

Book Reviews

Field Guide to Coastal Wild Flowers of Britain, Ireland and Northwestern Europe

Paul Sterry & Andrew Cleave

Wild Nature Press, 2022. 352 pages, paperback with numerous colour photographs and distribution maps.

ISBN 9780691218151.

£19.99

I was given this book some time before writing the review and was thus able to read and use it over the summer months. My first impression when opening the book was that the quality of the photography is superb. Most of the photographs have been taken by the authors and it did not surprise me to read that Paul Sterry is well known as a photographer as well as a wildlife author. There are over 1,500 excellent colour photographs of coastal habitats and individual plant species. Also included are a glossary and illustrations to help with identification.

The introductory chapters cover detailed descriptions of the range of different coastal habitats, sandy and green beaches, shingle, machair, estuaries and saltmarshes, heaths and cliffs. Each habitat also has illustrations of key non-plant species with interesting and detailed information alongside superb photographs.

The main body of the text covers over 600 species of flowering plant and an additional selection of ferns, bryophytes, fungi, lichens and seaweeds. The description for each species follows a similar pattern which has been adopted throughout. Each species has at least two photographs, typically of the whole flowering plant together with a close-up of the flower or leaves, illustrating the most relevant diagnostic features. Each has a common name and a Latin name. Each has details of height, ecology and natural history, habitat, flowers, fruits and leaves plus a small map of British and Irish status and an indication of its northwestern European status. Where necessary, fuller and more detailed descriptions are provided to allow differentiation between closely related or easily confused species. The whole approach is beautifully laid out and very readable; it would make the identification or revision of some tricky groups such as the oraches (*Atriplex*) and grasses easier and (almost) fun because of the quality of the illustrations.

All this is very positive. My own background is botanical and I could certainly learn from this book. However, this is not a complete flora. Whilst using this book, I quickly picked up some omissions such as orpine (*Sedum telephium*) and meadow saxifrage (*Saxifraga granulata*) both of which occur on the Ayrshire coast. Some of this can be put down to the distribution maps being rather small, but there are also textual inaccuracies and grammatical confusions. For example, the bee orchid (*Ophrys apifera*) which occurs in Ayrshire and

elsewhere in coastal sites in southwestern Scotland is “locally common only in England, Wales and S. Ireland”. This may suggest a lack of up-to-date information. The authors do cover issues of this sort in their “About this Book” paragraphs. Primarily, this book is a “celebration of coastal flowers” which aims to help the casual visitor to identify flowers and appreciate their environment, and to hone the skills of seasoned botanists and encourage recording. The authors do refer readers to Clive Stace’s *New Flora of the British Isles* and the website of the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland. This pretty well covers any criticism I have, and one has to recognise that much up-to-date information is available only digitally these days.

Would I recommend this book? Yes, I think I would. Some of its limitations annoyed me at first, but the authors have clearly covered these in their introduction. I do think this book would be an excellent and informative introduction for a visitor to the coast and, above all else, the illustrations are of exceptional quality, making it a joy to pick up and read. Particularly welcome is a “Quick index to iconic species and groups” inside the flap of the outer cover. This would help put the inexperienced reader in the right direction for identifying an unknown species.

Alison Moss

The Peatlands of Britain and Ireland - A Traveller’s Guide

Clifton Bain

Sandstone Press, Muir of Ord, 2021. 256 pages, hardback illustrated with photographs and drawings.

ISBN 9781912240241.

£24.99

Like many people, I have been aware of bogs from childhood, through warnings of disappearing into Dartmoor’s mire or history lessons about East Anglian fens. As an adult I realised that there is more to these areas than watching one’s step. Some years ago a ranger-led excursion across Flanders Moss, Stirlingshire opened my eyes to the variety of mosses and other plants, insects and other animals that live in this habitat, as well as its human history. More recently the importance of peatlands in the fight to halt climate change has been publicised widely. So it was with pleasure I accepted the invitation to review this timely book.

In June 2022, Clifton Bain’s expertise in this area and his work for the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s Peatland Programme was recognised by the award of an Honorary Fellowship from the Royal Scottish Geographical Society. This book is the final part of his trilogy, the previous parts of which explore the ancient pinewoods of Scotland and the Atlantic rainforests of Britain and Ireland. With all that in mind,

I approached his book with eager anticipation.

