

books to read. They can be read pleasurably by the general reader.

JOHN CLEGG

**The Peregrine Falcon, by Derek Ratcliffe. Poyser, £12.**

Derek Ratcliffe, an undoubted and critical scientist, has been as enthusiastic as any amateur in his life-long and deep interest in the peregrine, and much of his work with the Nature Conservancy and related bodies has been researching environmental problems which either directly or indirectly affect the peregrine. All this has resulted in a 400-page readable volume.

After describing the peregrine's changing fortunes – protected, persecuted and poisoned – the author surveys its present habitat, distribution and numbers, concluding that there are few parts of Britain and Ireland in which it could not live, given the chance, for at least some part of the year. The chapter on food and feeding habits is fascinating, not only because of the description of food taken, hunting efficiency, food wastage and calculations of speed attained in a stoop, but because in Ratcliffe's writing you sense the thrill that comes from watching these aerial manoeuvres. In a chapter on population and dynamics he reviews the peregrine's past and present status which is, in part, linked to the pesticide story, of which he gives a full account. Here his own detective work on thinning egg shells resulted in important disclosures. Incidentally, he comments forcefully on the failure of the Pesticide Safety Precaution Scheme to publish any report in the last 12 years.

The peregrine is regarded as an ecological barometer, being the terminal focus of energy in a wildlife community, and in his final chapter Ratcliffe looks at its future as it runs the gauntlet of egg-thieves, pet-keepers and the threat of increased acres of Forestry Commission conifers. He concludes that pesticides are the bird's biggest problem, and, if that can be overcome, the peregrine, aided by a growing number of sympathisers, probably faces a brighter future than many birds and other animals.

The book is illustrated by four fine watercolours and a series of black and white pictures by Donald Watson, and more than 60 photographs. It is an example of what a good monograph should be: readable, well produced and good value.

PETER CONDER

**Monarchs of the Glen, by Duff Hart-Davies. Cape, £1.95.**

**Highland Wildlife, by Richard Perry. Croom Helm, £6.95.**

*Monarchs of the Glen*, written with love and knowledge, takes us back to the earliest days of the Caledonian Forest, liberally covered with ancient pines and harbouring bears, beaver and wolves as well as red deer, more akin in size to English park stags. But as the author points out, trees are not essential to a forest (derived from the Latin *foris*, or outside), which is uncultivated land set apart for sport, usually deer.

The monstrous evictions from 1780-1830 were caused by the introduction of sheep and the simultaneous collapse of the kelp industry. Their reign was short-lived, however, for by 1870 the economy of 3½ million acres of the Highlands was that of the deer forest. Probably not more than 1800 people gained their living thereby, but as early as 1850 the custom of letting stalking had arrived. Until fairly recently, most stalking was done by rich landowners; but nowadays more and more letting is by the stag rather than the season, allowing many more people to participate, including foreigners.

Most proprietors try to shoot selectively (though it's hard to deprive a foreigner of his one and only chance), thanks to the invaluable work done by the Nature Conservancy on Rhum; and there is unlimited demand for venison in Germany. This is as well since only deer have the stamina to produce protein out of marginal, albeit beautiful, land. Therefore the growth of deer farming is predictable. Yet, given good fencing, this need not affect stalking's future for, as the author points out: 'Once the stalker has set foot on the hill, he is just as dependent on his legs, his wind and his wits as were his Victorian predecessors. Like them, he is alone with the grouse, the eagles and the deer.'