

# Book Reviews

## ZOOLOGY

### The Birder's Bug Book

By Gilbert Waldbauer. 1998. Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London, England, 290 pp., illus. U.S. \$27.95

The chapter titles grabbed my attention: *Bugs That Birds Eat, The Bugs Fight Back, Bugs that Eat Birds, The Birds Fight Back, Bugs That Eat People, People Fight Back*. Delving into the the book, I soon found the contents to be as interesting as the chapter titles. The writing is clear, enlivened with personal anecdotes and sprinkled with vivid description. The larva of a moth or butterfly "is essentially a digestive system on a caterpillar tread." Nightjars "are the night shift of the insect-eating aerialists." There is even a poem by Robert Frost. The numerous drawings are effective in illustrating points made in the text, as is the portfolio of coloured photographs in the centre of the volume. On the lower right-hand corner of every odd-numbered page is a sketch of a pileated woodpecker. The position of the woodpecker is varied so that, when the pages are flipped, you see an animation of the bird chiselling a hole in a tree. Canadian readers will appreciate the fact that the author shows some awareness that life exists north of the 49th parallel. There are repeated references to birds and insects in the various regions of our country.

As well as a being a good read, the book has value as a reference volume. There are bibliographies for each chapter; a comprehensive index; and a helpfully illustrated section on the taxonomy of insects with a summary of the principal features of the major orders — enough information "so that you can recognize at least some of the members and so that you know at least a bit about how some of them live."

The humorous, eye-catching dust cover photo of a satisfied fledgling screech owl beginning to munch a

colourful cecropia moth is, itself, almost worth the price of the book.

In the experience of the author, "almost all birders . . . view a bird as more than a checkmark on a list. They are curious about its life history and behaviour." This has certainly been true for me, a birder for some 30-years standing. *The Birder's Bug Book*, however, launched me into a crucial area of the natural history of birds to which I have given scant attention and which greatly enhanced my understanding of bird life. I got an entertaining education in bugs which has left me with a new appreciation of their ecological significance.

The book is not just concerned with birds and insects; birders get coverage as well. There is information about bugs that sting, bite, harass and live on people and about both the helpful and destructive ways that humans have responded.

The final chapter, *Disappearing diversity*, is a plea for greater efforts to reverse the alarming pace of extinctions. "We have the capacity to destroy or to preserve. So far, from an ecological perspective, we have been mainly destroyers . . . we unthinkingly wipe out whole habitats and exterminate species by the thousands. In so doing we both threaten our ultimate well-being and diminish our spirit."

Perhaps the most significant contribution of *The Birder's Bug Book* is to remind us that "we are but one aspect of the planetary web of life" and "can understand ourselves only in the context of all life."

Treat yourself to this engaging book. Share it with others. It's a treasure.

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### Cowbirds and Other Brood Parasites

By Catherine Ortega. 1998. The University of Arizona Press, Tucson, Arizona, 85721. 371 pp., Illus. U.S. \$65.00.

The central focus of this comprehensive work on brood parasites is the Cowbird, which is often blamed

for the decline in the number of songbirds. However mankind is equally to blame for altering the landscape and creating better conditions for the Cowbird to flourish by increasing forest fragmentation and therefore "edge" habitat. This absorbing work is intended primarily for graduate students, those in managerial





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