This “traveller’s guide” is a splendidly presented volume. The well-spaced, easy to read text is accompanied by superb photographs, maps and paintings. It is not a book you will slip into your backpack to consult while standing in the rain on a damp boardwalk peering across waving cotton grass into the misty distance. Rather, it will form part of your preparation for visiting these beautiful and important places. It is a book to enjoy while planning your trips.

After a Foreword by Dr Tony Juniper and the Acknowledgements, Clifton Bain has divided the book into two clear sections. The shorter Introduction supplies general information about peatlands across the country, covering different aspects of interest: formation, wildlife, archaeology, the use of peatlands over the centuries, varying language used across the countries considered, and the current drive to restore and conserve. The second, and larger, part of the book describes individually the peatlands the author has selected. He admits the choice of places is personal, but explains the criteria which have guided his selection. This part is divided by country, Scotland, England, Wales and Ireland (Northern and the Republic), before being subdivided into region, each with named sites. It is clear and unambiguous, making finding information about a specific place very easy.

The description of each peatland follows a common format. At the start, along with the Ordnance Survey (OS) reference, there is a map highlighting the moss, showing access point(s), trails and specific places of interest. There follows a summary of the area’s history, with mention of particular activity which might have affected the state of the bog today. In many places Bain gives credit to local interest groups who have become involved in restoration work. For example, fires caused by vandalism used to be a problem at Blawhorn Moss, one of the Clyde-Forth Mosses. However, with the involvement of the community of Blackridge village, access routes have been developed and a local blacksmith has installed bog-inspired artworks. The area now supports breeding red grouse (*Lagopus lagopus scotica*), curlews (*Numenius arquata*), and snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) with hen harriers (*Circus cyaneus*) and short-eared owls (*Asio flammeus*) being seen in winter.

The cutting of peats, both domestically and industrially, together with drainage for agriculture, has damaged many peatlands throughout Britain and Ireland. Such damage is still visible in many places, and excellent photographs show this along with results of restoration work. On page 163 an aerial photograph of Fenn’s Moss, part of the Midland Meres and Mosses complex, shows clearly how banded cells are used to retain water levels. “Cell-banding... a technique... in which impermeable low peat ‘bunds’ are used to create a network of water-holding cells... These cells ensure that rainwater is retained on-site long enough for the ‘acrotelm’ to reform, and the site to once again start growing peat.” For

those unfamiliar with the term, acrotelm is the upper layer of a peat bog, in which organic matter decomposes aerobically.

One of the starkest reminders of how damaging 19th century drainage was is shown by two cast-iron posts among the trees of Holme Fen, part of the Cambridgeshire Fens. “In 1848, when plans were being made to drain Whittlesey Mere, local landowners were concerned about the surrounding peat drying out, shrinking and lowering, with the risk of flooding and possible inundation from the sea. A long post was driven down through seven metres of peat to the clay substrate, with its top cap at ground level to allow any changes in peat depth to be monitored. In just over 170 years the ground has dropped to leave an incredible four metres of post now visible.” This area is now supposedly the lowest point of land in Britain at around 2.7 m below sea level. Bain continues to explain the challenges of conserving such an area, where the wetland is above shrinking farmland. In other parts of the great fenland, once a huge peatland landscape, restoration is more successful - for example at Wicken Fen and Woodwalton Fen, both Cambridgeshire, one of Britain’s oldest nature reserves dating from the early 20th century.

Evidence from Dartmoor reveals that these areas have “preserved a wealth of archaeological information, demonstrating the area’s importance for humans over the last 10,000 years, with abundant prehistoric settlements, burial tombs, monuments and ritual sites.” The Neolithic and early Bronze Age clearance of forests in this area was abandoned as the climate became wetter, which contributed to the subsequent formation of peat. Similarly, in Cors Fochno (Borth Bog in North Wales) there is an amazing “‘sunken forest’... ancient tree stumps revealed in the sand at low tide and in extreme weather. These are the preserved remains of a forest of pine, alder, oak and birch that grew here around 5,000 years ago, before the peatland formed, and which was then eroded by the estuary waters.”

