterflies, is a valuable contribution to conservation knowledge. The Butterfly Monitoring Scheme, introduced by the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology in 1976, has revealed that Kingley Vale, by reason of its range of habitats and food-plants, as well as its enviable climate, is perhaps the richest in butterflies of any of our national nature reserves.

No fewer than ten appendices give flora and fauna lists, measurements of yews, numbers of visitors and other information. There is a bibliography and the book is illustrated by plans, photographs and attractive pen and ink drawings, presumably by the author as they are not acknowledged.

JOHN CLEGG