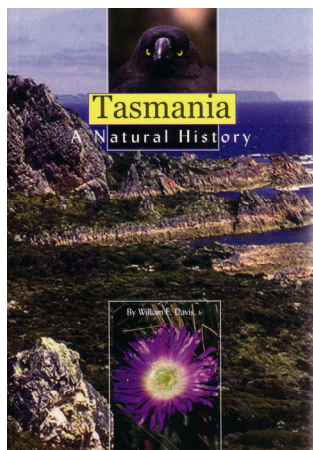


## BOOK REVIEWS

**Tasmania: A Natural History** by William E. Davis Jr., Surrey Beatty & Sons, 2007, paperback, 269 pages.

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A title like this had me drooling in anticipation of getting my hands on a copy as soon as it was published. At this point in the piece, the standard comment would be ‘and I was not disappointed when it arrived’. But the sad thing is that I was – a little, at least. I’ve been trying to put my finger on exactly why, and think it boils down to one key point: presentation. These days, readers are used to being able to dip into a book of this sort. One expects to be able to use chapter headings and sub-headings to make instant sense of the book’s structure, helping one to decide whether to delve into the detail presented in tables and text-boxes or to go for a more superficial impression from browsing high-quality graphics with informative captions.

By contrast, this book reminds me of something I might have read in the 1970s or earlier. The text is dense and unbroken. The photos are sparse and mostly monochrome. They are very poorly reproduced (they look like they started life as embedded graphics in a Word document) and are not well integrated with the text. Their captions are minimalistic. There are no other figures, no tables, no text boxes.

While the chapter headings give little clue as to what lies within, the bulk of this book is a traditional treatise on natural history set out along taxonomic lines – a style largely abandoned by other authors and publishers in recent years in favour of more contemporary habitat-, ecosystem- or ecological process-based approaches. After some scene-setting chapters on the geologic (*sic*) history, climate and arrival of humans, there are separate chapters devoted to the inhabitants of Tasmania’s land-base, describing in sequence vegetation, invertebrates, mammals, birds and ‘other vertebrates’. A chapter on marine natural history follows, similarly arranged taxonomically. The final chapter is perhaps the one that visitors to the State will appreciate most: a regional guide to some of the best places for experiencing Tasmanian natural history.

As a taster of what to expect from this book, here’s the opening sentence to Chapter 1. ‘The largely non-biological (abiotic) processes that have shaped the geological and climatic history of Tasmania over the past billion years or so have provided constraints

within which natural selection has worked to shape Tasmania's current flora and fauna (biota).' All true, but a bit, well, uninviting. Not even my word processor liked the sentence construction as I retyped it; it underlined it in green. I don't believe that Surrey Beatty has served Tasmanian naturalists well by apparently taking a 'hands-off' approach to preparing this book for publication.

Despite my disappointment with the presentation of this book, there's no doubting the quality of the material contained within. Almost every paragraph is packed full of information, and the author is clearly very much in tune with Tasmania's nature and with the way naturalists experience it. Almost everything I read struck a chord with me: it was all stuff I either knew or was pleased to learn afresh. The list of local naturalists that the author acknowledges for support along the way is long and venerable; many are members of the Tasmanian Field Naturalists Club and will be reading this review.

There's one other reason for my disappointment, which may come across as a bit churlish, even xenophobic; but I'll say it anyway. I'm disappointed that the market existed for this book in the first place. The publishers boldly state that 'this is the first book on the general natural history of Tasmania in nearly a century'. Whatever the veracity of this statement, it strikes me as odd that a book with this title hasn't been produced by a home-grown Tasmanian naturalist. William Davis Jr. is a Professor Emeritus at Boston University in the United States, and his book is based on his eight visits to Tasmania since 1990. His overseas perspective may well add something to the book. After all, many of us take our own backyard for granted and sometimes need non-locals to remind us of the wonders that Tasmania has to offer. But his style can also irritate. Do we really need to be told in a book on Tasmanian natural history that, 'for foreign visitors be aware that as in Great Britain, cars drive on the left hand side of the road'? And should a 21<sup>st</sup> century book on Tasmanian natural history perpetuate the use of feet and inches as the preferred unit of measurement?

The often pedantic nature of naturalists (or at least of me) means some niggling over spelling errors is only to be expected in a book review such as this. So I can report that, while Karen Richards may be happy to get an acknowledgement for her contribution, she may be less so to be referred to as 'Karren'. I also noticed that the marine mollusc *Pleuroploca* was renamed *Leuroploca*. Again, allowing these and others like it to slip through does little credit to the publishers.

As the first sentence of the book's preface says, 'Tasmania is a truly remarkable place for those interested in natural history'. Unfortunately, my feeling is that only Tasmanians (and visitors) who are already truly remarkably interested in natural history will get real value out of this book. This means that I can end on a positive note by recommending the book to the majority of the readership of *The Tasmanian Naturalist*, but I wouldn't necessarily recommend it to those whose interest in natural history extends no further than enjoying an uncomplicated walk in the bush.