Dartmoor is not alone in providing us with ancient remains. For example, in many areas wooden trackways have been discovered, of Bronze Age origin or earlier. There is a photograph of an Iron Age trackway at Corlea, County Longford. Perhaps most famous are the numerous bodies, or body parts, that have been found in bogs throughout Britain and North-West Europe. At Lindow Moss in Cheshire, one such very well-preserved part of a skull had skin tissue and hair attached, which proved to be almost 2,000 years old, from a male living in Roman Britain.

Much of the natural history is replicated on different sites, but certain places provide a home for more unusual creatures. How could anyone interested in bugs not be encouraged to visit Thorne and Hatfield Moors, South Yorkshire, which “boast the highest variety of insect species of any peatland in the UK and are home to species found nowhere else in the country...” and where the female “bog hog” beetle (*Curimopsis nigrita*) lines

her burrow in the peat with sheets of moss. The same area “is abundant with crane [*Grus grus*], bittern [*Botaurus stellaris*] and marsh harrier [*Circus aeruginosus*]”. Well worth a visit! At Cors Caron, near Tregaron, Ceredigion, Wales, you might be fortunate enough to see the rosy marsh moth, “thought to have become extinct in Britain over a hundred years ago but discovered here in recent years.” Or if you are in Shropshire, you might be tempted to visit the Marches Mosses, where recovery work has led to the first breeding snipe “returning to Whixall Moss in 2019 after an absence of over twenty years”. This is important because there are only ten breeding pairs of snipe in the whole of Shropshire. Here you might also spot a “seven-centimetres wide raft spider [*Dolomedes fimbriatus*]... standing on open water among the sphagnum carpets,” or the rare white-faced darter (*Leucorrhinia dubia*) which is one of 29 species of damselflies and dragonflies found here.

Some peatlands support particularly interesting plants. Rannoch Moor, north-west central Scotland, is the “best remaining peatland site in Britain to find the rare Rannoch-rush (*Scheuchzeria palustris*)” while in Ireland’s Diamond Hills area the rare heather “Saint Dabeoc’s heath (*Daboecia cantabrica*) is found only in Connemara, South Mayo and parts of the Atlantic fringe of South-West Europe.”

The Peatlands of Britain and Ireland is a treasure trove of information about these fascinating landscapes. But its title claims it is “A Traveller’s Guide”. So, how well does it take us to these marvellous places? At the end of the Introduction, Clifton Bain gives some general advice about visiting peatlands: how best to appreciate them; advantages of different times of year; respect for the wildlife; becoming involved with restoration work; taking account of other cultural points of interest in the surrounding area; and perhaps, most importantly, how to protect against the biting flies who inhabit such places!

I have put the instructions to the test. The maps are clear. The Travel Notes vary in the amount of detail given but tend to focus on trains, buses and bicycles with little guidance for car drivers, though a site’s map can be used in conjunction with a road atlas or the relevant OS sheet. Where a group of peatlands is being described (e.g. Clyde-Forth Mosses) there are more detailed directions for the car driver from moss to moss. Travel notes for The Peak District Moors give a detailed description of part of the Pennine Way from Edale to Marsden, though detailed information on this well-trodden walking route is widely available elsewhere.

My main criticisms concern the reference to websites and the lack of an index. With a view to visiting a couple of sites unknown to me, I used this book as a start and then turned to the internet to research further - partly to check the book’s information, and partly to expand it. I was surprised that no relevant website links were provided in the same place as the other site-specific information. The list of “Useful Websites” is at the back of the book. Some of these apply to more than one

peatland (e.g. Natural England, NatureScot, National Trust for Ireland etc.), while others are particular (e.g. Connemara National Park, Marches Mosses BogLIFE, Solway Wetlands etc.). I think it would be more helpful to have websites listed with the relevant site, particularly as websites should provide the most up-to-date information, while the book is accurate only at the date of writing.

There is a good Contents page at the start together with a map of Britain and Ireland showing the locations of the selected peatlands. However, there is no index. Thus, when wanting to find out where “bog bodies” had been discovered, I had to look through the whole text. Also, several peatlands mentioned in the general Introduction are not featured as selected areas. If I wanted to see if a particular place was included in the book, other than as a selected peatland, I had no way of doing so, other than to read the whole Introduction.

