

## Endangered: Wildlife on the Brink of Extinction

By George C. McGavin. 2006. Firefly Books Ltd. 192 pages. U.S. \$35.00 Cloth

An ecologist could not help but be drawn to a book with the title *Endangered. Wildlife on the brink of Extinction*, seeking an update on the current state of the world's species at risk. Unfortunately McGavin's book does not provide a succinct analysis of current status, the impacts we should be most concerned about, geographic localities of concern and the likely future trends. Rather this coffee table book provides a piecemeal of "information bites" for fifty animal groups ranging from dogs and cats to salmon and songbirds.

The lengthy (50 of 192 pages) two chapter introduction on the "Nature of Extinction" and "The Sixth Extinction" could be a grade nine biology course covering the basics of evolution and human development from our hunter-gather roots, through our agrarian and industrial revolutions to an assessment of supply and demand harvesting of nature. Instead of a discussion of the ecological implications of the loss of species to ecosystem integrity, extinction is considered more in terms of the extent of human mourning and the likely curiosity of future generations about species that once existed.

The "Lost and the Last" chapter constitutes the central text starting with Monotremes and Marsupials. Typical treatment of species groups include general statements such as: "Platypus eggs are eaten by introduced red foxes and rats as well as by native predators such as lizards. Many echidna eggs suffer the same fate." This text provides no meaningful information on the status of even these most unique of creatures for which clear trends must surely be known. No consistent format is used to cover each animal group, for example within the sub-section Insectivores Insectivora the subtitles used could have been chosen at random: Sense of Smell; Desmans in Danger; Desert Moles; Rare and Restricted; and Solendon Capture. Often the information presented begs the question; What has this to do with wildlife on the brink of extinction? If general ecological information is to be presented it would have been better in a text box or sidebar as a special case study.

Much more information could have been conveyed by following a consistent format for each animal group with sub-headings that allowed the reader to move from one group to another building an understanding of the most threatened species, the number of species threatened within each group, the ecological implications of species loss, the key causes of species decline, likely future trends and actions required to reverse negative trends. Summary graphs, tables or pictorial representations are virtually absent, yet they too could have been used to convey large amounts of information in a simple repeatable format for each species group.

The most impressive aspect of *Endangered* is surely the figures but, while there are captions, the text makes no direct reference to the figures and text and figures are often unrelated. In the Prosimians group the text states: "The strangest prosimian is surely the aye-aye. Its wide eyes, pointed ears and thin bony fingers lend it a goblin-like appearance". No picture of the aye-aye is included, but pictures of the sifaka and loris are included with no information on their status.

There is considerable variability in the treatment of each species group with some written in a more authoritative style. Bats Chiroptera is one example where there is a logical organization of sub-sections and more information on extinction. Variability is also seen in how comprehensively each species group is covered and this appears unrelated to the extent of information likely available. For example, the monkeys species group includes less than one page of text while the amphibians group has four pages of text.

In summary, *Extinction* provides an enormous amount of anecdotal information that is interesting to read, but which is likely forgotten soon after having read it. The book leaves the reader with a sense of disaster for all creatures as a result of human activity (which may or may not be far off the truth) and attempts to deal with all the ills of humankind from switching off light bulbs to buying local produce. Unfortunately readers that might be inclined to read *Endangered* will likely come away knowing little more than they started with.

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## MISCELLANEOUS

### The Reluctant Mr. Darwin: An Intimate Portrait of Charles Darwin and the Making of His Theory of Evolution

By David Quammen. 2006. Atlas Books/ W. W. Norton & Company, New York. 304 pages. \$30.00 Cloth.

As naturalists, we never cease to be amazed by the myriad wonderful life forms in nature, be it the flowering plants that suddenly appear following snowmelt, the wide variety of birds that return north every spring,

or the colourful mushrooms found each fall in our forests. However, the source of this very diversity may easily be perplexing: why are there so many species and how did they originate? The theory of evolution has gone a long way towards explaining these and related questions by means of a wealth of empirical and theoretical studies.

