

REVIEWS

The Black Robin : the Saving of the World's Most Endangered Bird, by David Butler & Don Merton, 1992. Oxford University Press, 304 pp., ISBN : 0-19-558260-8. Price \$49.95.

This book, so far seen only as proofs, is due for publication in late September or early October; it should be of wide interest to readers of *Notornis*. On the one hand, it provides a detailed record of how the Black Robin was brought back from the verge of extinction and, on the other, a lively and interesting account of the activities of the dedicated people who made this remarkable achievement possible despite many difficulties.

The book is to have 91 photographs (21 in colour), 24 figures (including maps) and 18 tables, plus appendices and end notes. The first two of the 18 chapters provide an historical perspective covering the period from 1871, when the Black Robin was discovered by H. H. Travers, to 1938, when Fleming's expedition confirmed the survival of the species on Little Mangere Island. The third chapter supplies useful information about the geological history of the Chatham Islands, their discovery and geography, and about the history and relationships of the flora and fauna. The fourth chapter, summarising events during the 1950s and 1960s, records the acquiring of reserve status for South East and Mangere Islands and the increasing involvement of the NZ Wildlife Service in the management of endangered bird species at the Chathams and elsewhere. The remaining chapters explain chronologically, and in detail, how the wildlife officers and their helpers reversed the decline in the Black Robin's population. From a low of only seven birds in 1976 (only two were females), the population was gradually increased until, by 1991, there were over a hundred.

Apart from the difficulties involved in camping for long periods on exposed islands in stormy seas 400 nautical miles from the New Zealand mainland, the problems the team encountered included the declining quality of a very small habitat (Little Mangere Island), low production of robin eggs, loss of nests from the countless numbers of seabirds that crashed through the canopy at night, nest-predating starlings, poorly performing foster parents for robin eggs, virus infections, mite infestations, toxic insecticides, inbreeding, tit-raised robins trying to mate with tits (mal-imprinting), weather extremes and shortage of food for robins.

As each problem was identified means were devised to overcome it, or at least to minimise its effects. Robins were moved to other islands, habitats were improved by tree planting, robins were induced to use starling-proofed nestboxes, robin eggs were cross fostered to tits (thus inducing the parent robin to lay again), and then well-grown tit-raised robin chicks were fostered back to robins before they fledged (to prevent mal-imprinting), parent birds with artificially enlarged broods were given extra food, and nests were periodically replaced with sterilised ones to reduce parasite infestations.

There is much more in this book than its title might suggest. Although the main emphasis is on the Black Robin, there are many useful snippets of historical information about the activities of the former NZ Wildlife Service in securing and enhancing nature reserves in the Chathams (often in

association with other agencies), and in protecting other threatened species such as the Magenta Petrel, Chatham Island Oystercatcher, Shore Plover, Chatham Island Snipe, Chatham Island Pigeon and Forbes' Parakeet. At least 90 people are named in the book as having been involved in one aspect or another of the robin work at some time during the period 1961 to 1991. Most of these people were members of the former Wildlife Service, but many were from other government departments or from the universities, and some were volunteers who had paid their own air fares to the Chathams.

Much of the book is taken up with details of the management and breeding success of the robins, some of which produced larger and more frequent clutches when "managed" on their new island homes. Each bird was banded and its ancestry recorded (sometimes going back several generations) together with its egg/chick history, which often involved several transfers between warbler, tit and robin foster parents.

All this detailed information, invaluable to geneticists and to wildlife managers faced with similar problems in the future, may seem rather heavy going to the general reader, but this should be less so in the finished book, where the reader will have both text and illustrations together. Even in the proofs, the detailed information about individual robins is enlivened by the accompanying human stories, some of which, like the climbing of the 200 m cliffs of Little Mangere Island and the two instances of small boats being overturned while trying to land in rough weather, involve high drama.

The authors have been successful in catching the flavour of some of these dramatic events and also in conveying the extraordinary enthusiasm, dedication and competence of the people involved. For Don Merton, the leader of the robin team since 1976, the end of the programme of active management of Black Robins means the end of 12 summers spent in the Chathams – how appropriate that the book should be dedicated to his wife Margaret!

Peter Bull



The Skuas, by Robert W. Furness. T & AD Poyser, Claton, 1987. ISBN 0 85661 046 1. Price: 18 pounds.

Skuas are closely related to gulls, and are well known for their habit of stealing food from other seabirds. Skuas are divided into the small skuas (Arctic, Pomarine and Long-tailed Skuas) and the large skuas (Great, including the Brown or Subantarctic Skua, and the South Polar and Chilean Skuas). The small skuas breed in Arctic and subarctic regions and migrate to the Southern Hemisphere, where they are regularly seen around the New Zealand coast. Two of the large skuas breed in the New Zealand region, the Brown Skua breeding on Stewart Island and the Chatham and subantarctic islands and the South Polar Skua in the Ross Sea region of Antarctica.

The aim of this book is to outline knowledge of the ecology of skuas and to consider some of the interesting questions which this raises. Dr Furness has made extensive studies of skuas on the Shetland Islands and is well qualified for this task. The book considers the early history of skuas