My overall opinion is that this book is both useful and beautifully presented. I would use it as a good starting point to discover these important areas and would recommend it to others. It is a book which inspires exploration.

Anne Orchardson

Wild Mull: A Natural History of the Island and its People

Stephen Littlewood & Martin Jones

Pelagic Publishing, 2021. 300 pages, paperback with colour photographs and illustrations. ISBN 9781784272760.

£25.00

Wild Mull is a versatile guide combining a visual journey told through Martin Jones’ photographs with comprehensive writing by expert naturalist Stephen Littlewood. It is an un-intimidating read, its text enhanced regularly with large, attractive colour photographs displaying the island’s unique beauty through the lens of an award-winning photographer. This book will appeal to any lover of the islands off Scotland’s west coast; it guides the reader unassumingly through all facets of Mull’s wilderness and successfully captures the enchanting way of Inner Hebridean life. The 12 chapters (each crowned with a short verse of Hebridean poetry or apt quotation) deal with specific aspects of Mull’s unique anthropology or environment. These include chapters on the geology of Mull, how humans have shaped the island, fungi and lichens of the celtic rainforest, insects, small vertebrates, marine life and the introductions and extinctions that have accompanied the human footprint; there are three chapters on birds – seabirds, landbirds, and the raptors for which the island is so famous. The text is accessible both to those with an amateur interest in the nature of the island, as well as to the experienced naturalist.

Littlewood demonstrates an intimate understanding of Mull as an island and the true value of the interconnectedness between people and nature resonates strongly. The book celebrates Mull as a well-known raptor site with a healthy population of both golden

eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*) and white-tailed sea eagles (*Haliaeetus albicilla*), and as a known playground for the Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*). However, the true beauty lies in the celebration of themes less well-known to the passing visitor. The island is a stronghold for ever-diminishing temperate rainforest. On Mull, the “celtic rainforest” supports a plethora of unusual lichens, as well as being home to the extremely rare hazel-gloves fungus. Indeed, Mull is of international fungal importance, boasting over 2,000 species.

I particularly admired the postscript, where Littlewood removes any rose-tinted spectacles regarding the many invasive and non-endemic anomalies that inevitably establish themselves on long-inhabited islands. The author discusses each angle pragmatically, but manages to leave the reader with a sense of optimism for how resilient and adaptive both islanders and wildlife can be.

The inclusion of some maps would be useful for those who do not know the island intimately on the ground, but this is an isolated flaw. *Wild Mull* has all the ingredients of a truly enjoyable read. It is a beautiful depiction of place and a reference guide that does justice to a unique island that fully deserves such masterful coverage.

Laura C. Thubron

Edible Fungi of Britain and Northern Europe: How to Identify, Collect and Prepare

Jens H. Petersen

Princeton University Press, 2023. 154 pages, hardback with many colour photographs and black-and-white illustrations. ISBN 9780691245195.

£17.99

As someone who has a long-term interest in fungi, particularly edible chanterelles (*Cantharellus cibarius*) and ceps (*Boletus edulis*), I was excited to be asked to review this book. Fungi and mushrooms are fascinating and varied organisms with hundreds of species found in Scotland and Britain, and thousands throughout the world. Many of these are inedible, with some mildly poisonous, a few deadly poisonous, and some wonderfully edible with a few of the latter being gastronomic delights. The challenge has always been to safely identify the edible varieties and not confuse them with poisonous look-a-likes.

Hence, the publication of *Edible Fungi of Britain and Northern Europe*, which specifically sets out to do this, is useful and important. The book is nicely produced with many excellent colour photographs. It contains a comprehensive introduction, explaining what fungi are, habitats where they are found, how to collect and cook fungi, and legal aspects of collection.

The central sections of the book describe and illustrate the main types of edible fungi, including morels, boletes, chanterelles, brittlegills, milkcaps, agarics and puffballs. In each case, much detail is given to explain how to identify the edible species with particular care taken to

show similar poisonous look-a-likes, with many excellent photographs and keys to allow this to be done.

