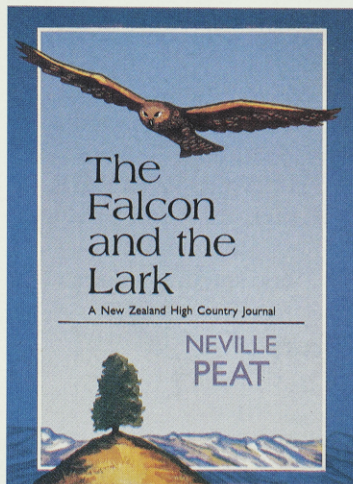


The Falcon and the Lark: a New Zealand high country journal

by Neville Peat (John McIndoe)
1992, 143pp, \$21.95

This book reinforces Neville Peat's reputation as one of New Zealand's best contemporary natural history writers.

An account of Peat's journey to re-discover his roots in the eastern Otago high country, the book is a satisfying blend of human and natural history. Its main theme is the life history of the eastern falcon, from its solitary roving in winter, through courtship and nesting in the spring and then the raising of young in the summer.



The reader shares the daily activities of the falcon as it hunts for food, prepares to breed and soars on the warm summer air currents. Peat uses his familiarity with the landscape to evoke clear images of the habitat of the falcon. He also explores some of the more unusual plants and animals that also share the ranges and valleys of the Middledarch area: insects admirably adapted to the temperature extremes of the Otago block mountains, and plants that have been used as medicines since early Maori times.

This high country journal, however, is not limited to exploring the flora and fauna. Neville Peat talks to the local people as he investigates the area where his ancestors lived. He introduces us to some of the local identities and increasingly, as the book progresses, to a mysterious character very much at home in this wild landscape. And, importantly, he uses this opportunity to comment on

some of the key conservation issues affecting the area and the high country generally. *The Falcon and the Lark* is the best natural history novel yet about New Zealand's high country.
Mike Harding

The Diversity of Life

by Edward O. Wilson (Harvard University Press) 1992, 430pp

E.O. Wilson, world-renowned biologist and recipient of two Pulitzer Prizes, has crafted a work which is readable, comprehensive, instructive and visionary. In no one volume can a reader find such an assemblage of descriptions of all those elements which comprise both the subject and science of biological diversity (biodiversity).

If you have ever been confused as to what exactly biodiversity is, wanted to know why the preservation of biodiversity is so important, or wanted to be able to make rational arguments to others for its preservation, this is the book to read. Wilson not only provides the most comprehensive collection of apologetics for preservation of biodiversity, but he gives refreshingly understandable explanations of such complicated concepts as the definition of species, adaptive radiation, and extinction theory.

The book, which contains numerous illustrations and stunning colour photographs, is divided into three sections. In the first, Wilson explains the nature of extinction through time. The second section discusses the nature of biodiversity and how it arises. In the final section, Wilson describes, in chilling detail, the human impact on biodiversity:

"Field studies show that as biodiversity is reduced, so is the quality of the services provided by ecosystems. Records of stressed ecosystems also demonstrate that the descent can be unpredictably abrupt. As extinction spreads, some of the lost forms prove to be keystone species, whose disappearance brings down other species and triggers a ripple effect through the

demographics of the survivors. The loss of a keystone species is like a drill accidentally striking a powerline. It causes the lights to go out all over."

But Wilson does not simply present a diatribe on the horrors of the current extinction spasm. He finishes this wonderful book by offering qualified hope for the future and offers several thoughtful suggestions and notes:

"There is an implicit principle of human behaviour important to conservation: *the better an ecosystem is known, the less likely it will be destroyed*. As the Senegalese conservationist Baba Dioum has said, 'In the end, we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught.'"

Do yourself a favour and teach yourself by reading what is probably the most important book ever published on biodiversity.

(The Viking edition of *The Diversity of Life* can be ordered

through bookshops for \$79.95. A Penguin edition should be available by the middle of next year.)
J. Alan Clark

The Estuary: where our rivers meet the sea

edited by S.J. Owen for the Christchurch City Council, 1992, 202 pp, \$29.95

Estuaries are biological powerhouses, and in the ecologist's jargon they are among the most "productive" of all ecosystems.

This book is a detailed account of life in and around the Avon-Heathcote Estuary and Brooklands Lagoon in Christchurch. Everything from the natural history of the living components – from birdlife to the crabs, fish, plants and shellfish – and the human history are covered. But it is much more than a local textbook about one important estuary. It is also an exuberant, wonderfully organised and illustrated treatise on what makes estuaries important and how they work. In that sense it is about every estuary in New Zealand.

Ian Close



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