

BOOK REVIEWS

A Census of the Vascular Plants of Tasmania

by *A.M. Buchanan A. McGeary-Brown & A.E. Orchard*

Reviewed by P.A. Collier

This publication is the second Tasmanian Herbarium Occasional Publication. The text is in two major sections: a seventy-four-page list of the names of the higher plants which are native or naturalised in Tasmania and an eight-page index to the genera in Tasmania. Such lists form a valuable reference for those concerned with the scientific naming of Tasmania's plants.

The last time that a complete treatment of the Tasmanian flora appeared was in 1903, eighty-six years ago. This was *The Tasmanian Flora* by Leonard Rodway. Being a flora, it includes a full description of the Tasmanian species as well as keys to help with identification. A census includes just the names with no other description and is not useful for identification of plants.

One role of a herbarium is to keep up to date with the current names for local plants. The Tasmanian Herbarium is no exception, and they have kept a list of current names for their own use for many years. The advent of computers in the Herbarium has allowed this list to be published. A computer allows a publication to be set-up ready for printing at a relatively small cost. Additionally the list may be kept up to date very easily and we can expect a revised version to appear before this list is eighty-six years out of date!

For readers familiar with the Tasmanian flora this census may prove both interesting and frustrating. There are a great many names included which do not appear in the incomplete Tasmanian floras published in the last twenty-six years. Without a major literature search, or a patient friend in the Herbarium, it would be difficult to find further details about all of these names. Perhaps the Herbarium can be persuaded to computerise the *Tasmanian Flora*, so that regular revisions can be produced of this valuable reference work as well.

The Platypus: a Unique Mammal

by *Tom Grant, illustrated by Dominic Fanning*

NSW University Press: Australian Natural History Series, rrp \$14.95

Reviewed by D.G. Hird

Since its discovery by Europeans, the Platypus has intrigued casual observers and scientists alike. This provocation of our curiosity has continued through the first proof of oviparity (egg laying) amongst mammals in this species through to a recent discovery of a specialised food electro-location faculty not previously known in any higher vertebrate.

As with several predecessors in its series, this volume is primarily based on an intensive long-term study of its subject by its obviously dedicated author. As such

it contains a wealth of up to date information on life history aspects of the platypus as well as clearly elucidated features of physiology and anatomy. Natural history elements are cleverly presented in a season by season sequence, for example reproductive and feeding behaviours exhibit significant seasonal activity. Interwoven with this are coherent and concise segments on relevant topics such as the unique (with the echidnas) reproductive system and the marked seasonal activity of the male platypus' poison gland.

Tasmania abounds with prime platypus habitat. This has been recognised by naturalists, cinematographers (eg. the *Nature of Australia* platypus sequence) and also some accommodation hosts whose reputation as "platypus guides" has justifiably enhanced their business. Further local interest should follow, it would be interesting to have more details of the known platypus usage of Tasmania's thousands of highland lakes, for example.

As was reported in previous reviews of volumes in this series, production errors are again apparent. The preface includes an unfinished sentence and *mono tremes* (sic) appears as two words on page 7. The bibliographical page doesn't clearly indicate that this is in fact the second, revised edition of the 1984 hardcover edition.

A diversity of readers should nonetheless find this book to be both entertaining and highly educational.

SHELL COLLECTING — FROM CAVEMEN TO KINGS

by Elizabeth Turner

Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery

The history of shell collecting goes back to prehistoric times and started with the need for implements to cut and carry objects. It was also the beginning of shell ornamentation which continues today.

The first artistic shell representations known are from the Minoan civilization in Crete. Aristototele is thought to be the first person to seriously document descriptions of shells and the habits of the animal inside, while it has been suggested that shells found during the excavations of Pompeii may have been from a natural history collection. Two Roman consuls 100 years B.C. collected shells and the infamous Caligula, while pretending to invade Britain, ordered his men to collect shells after he had marched them battle-style to the shore.

During the Middle Ages early 13th century Dominican monks wrote books on shells and also used them to illustrate the borders of manuscripts.

The 15th and 16th centuries saw a time of great world exploration and soon shells were being brought back as curios from the East and West Indies, the American continent, India and by church missionaries.

Much of the shell trade centred in Amsterdam and Antwerp as ships unloaded exotic cargoes from all over the world. Two notable shell collectors in Holland were the scholar Desiderius Erasmus and the engraver Albrecht Durer.