

Wavering plumes

Why nature continues to fascinate

Here are two very different ways of celebrating nature. Bernd Brunner is a professional author who has written a string of successful trade books on subjects as various as the moon, bears, aquaria and Christmas trees. He now turns to birds. *Birdmania* sets out to document the fascination birds have had for people throughout history, and through a long series of short vignettes, organized under catchy if somewhat opaque chapter titles, he tells us about the many scientists, taxonomists, curators, artists, writers, adventurers, bird-keepers, egg-collectors and assorted eccentrics who have helped to shape the way we think of birds today. We hear of exotic characters like the army officer Richard Meinertzhagen, who stole the skins of rare birds on a large scale from major museums and then represented them as ones he had collected himself, and Frank Chapman, a New York bank official, who listed all the birds whose plumes he could identify on the hats worn by women shopping in uptown New York in 1886, as a protest against the feather trade.

Despite an alarming reference to “our feathered friends” in the first paragraph of Brunner’s blurb, this turns out to be a serious and

JEREMY MYNOTT

Bernd Brunner

BIRDMANIA

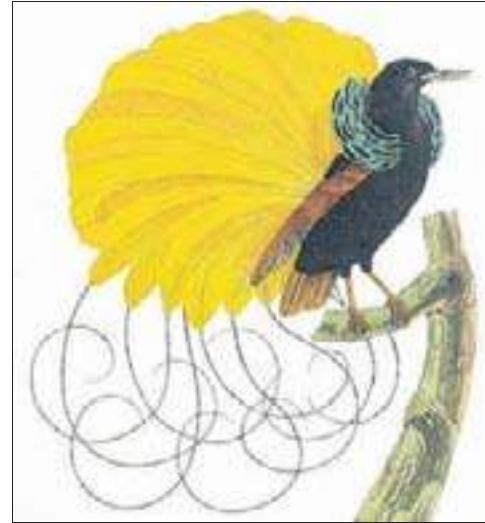
A remarkable passion for birds
304pp. Greystone. £24.99.
978 1 77164 277 4

Matthew Oates

BEYOND SPRING

Wanderings through nature
256pp. Fair Acre Press. £10.99.
978 1 911048 23 7

not a sentimental work. Brunner is in any case more interested in the people than the birds. The book is written in a clear and lively style, includes lots of good anecdotes, quotations and examples, and is beautifully illustrated throughout – so beautifully that it risks becoming the kind of coffee-table book one is expected to look at but not actually read. That would be a shame. Brunner has read widely and tells his stories well, even if he never goes deeper than second-hand reportage. He and his publisher have packaged an attractive product



Le Nebuleux bird of paradise, from *Birdmania*

that will please, entertain and inform.

Matthew Oates, by contrast, is a fully authentic naturalist who is scarcely packaged at all. His book consists in a series of wonderful effusions – about places, poets and personal encounters with wildlife – loosely arranged as a journey from spring to summer. The essays are of vari-

ous lengths and kinds, and seem to have been written very quickly and not much edited later, but they have an immediacy and passion that compel attention. Oates operates at some point of intersection between science, natural history and poetry. His source material is his own extensive first-hand knowledge and deeply pondered experience. He ranges confidently over topics as various as Wordsworth’s unsatisfactory descriptions of daffodils (they “waver” not “nod”), the first Brimstone butterfly epiphany in March each year, the joy in massed dandelions, the dippers of Dovedale, “next year’s” violets already showing in October on Wingletang, St Agnes, and the dramatic ladybird invasion of 1976. His literary reference points are the great Romantic poets and the nature writers Richard Jefferies, W. H. Hudson and in particular Edward Thomas. He is cheerfully rude about the bureaucracy of nature conservation bodies (with which he is very familiar, having worked for the National Trust for more than twenty-five years), and he also deplores their abstract professional language, peppered with distancing terms like “biodiversity” and “the environment”. He much prefers the resources of metaphor himself and he is not afraid to invoke such unfashionable concepts as rapture, metaphysics and the sublime. But you have to find your own way around his book, since it is itself an untidy if enchanting wilderness, without route maps or index.

In the one case you feel the publisher was too much present, in the other not quite present enough.