Evolution by natural selection as [formulated] proposed by Charles Darwin is one of the most important and far-reaching ideas ever formulated, as it provides the basic mechanism whereby evolution has created the enormous diversity of life. David Quammen's objectives with his book were to offer a concise yet insightful overview of the background, birth and development of Darwin's idea of natural selection, and to consider the reasons for Darwin's reluctance in making his theory public. Indeed, there were many reasons why Darwin might have wanted to keep his evolutionary views to himself. These included the fear of rejection from a science corps whose natural history was based largely on teleological ideals with foundations in religious agendas, as well as his personal relationship with his beloved wife Emma, a pious Christian. In the end, it was Darwin's receipt of a manuscript from Alfred Russel Wallace, who at the time was collecting beautiful bird and insect specimens somewhere in the Malay Archipelago, which prompted the eventual publication of *On The Origin of Species* in 1859.

Quammen outlines this momentous piece of history concisely and does not attempt to compete with other more exhaustive biographies that provide a more detailed and scholarly account of Darwin's idea. The result is a very readable book that, despite the fact that Quammen is not an academic scientist, is based on thorough research of original background material. Hence, this book follows in the tradition of Quammen's previous successes, most notably *The Song of the Dodo* (1996), his outstanding and award

winning volume on island biogeography. Several interesting aspects of Darwin's life are also highlighted, such as his mysterious illness, characterized by dizziness, stomach pain, and bouts of illness, often flaring up under stressful conditions. Darwin spent weeks on end at health clinics, surrendering his body to coldwater treatments, hoping to rid himself of the persistent ailment. The book also describes a number of the small natural history experiments that Darwin performed to understand the mechanisms of evolution, such as submerging common vegetable seeds in brine solution to investigate the possibility of over water dispersal, or dangling duck feet in water to see if gastropods would climb aboard on a flight destined for other ponds. With these sorts of amusing passages highlighting the development of the most important idea in biology, *The Reluctant Mr. Darwin* should be of great interest to naturalists regardless of whether they are deeply aware of evolutionary theory or simply familiar with Darwin's work. The good quality of the material in this volume, along with Quammen's command of the English language, makes this book well worth the read.

#### Literature Cited

Quammen, D. 1996. *The Song of the Dodo – Island Biogeography in an Age of Extinctions*. Hutchinson/Pimlico/Random House of Canada Limited, Mississauga, Ontario.

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### A Field Guide to Gold, Gemstones & Mineral Sites of British Columbia, Sites Within a Day's Drive of Vancouver

By Rick Hudson. 2006. Volume 2. Revised Edition. Harbour Publishing Co. Ltd., P.O. Box 219, Madeira Park, British Columbia V0N 2H0 Canada. 368 pages. 8 illustrations \$16.95 CAD

Rick Hudson has succeeded in expressing his passion for mineral collecting through his field guide book. On a second level he also tries to promote a sense of adventure by teasing the reader to go out and explore or prospect for nature's buried treasures.

The author structured the book so the reader can easily cross-reference required information in the lengthy location lists. A "How to Use This Book" and a "Quick Reference Guide" help to quickly locate items of interest throughout the book.

The book cover illustrates the hobby of mineral collecting as a family activity. Hudson educates the reader from first principles on how to become a Rockhound. To accomplish this, he describes how to prepare yourself by choosing proper clothing, safety gear, collecting tools and maps. He warns the future mineral collector about natural hazards they may encounter such as; rattlesnakes, grizzly bears and ticks. Ethics, access rights and mineral rights are also discussed to

keep the collector within acceptable collecting practices and to avoid unintentional trespassing.

Mineral collecting is attractive to many people because as you find an interesting mineral specimen, you want to learn how nature created it and or its geological history. The author included short geological descriptions partitioned by collecting areas as well as mining histories of local economic importance within the collecting area.

Colour plates illustrate the minerals found in some of the collecting sites and detailed occurrence maps are included in all the collecting area sections throughout the book. The colour plates represent minerals that are possible to find in the collecting sites. Government mineral index files were included in the locality information along with detailed road log descriptions.

The author has made a successful merger of personal knowledge and technical data to compile an informative volume which can provide years of enjoyment for many future rockhounds and their families and friends.

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