

Book reviews

interesting chapter on how to 'blat off good grips'* in the Antarctic. There is very little to criticise about what is included, but there are omissions. The marine ecosystem is not covered, which is puzzling when one considers that the wildlife of the area depends for its richness largely on the sea's productivity. Does this omission reflect the availability of photographs? There's lots on birds, less on seals, few whales in sight and nothing on the poor old unphotogenic invertebrates. Future conservation of the great resources of wildlife is not discussed — what about threats from tourism? This is a book in which the photographs have not been taken to illustrate the text, and occasionally the marriage between the two is a bit shaky.

The strength, and certainly the selling point, of the book is its photographs and it is thus a great pity that the publishers have elected to spread a good photograph across the central join on almost every page. In summary, it is an enjoyable book to look at, but it does not pretend to be a comprehensive scientific work.

*Antarctic-ese for 'take good photographs'.

Sheila and Peter Anderson-Witty,
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Discoveries of a Crocodile Man

Tony Pooley
Collins, £8.95.

What a fascinating book this is. But then, perhaps we should expect no less from a man who has been working with crocodiles in the wild for some 20 years, who observes them with a scientific eye and with sympathetic spirit, and who helps to conserve them both in their natural habitats and through captive rearing. As a founder member of the Crocodiles Specialist Group under SSC, and as one of the more activist as well as committed conservationists in southern Africa, there is no doubt about Pooley's commitment.

Fortunately for us and his crocodilian charges, Pooley can tell his tale with straightforward prose and graphic detail. His story is indeed one of discovery. He starts out with his conventional reactions of fascination and fear — almost, one senses, of repulsion mixed with reverence. It did not take him long, during the course of his field observations, to learn that there is much more to

crocodiles than established images. He describes the social behaviour patterns of crocodiles, more convoluted and refined than one might expect; he reveals how adaptable they are, able to cope with floods and drought alike, thanks to far more sophisticated physiology than one supposes at first blush; he describes their foraging strategies, stressing (for those to whom the message might still be new) that, through their ecological relationships, crocodiles are generally helpful rather than harmful to fisheries of lakes and rivers; and he recounts the maternal solicitude that is shown to infant crocodiles until they learn how to cope with a world full of enemies. It is this last feature, care of the young, that is best illustrated through the splendid photographs, including several shots of a mother crocodile picking up and bearing babies in her throat pouch, 20 of them at a time, from riverbank nest to riverine nursery.

When we look at a distribution map of the crocodile in Africa, we may find that it still enjoys a pretty broad range. True, its numbers have been sorely depleted; but it still pops up in many parts of the continent south of the Sahara. But herein lies an illusion. Whereas zebras, elephants and lions may well roam from one horizon to the next, crocodiles are confined to very small sectors of African landscapes. Not just any old patch of water, but those aquatic habitats that allow the crocodile to haul itself on to land with ease — these being precisely the waters-edge areas that are most favoured by humans, generally with gently sloping banks and shores. If water tracts constitute a small part of Africa anyway, the select localities that suit the crocodile represent a still smaller fraction. Equally to the point, a human population whose explosion of numbers has scarcely started on its full demographic momentum will generate disproportionately greater pressures on crocodile habitat than on the living space of most other major forms of African wildlife (with the obvious exception of the hippo). Even with tighter regulation of the international trade in crocodile skins it is hard to see how the crocodile can survive in the wild, except in such few parks and reserves as persist. All the more timely, then, is Pooley's book, replete with scientific information, and with innovative ideas.

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