

Book Reviews

The Imperial Collection of Audubon Animals, edited by Victor H. Cahalane. Country Life, 5 gns.

The stature of John James Audubon is so great and so internationally established that he has become something of a yardstick for the comparison of all other work in his field. I believe one has to be American to appreciate just how vast was his personal contribution to science and culture. He was more than a great artist naturalist because his impact was upon the history of a nation. Americans, too, are more easily able to visualise just what was entailed in Audubon's decision, with his son-in-law the Rev John Bachman in 1831, to complete a full-scale work on the mammals of the North American continent – desert and mountain, forest and prairie, from the Gulf of Mexico to the high Arctic – at a time when travel was measured in months and the west was really wild.

Audubon was already nationally famous as a bird painter when work began, but mammals, by their very nature more elusive, present an illustrator with greater problems. Not surprisingly, references proved inadequate and hard to find. It takes little imagination to visualise what a snow-shoe rabbit would look like after weeks' travelling from Nova Scotia in a keg of rum, yet this kind of offering was apt to be his only 'model' for some of his subjects. Despite his devotion he was something of a dreamer, the more practical and less emotional Bachman would have to draw him away from the enchanting spectacles of scenery, buffalo hunts, and great herds moving on the plains. Bachman was there to remind him, as he contentedly sketched a pretty squaw astride her pony, that a host of ground squirrels, gophers, chipmunks and mini-rodents clamoured to be classified and drawn. It seems to speak volumes for both Bachman's tact and Audubon's affection for him, that the pastor survived the exercise. The work was completed 17 years later despite technical problems, worries and frictions that hastened the deaths of Audubon's two sons who before the end had both been drawn into the work. Plates appeared in various folio forms and in reduced sizes but this new presentation must be the finest tribute of all. The reproductions are excellent. Each picture is supported, not only by Bachman's original text, but by Victor Cahalane's up to date descriptions making it a first-class reference book of North American mammals, omitting only bats, seals and whales.

Because of Audubon's magic it is a true picture book. The subjects have the same decorative quality as his birds – a little fantasy, an overwhelming display of artistry and design skill; yet one feels that, despite his meticulous mapping of surface detail, Audubon knew no desire to show evidence of life beneath the skin.

KEITH SHACKLETON

Galapagos, Islands of Birds, by Bryan Nelson. Longmans, 50s.

Although the Charles Darwin Foundation has done a creditable job in promoting conservation in the Galapagos, lack of funds and the difficulty in preventing land settlement have meant that little of the archipelago is yet safe for posterity. This book will do much to bring home to the public the importance of preserving this unique area and the work which is being undertaken by scientists based at the Charles Darwin Research Station. It is extremely well written, if slightly verbose, and incorporates a mine of information on the author's main interests, sea-birds and especially gannets and boobies. Chapters are devoted to different sea-birds, their breeding biology and behaviour, sea-lions, the guano birds of

Peru, and the difficulties in camping on isolated islands. Although some might quibble with a few of the general scientific conclusions, there are gratifyingly few errors. The text is augmented with many plates and some generally less successful line drawings.

This book shows how scientific work can safely be undertaken without undue disturbance of the animals, and contrasts most favourably with many recent writings on the Galapagos from which it sometimes appears that 'conservation is only for other people'. Such work as this is essential if the irresistible tide of tourism is to be channelled, not to destroy the golden goose but to act as the necessary financial inducement for governments to support conservation.

M. P. HARRIS

Great National Parks, by Richard Carrington. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 6 gns.

Measuring 12½" by 10", and containing 240 thick pages, this is a lavish book fit only for the stronger coffee tables, two-thirds photographs, one-third widely spaced text. The pictures, always beautiful, sometimes exciting, are almost all of animals which reside in parks, rather than views of the parks themselves. 'Lovely photographs of animals in parks' is a fair working title for the book.

Nevertheless the text is good. It goes through most of the major parks in the world, and manages to turn what could be largely indigestible dollops of fact about each into extremely readable prose. There is also a good introduction which points out that part of Fontainebleau was the world's first nature reserve (in 1858), that the congressional decision to hold the Yosemite Valley in trust for public use and recreation (in 1864) really set the ball rolling, and that Yellowstone was the first true national park (in 1872). Mr Carrington also describes the concept of zonation, whereby part of a park is strictly for casual tourists, part is more inaccessible, and part is solely for scientific investigation. Skilful zonation is the key to the successful management of many parks, notably the American ones.

To my mind the captions – admittedly always difficult – are the greatest let-down of this work. Sometimes they assume the reader to be blind: 'The leopard cub above does not seem to regard the photographer with favour.' Worst of all is when they appear to have been written by a computer, and are just the same old boring captions we have all read a million times. As a plea for a cessation of this practice, herewith a questionnaire taken from this book: Guess what African animal is being described – 'alleged aphrodisiac properties', 'this antelope . . . often feeds standing on its hind legs', 'beautiful lyre-shaped horns', 'its long neck is an evolutionary adaption to the habit of browsing off tall trees', 'one of the swiftest land predators . . . 60 mph', 'reputed to be one of the most dangerous animals', 'feathered tufts . . . like quill pens', 'flightless'. No prizes are offered for knowing all eight.

But as an appetite-whetter for where next to go in the world this book is unsurpassable.

ANTHONY SMITH

A Field Guide to the National Parks of East Africa, by John G. Williams. Collins, 45s.

John Williams has done visitors to the East African parks a great service with this guide, designed to assist both the identification of the mammals and rarer birds and the planning of an East African holiday to the best possible advantage; he has accomplished both aims most successfully.

The first of the guide's three sections describes briefly the situation and size of