BOOK REVIEWS

Reviews in this issue have been collected and edited by Kate Harrison.

The Dark Stuff: Stories from the Peatlands
Bloomsbury (2018) £16.99 (hardback)

Peatlands are important components of European landscapes. Not only are they significant sources and stores of carbon as well as distinct habitats for plants and animals but they have played an important role in social history, notably folklore, literature and art, and in politics. These are the dominant themes in this personal account of Scotland’s varied peatlands. Donald R. Murray is an author, journalist and poet who grew up on Scotland’s Isle of Lewis so his experience is first hand. He uses a systemic rather than a regional approach to a personal discourse concerning three key parts...

The first part is entitled ‘Turling’, the three chapters focus on heather, the Erica caespitosa, with reference to Scottish, Danish and Dutch scenarios. Whilst heather is a dominant peatland plant, the chapters contain much more than descriptions of plant communities, observations on livestock, peat for fuel and management by fire are examples. Part 2 is entitled ‘Black Peat’. The chapters explore the various names given to peat in Northern Europe, relate stories of the ancient past through reference to bog bodies, recount ancient myths of life and legend in peatlands and their role in social groups. Many tales are amusing while others have a sinister air. Reference is made to poetry and literature inspired by these accumulations of dead plants. Influenced poets include Seamus Heaney, the Nobel Laureate. Part three ‘The Wall Peat’ dwells on issues such as the vital role peat played in energy provision before the ages of coal or oil with examples from The Netherlands and France. Here peat cutting was commonplace by hand and later through the use of machines enforced by the difficulties of importing coal during World War II. Scottish peat cutters also established influential political movements as people such as Patrick and Scotland. Part 4 is entitled ‘Black Peat’. It focuses on political events such as Scotland’s Highland Clearances, moorland improvement for agriculture in The Netherlands whilst in Germany peatlands metamorphosed into grazing land. Change is the norm; Nature has been transformed. Ecologically, socially and politically peat is indeed the ‘dark stuff’. This book will fascinate those interested in peatland characteristics as well as peatland culture and its myriad causes.

Antoinette M Mannon

The Long Spring: Tracking the Arrival of Spring Through Europe
Bloomsbury (2018) £16.99 (hardback)

Laurence Rose is a naturalist and former RSPB employee with a gift for landscape and wildlife description. The Long Spring is the outcome of a journey which began in February 2016 when he crossed from North Africa into Spain and thereupon followed a northern path through France, the UK, Sweden, Finland and Norway as he chased the onset of spring for four months. Changing temperatures and day length are documented. The latter are especially significant in the northern countries where in the Arctic zone long nights metamorphose into long days. The mode of travel is almost as varied as it is also green. Walking, cycling, rafting, railways and boats provide platforms for observations. Each country merits a chapter which details his observations on landscape changes and the reactions of birdlife as winter gives way to spring; there are also reflections on the changing season based on his extensive past travels through three continents. Each account details the character of the landscape, e.g. town, forest, lake, coast which provides the vital backdrop for the wildlife observations. One message is that wildlife is everywhere even in the most urban environments. Birds are clearly a favourite, notably cranes, swallow, wild swans and eagles. The final chapter is entitled ‘Misled Connections’ and comments on the many commercial, political and legislative factors that have influenced landscape character. These include national and international actions and treaties such as the establishment of Sites of Special Scientific Interest in the UK and various European directives including the Common Agricultural Policy which has affected wildlife directly or indirectly.

There are also specific references to post-Brexit directions. The final section provides references which are also specific to a country by country basis. A significant flaw is the failure to include at least one map to highlight the location of the observation sites and to emphasise the substantial variation which underpins the narrative. An introduction would also have been useful to what constitutes an embalming, informed but personalised account of seasonal change.

Antoinette M Mannon

The Lost Words
Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris £20 (hardback)

On February 14 2018 I was made aware of The Lost Words by Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris. My husband sent me an article reviewing the book, and after reading it I headed to the nearest book shop to pick a copy up for myself. It poked around the bookshop and asked a clerk if the book was available still. I was pointed to the corner of the store where the book was being displayed. I was prepared for a small soft-covered book, as most poetry books are, but much to my surprise it was a large hardback book with striking gold letters and gold flitches in flight on the cover. It stood out among others, and if I think of it, a feel unique, this book can even point you towards a broad range of cutting edge proposals on management evolution. Discover how modern technology can expand our knowledge of animal ecology, encompassing plankton, elephants, and everything in between.

Holly English

Where the Animals Go: Tracking Wildlife with Technology in 50 Maps and Graphics

Some books cannot be read just once. Where the Animals Go by James Chessire and Oliver Uberti is a perfect example of that beloved book you find yourself returning to again and again. The authors skillfully combine ground-breaking science and compelling storytelling with beautiful maps and graphics. Read it from start to finish or leave it on your coffee table and dive in whenever chapter strikes your fancy. Follow a vulture spiralling through air thermals, discover how birds of prey track their prey and how bats navigate. This book is clear and accessible for young people and beyond, making it a perfect gift for the nature lover in your life.

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