However, despite the care that the author has taken in creating this book I still ask the question: “Is it successful in providing enough information to give novices to fungi-collecting the confidence to identify edible species with certainty, and therefore safely?” I personally am not convinced that, by itself, *Edible Fungi of Britain and Northern Europe* accomplishes this function. Being a cautious mushroom collector, I restrict myself to a few species with which I am familiar. I only acquired confidence to identify these species by participating in “fungi forays” accompanied by experienced mushroom pickers who, in the field, were able to show me directly what the edible species looked like, and the type of habitat and time of year that they were found. This direct and personal instruction was essential. With this acquired knowledge and experience I still only restrict myself to chanterelles and a few bolete species. Anything I am not 100% sure about I do not harvest. Perhaps I am over cautious, but this has meant I have never had any trouble (touch wood!).

To conclude, I liked *Edible Fungi of Britain and Northern Europe* very much and I hope that this book introduces the world of edible fungi to many new people. For this purpose, I would encourage those interested to buy it. But I would urge that the book be used only as a supplement to direct contact with edible mushrooms when folk attend an organised fungi foray and are shown the species by knowledgeable and experienced “mushroomers”. Only then will they be genuinely confident about what they are collecting. This will then allow people feel secure to enjoy the fantastic taste of these fungi.

Christopher J. McNerny

How Birds Live Together: Colonies and Communities in the Avian World

Marianne Taylor

Princeton University Press, 2022. 224 pages, hardback with many colour photographs, maps and other illustrations. ISBN 9780691231907.

£25.00

Some years ago, we stayed on Bird Island, one of the northern, coralline islands of the Seychelles group. Its name derives from some three quarters of a million nesting pairs of sooty terns (*Sterna fuscata*) which are the star attraction. The colony was surrounded by “police incident” tape. If the nest was inside the tape, it was sacrosanct but, if it was outside, the eggs could be taken by the hotel restaurant to make omelettes - a stark, if wholly anthropogenic, illustration that it is safer to be at the centre of a bird colony than at the periphery.

Bird Island is one of several “colony profiles” in this beautifully illustrated book. Other sea-bird strongholds featured include the Bass Rock, Troup Head, both Scotland and Grassholm, Wales, while non-maritime examples include Matera, Italy for lesser kestrels (*Falco naumanni*) and the Cota Doñana, Spain (egrets, ibises and herons). The book divides into ten short chapters

many of which are based on habitat. Thus, there are chapters on colonies on sea cliffs, in trees, on beaches and islands, in lakes and marshes, in burrows and in towns. There are also chapters which explore the co-existence of several species (sometimes including prey and predator) and how birds decide whether to join or leave a colony. Most bird colonies are highly conspicuous, but one chapter discusses “secret colonies” such as those of cave-nesters. There is not much on birds living together outside the breeding phase, such as in feeding assemblages and mass migration movements.

The “how” in the title *How Birds Live Together* is appropriate, because this is a book based largely on specific examples and each chapter ends with one or more representative species discussed at length. Despite this, there are no references, and in a book of this nature there really should be. If the work of scientists is worth writing about in detail, then the scientists themselves deserve a mention and the reader deserves a reference to follow the topic up. As an example, pages 138-139 show graphs of how heron and ibis numbers have fluctuated dramatically in the Cota Doñana over a 12-year period. But who has collated and published these painstaking and methodical data?

As to “Why birds live together”, authors such as Brown & Brown (2001) and Danchin & Wagner (1997) set out the three major benefits: a) vigilance and defence against predators; b) food-finding by observation and/or co-operative hunting; and c) safe and suitable nesting sites may be limited in number. All of these get mentions at appropriate places in the book, even if it is difficult to pin down the dominant factor in any specific case. There is less discussion of the downsides to colonial living, which include the spread of parasites and disease, the fact that colonies advertise themselves to predators, and that they may place a burden on local food resources. Close proximity also facilitates extra-marital affairs and parasitic egg-laying, so that parental energies can be mis-directed towards furthering someone else’s genes.

Although this book is perhaps stronger on individual examples than on synthesis or theory, those examples are interesting and diverse, covering all the continents and a wide variety of bird species. Like all Princeton University Press books, it is illustrated with dozens of beautiful coloured photographs as well as appropriate maps and other illustrations.

