

MARK AVERY

STANDING UP FOR NATURE

Stephen Moss's 2023 Round-up of Nature Books

MARK NOVEMBER 25, 2023 2 COMMENTS

Stephen Moss is a naturalist, author and, until recently, a course leader of the MA in Travel & Nature Writing at Bath Spa University.



Here is his annual round-up of books about wildlife, nature and the environment which was formerly published by The Guardian but this is the sixth year it has appeared on this blog. @stephenmoss_tv

[Mark writes: where I have read and reviewed books mentioned by Stephen I have linked to my reviews].

Another great year for books on the natural world. But before I begin, huge congratulations to two of my choices for 2022's 'Book of the Year'. *The Lost Rainforests of Britain* by Guy Shrubsole and *The Flow* by Amy-Jane Beer won their respective categories in the James Cropper Wainwright Prize – well done both!

Incidentally, the majority of books on the longlists and shortlists for all three prizes (Nature Writing, Writing on Conservation and Children's Writing) were written by women. This is a welcome first, showing the huge progress made since the appearance in 2008 of Granta 102: New Nature Writing, which featured just two women out of 25 contributors.

Other excellent titles shortlisted for the Wainwrights included *Spark*, by M.G. Leonard (Walker Books), *Nomad Century* by Gaia Vince (Allen Lane), *Twelve Words for Moss* by Elizabeth-Jane Burnett (Penguin), *Belonging: Natural Histories of Place, Identity and Home*, by Amanda Thomson (Canongate), and *Beastly*, by Keggie Carew (also Canongate) – all highly original, beautifully written and timely accounts of us and the natural world, written from very different perspectives.

Lev Parikian has established a fine reputation as a humorous and (mostly) urban writer, but *Taking Flight* (Elliott & Thompson) departs from his usual style. This is a wide-ranging, in-depth work of popular science, as he explores the nature of flight not just in birds, but other creatures as well. On a similar topic, *Flight Paths*, the first book by US writer Rebecca Heisman (Swift Press), tells the fascinating story of how the mysteries of bird migration were solved. Other popular science works include Charles Foster's eight compelling stories of 'animals under siege' from the climate crisis in *Cry of the Wild* (Doubleday), and Jennifer Ackerman's fascinating *What an Owl Knows* (One World).

Amongst so many books on birds, plants sometimes struggle to get a look-in. So *One Thousand Shades of Green: A Year in Search of Britain's Wild Plants*, by naturalist and TV presenter Mike Dilger (Bloomsbury Wildlife), is a welcome exception. It tells the entertaining story of Mike's quest to see one thousand different species in the UK in a single calendar year. Did he succeed? You'll have to read the book to find out!

Other flora-based books come from Little Toller's delightful 'Nature Classics' series, including the 1958 book *Wanderers in the New Forest* by Juliet de Bairacli Levy (known as 'the grandmother of herbalism'), and *The Allotment*, by Colin Ward and David Crouch, first published in 1988. The veteran children's author Michael Morpurgo has also reissued *All Around the Year* in the same imprint. Originally published in 1979, this is a diary of life on his North Devon farm, accompanied by poems from his friend and neighbour Ted Hughes. These repackaged volumes, from a publisher who always punch above their weight, show us that nature writing really is nothing new!

My Bath Spa Nature & Travel Writing colleague Gail Simmons published her second book: *Between the Chalk and the Sea* (Headline). This takes the reader on a modern pilgrimage through space and time, as she reflects on what it means to walk a specific, linear route – in this case a recently- discovered 'old way' between Southampton and Canterbury – through the perspective of a woman walking alone through the English countryside.

Three of our former students (taught by me and Gail on the MA) also published their first books: *Nature's Wonders: Moments that Mark the Seasons*, by Jane V. Adams (National Trust Books); the *Slow Guide to North-east Scotland*, by Rebecca Gibson (Bradt); and *Twelve Moons: A Year under a Shared Sky*, (Harper North) – a wonderful account of motherhood and nature, by Caro Giles.

From the far north, *Wild Shetland Through the Seasons*, by Brydon Thomason (The Shetland Times) is a stunning collection of photographs and stories about the wild creatures found in this wonderful archipelago, including proverbs, poems and names in the evocative Shetland dialect – a beautiful and informative book.

Meanwhile, established nature writers continue to produce new works, not least Mark Cocker, whose *One Midsummer's Day* (Vintage) is a truly original and – as ever – beautifully-written account of the author's love of swifits, which he uses to tell the far bigger story of life on our planet. On a smaller but still significant scale, *The Book of Wilding* (Bloomsbury) by Charlie Burrell and Isabella Tree (from the Knepp project) is a pragmatic and helpful handbook on how we can all wild ourselves and the world around us. And one of my favourite 'old nature writers', the always-readable John Lister-Kaye, reveals the secrets of Britain's mustelids in *Footprints in the Woods: The Secret Life of Forest and Riverbank* (Canongate).

