

Desert Wildlife by **Edmund G. Jaeger**. Stanford UP; OUP 26s. 6d.

Aptly described by its author as a series of intimate and authentic sketches depicting the lives of native animals of the south-western deserts of the New World, this is an expanded revision of his popular *Our Desert Neighbours* (1950) with additional chapters and many new field notes, photographs and sketches. Mammals and birds predominate, with shorter sections devoted to reptiles, amphibians, and some invertebrates, the whole based on the author's many years of carefully documented personal experience and observation, recorded here with an easy and absorbing style, and well illustrated with photo-litho-reproduced plates and charming line sketches.

Not only the local naturalists will enjoy this book; the present reviewer found it a most illuminating study, revealing numerous instances of parallelism with the fauna of the Palaearctic deserts, with which he is more familiar. Indeed the kit fox illustrated on the cover, with its large ears and hairy feet recalls at once similar adaptations in the Rüppell's sand fox and sand cat of the Arabian deserts. Again and again the author appeals for the preservation of vanishing wildlife, pointing out that the balance of nature is extremely complex. Creatures that may seem baneful on superficial consideration all have a part to play; the vulture, which seems hideous to some, is a useful scavenger, a desert 'sanitary inspector'.

All interested in wildlife conservation should read this book; the scientific ecologist will find it as interesting as the amateur naturalist.

DAVID L. HARRISON

Asia, A Natural History by **Pierre Pfeffer**. Random House, New York, \$20. Hamish Hamilton, London, 105s.

This sumptuous book, 12 inches by 10 inches is a feast of photographs. One or more in colour or half-tone adorns almost every one of the 300 pages. They have been gathered from many sources and testify to the author's industry in presenting this magnificent view of the scenery and wild life of Asia. A narrative text runs lightly between and, though not always in explanation of the photos, inserts a vast and intriguing amount of information. Seven chapters deal with the more inclement parts of Asia from the Arctic to the Himalayas and Arabia, and seven lead from the busy China plain through Indochina to Ceylon and the Moluccas. Man and his works are omitted save where their effect is transcendent. Most of the large animals figure in their natural surroundings, especially mammals, birds and lizards, and a few of the spectacular insects. The botany starts well but falls off as it gathers in complexity towards south east Asia. There is no good photograph of high tropical forest in any way comparable with the fine scenes of the coniferous. The Indochinese forest is pathetically secondary. The mangroves are re-growth, devoid of the abundant epiphytes that were their glory. The mountains of Celebes offer prominently two American introductions. But, then, I am a botanist, and the author, geographer and zoologist, has made his choice triumphantly. I delight, indeed, to recognise the uniquely heterosporous toadstool *Hygrophorus firmus*. A hundred men could write a hundred books with as many sets of photographs and still the natural history of Asia would not be exhausted. The author excels in Russia, Arabia, China and Cambodia.

This book, the sixth in its series, is for the sitting room, the public library, the school library and, I hope, the university because it is a very fine introduction to some of the grandest geology and biology of the earth. It seems to be the policy to exclude references which is a pity because there are many points in text and illustration that one would like to pursue. For instance, the great Yenisey

divide is unfamiliar, the Japanese work on monkeys is not ordinarily known, Wallace's line is hotly disputed, the turret-rocks of Formosa are baffling, and where can one learn more about the stupendous scenes of the Himalayas? Such a fine book, produced with such experience and craftsmanship, ought to last; it would if it led on.

E. J. H. CORNER

Where the Sea Breaks its Back by **Corey Ford**. Gollancz, 30s.

This is two tales in one: the story of Vitus Bering's voyage of discovery from Kamchatka to Alaska in 1741 and nightmare journey back, and of the remarkable wildlife discoveries of that brilliant, bitter, arrogant, tactless, irascible German naturalist and scientist, the ship's mineralogist, Georg Wilhelm Steller, whose name as a result of this voyage is commemorated in four birds, one fish, three geographical features and the giant northern manatee, the now extinct Steller's sea cow. When they did discover Alaska Steller, to his fury and despair, was allowed only ten hours ashore – 'ten years the preparation, ten hours to do the work itself', as he bitterly recorded in his diary – and even that was only achieved after a blistering attack on Bering to his face for which 'any other member of the crew would have been clapped in irons'. The wreck of the ship on Bering Island after a return voyage of storm and disaster along the Aleutian chain – 45 of the crew of 77 died, including the captain, mostly of scurvy, which Steller could have prevented if they had heeded him – at least gave Steller eight months in which to study the flora and fauna. Sea otters, blue foxes – which sniffed at the dying, ate the dead and dug up the buried corpses – fur seals, sea lions, all were studied and meticulously described, and above all the huge sea cows, never seen before or since by any scientist.

A new boat, built out of the wreck on Bering Island, brought the survivors back to Kamchatka, and with them the news of the fur seals and sea otters. Next spring the massacre began.

This well told, dramatic and tragic story is based on Steller's own journal. In a final chapter the author tells briefly what has happened to the sea otters of Alaska since Steller's day – a story of slaughter and cruelty, but with a happier outcome today than could have seemed possible fifty years ago.

M. S. FITTER

Conservation and Caribbean Regional Progress by **Carl A. Carlozzi** and **Alice A. Carlozzi**. Antioch Press, Yellow Springs, Ohio, \$4.00.

This little 160-page book deals with the Lesser Antilles, 22 intriguing islands aggregating less than 5000 square miles. Without pretension as to scientific thoroughness, it discusses, among other natural and historic features, the vertebrate fauna and its current plight.

Because of the geological youth of the islands, vertebrates were never abundant. Birds and reptiles predominate. Mammals are rare. Except on Trinidad the birds are mostly inconspicuous. Parrots are found on Dominica, St Lucia, St Vincent, and Bonaire. Introduced birds of paradise persist on Little Tobago. The scarlet ibis and oil birds of Trinidad are mentioned, as are the flamingos of Bonaire. Howler monkeys are found on Trinidad, and smaller species are feral on St Kitts, Nevis, and Grenada. Green turtles are listed for Barbuda and Bonaire.

The fauna of these islands is disappearing. As a result of destruction of most of the original plant communities for agriculture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, introduced predators such as the mongoose and the monkeys, and excessive hunting, some 21 vertebrate species or subspecies endemic to these islands have already disappeared. Included are ten birds. Thirty-six more vertebrates, including 16 birds (all the parrots) are threatened.