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Tony Payne

Much Ado about Mothing. A Year Intoxicated by Britain’s Rare and Remarkable Moths

James Lowen

Bloomsbury Wildlife Press, 2021. 384 pages, hardback with colour photographs. ISBN 9781472966971. £18.99

The author may be intoxicated, but this book has gained many devotees amongst otherwise quite sober naturalists. It was recommended to me by several GNHS members and has already gone into a paperback edition. It belongs to the popular genre of “quest” books (to see all British orchids in a year; to bag all the Munros; to run a marathon on every continent) but it is a rather looser affair. The author has indeed set himself a time limit – one year – but he criss-crosses Britain with the simple intent of bringing the reader a series of vivid encounters with moths and moth-ers.

His conversion from an initial view that moths are small, brown, uninteresting and best avoided is partly due to an encounter with a poplar hawkmoth (*Laothoe populi*) and partly to discovering that his young daughter is just as enthusiastic as himself. Together they trap moths, first in London and then, after a move to a bungalow with a large garden, in Norwich. Interestingly, London was more productive.

Lowen sometimes makes heroic journeys with a couple of friends to find a regional speciality, at which point the book can resemble *Top Gear* for lepidopterists. His journey up the A9 to find the Rannoch brindled beauty (*Lycia lapponaria*) and Kentish glory (*Endromis versicolora*) is typical: the early Scottish spring has advanced flight times by a fortnight, causing panic and domestic chaos in all their households. He describes the wingless female brindled beauty as a sultana which has gathered fluff, but then invites you to compare that with Ray Leverton’s “a sporan with eggs”. His description of the Kentish glory includes a red panda face behind which luxuriates the ermine mantle of a high court judge; the wings are a horse chestnut canvas on which are imprinted flurries of snow and a black marker pen wielded by a toddler. Ooh-er.

Everywhere he goes, he is assisted by local experts and Lowen writes about them, their engagements with nature in their “patch”, and their difficulties and successes. He meets a hawkmoth breeder (whose wife dismisses them as “mice with wings”); this naturally elicits a digression on *The Silence of the Lambs*, while elsewhere two pupae that fail to hatch are likened to Harrison Ford frozen in carbonite by Jabba the Hutt. He visits a country house whose eight moth traps are arranged in such a pattern that at least one will be sheltered, regardless of the wind direction; one trap produces a striped hawkmoth (*Hyles livornica*) – a moth I have only seen once in the Canaries. He meets a man who needs a government licence to moth-trap in his own garden since his visitors sometimes include Fisher’s estuarine moth (*Gortyna borelii*) - a Red Data Book species.

You will gather that this is writing of a lively style. There are deliciously awful puns – “the charge of the Light Brocade” - and startling verbs; thus, birds “melodise” in woodland tree-tops, while plants “tussock” the ground. Yet the attraction of the book does not lie in style alone. There is plenty of information embedded throughout the text - how the silver Y (*Autographa gamma*) exhibits an unusual pattern of migration; the continuing saga of rare burnets (*Zygaena* spp.) in the Highlands and Islands; why the gypsy moth (*Lymantria dispar*) is the only moth in the IUCN list of “world’s hundred worst invasive alien species” and whether it can re-colonise Britain. The book features mothing in numerous habitats across Britain and is approximately in seasonal order throughout the year. Moths are encountered in woodland, on heather moors, on chalk downland, in marshes, on sea cliffs, in the Brecklands, and on the shingle beaches of Dungeness. The rise of “twitching” amongst dedicated lepidopterists is discussed, and we are introduced to “fridge-ticking” where rare catches are potted and placed in cold storage until other enthusiasts can arrive to see them. This is in stark contrast to an incident recounted elsewhere in the book where a rare moth was seen sitting on a trap by a friend of the trap owner. Knowing how much the trapper had wanted to see this moth, and fearing it would fly away before he could alert him, the passing friend potted it. The trap owner refused to even look at it; it was not “his”.

Much Ado About Mothing is not heavily-illustrated, but the cluster of colour photos in the centre of the book show the author in various guises (including walking with five moth traps suspended from his shoulders), his daughter and various co-conspirators. However, actual moths shown do include some very choice examples. It is a quirky and unusual book, relentlessly enthusiastic and optimistic, which has attracted an appreciative readership, to which I belong.

Tony Payne