Two classic natural history series – one almost eight decades old, the other a relative newcomer – continued to delight. The venerable Collins New Naturalists volumes continue to appear: this year's contributions are, unusually, two entomological titles: *Shieldbugs*, by Richard Jones, and *Solitary Bees* by Ted Benton and Nick Owens. The newer but also impressive series, from Bloomsbury Wildlife, reached volume 12 with George Peterken's *Trees and Woodlands*. Harper Collins also published *Wild Isles* (companion to the BBC-TV series), by Patrick Barkham and Alastair Fothergill, and Jonathan Kingdon's superb *Origin Africa: Safaris in Deep Time* – which turns one man's extraordinary knowledge and experience of Africa and its wildlife to focus on our own human evolutionary journey.

Perhaps the most useful book of the year is *The Identification Guide to Garden Birds of Britain*, written by Dominic Couzens with photographs by Carl Bovis (John Beaufoy). This compact volume is not just packed with perceptive information, like all Dominic's books, but also really lovely to look at, thanks to Carl's wonderful photos.

Two other guidebooks are rather more eccentric in their conception. The revered scientist Sir John Lawton has explored an unusual topic in his book *Inn Search of Birds* (Whittles Publishing). This humorous and informative guide to avian-related pub names is a light but very enjoyable read on a winter's evening. *Birds of the Mesozoic: An Illustrated Field Guide*, by Juan Benito and Roc Olivé (Lynx Edicions) provides a compelling insight into birds that went extinct in the era of the (non-avian) dinosaurs, from around 250 to 66 million years ago.

Lynx Edicions, based in Catalonia, Spain, have also produced the magnificent *All the Mammals of the World*, an informative, authoritative and very convenient single volume, illustrated guide based on their superb multi-volume series. This may seem expensive – though there is a discount if you buy it along with its equally excellent companion volume *All the Birds of the World* – this nevertheless represents superb value for money for what is effectively nine books in one.

At a time when so many publishers – as well, of course, as writers and readers – are having to cope with increased costs and reduced incomes as a result of the cost-of-living crisis, it's good to see so many great – and often beautifully-produced – books on the crucial subject of the natural world.

As well as praise for publishers, I'd also make a plea to everyone to support their local independent bookshop – at times like this we need them more than ever before. And many apologies to anyone I have missed out this year – there are just so many great books nowadays!

Finally, my choices for Book of the Year 2023 – in no particular order – are:

Undercurrent, by Natasha Carthew (Hodder and Stoughton). Subtitled A Cornish Memoir of Poverty, Nature and Resilience, this powerful, poetic account of a life without privilege brought a fresh new voice to the sometimes rather-too-cosy world of nature writing.

The Meaning of Geese: A Thousand Miles in Search of Home, by Nick Acheson (Chelsea Green). This is a beautifully-written account, by a Norfolk-based birder and conservationist, of his travels by bike during the Covid-19 lockdowns – packed with insightful observations and new perspectives on our relationship with nature.

God is an Octopus: Loss, Love and a Calling to Nature, by Ben Goldsmith (Bloomsbury Wildlife). This incredibly moving, yet nevertheless uplifting story deals with the impossibly tough death of the author's teenage daughter, Iris. It describes how, in his grief, Ben found comfort in nature, and specifically by restoring his Somerset farm as both a tribute to her, and a way of reconnecting with the meaning of her brief life.

Stephen Moss is an author and naturalist based in Somerset, and having retired from his post running the MA Nature and Travel Writing is now a Visiting Research Fellow at Bath Spa University. Stephen's latest books are the Wainwright-Prize-shortlisted Ten Birds that Changed the World (Guardian Faber) and The Owl: a Biography (Square Peg), the fifth volume in this bestselling series.

[Mark writes: my own selection of Book of the Year comes tomorrow]

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Book review

PREVIOUS Press release – Scottish Wildlife Trust NEXT This year's Books of the Year 2023

2 Replies to "Stephen Moss's 2023 Round-up of Nature Books"

Eryl Selly November 25, 2023 at 8:09 am

Shaping the Wild by David Elias should be in your list. It's a beautifully written book about the tensions between farming and rewilding (a red rag to many Welsh hill farmers) centred on a hill farm in deep Wales and constructed around a year although the book was written over several years.

It deserves to be far better known and read.

Reply

Mark November 26, 2023 at 6:20 am

Eryl – thank you for your first comment here. I can't tell you why this book was in Stephen's list – except that no-one can read everything!

But it is in my list, and my shortlist of Book of the Year for 2023, today.

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