Islands of the Dodo

Studies of Mascarene Island Birds. A. W. DIAMOND, Ed. Cambridge University Press, New York, 1987. vi, 458 pp., illus. $125.

Dodos were not just a figment of Lewis Carroll's imagination. These large, fat, flightless pigeons once thrived on the remote island of Mauritius in the western Indian Ocean. Then, in the 17th century, hungry human visitors proceeded to slaughter and extinguish an extraordinary avifauna, including the dodo. A few survivors of the Mascarene avifauna persist as some of the world's rarest birds: the pink pigeon (*Nesoenas mayeri*), the Mauritius kestrel (*Falco newtoni*), and the echo parakeet (*Psittacula echo*). Saving them has been one of the highest conservation priorities of the International Council for Bird Preservation and the Jersey Wildfowl Preservation Trust.

A sound conservation plan targets key features of an endangered species' natural history—its food and habitat requirements and whatever seems to limit population recovery. Continuing their tradition of ornithological exploration focused on endangered species, the British Ornithologists' Union organized the Mascarene Island Expedition in 1974. The goal was to study the native bird species of Mauritius and of Réunion and Rodrigues, the two other Mascarene islands. *Studies of Mascarene Island Birds* not only details the expedition's results, it is a comprehensive encyclopedia of the ornithology of the Mascarene Islands, past and present.

Two chapters are the centerpieces of the volume. One is the opening chapter on the ecological history of the Mascarene Islands by A. S. Cheke, who reviews in scholarly detail three centuries of savage conflict between human folly and evolutionary paradise. The other is a review by C. G. Jones of the biology and conservation of the three most endangered land birds of Mauritius—the pigeon, the kestrel, and the parakeet. The rest of the chapters concern the known fossil record (Cowles), surviving small land birds (Cheke, Horne), and sea birds (Jouanin). A detailed appendix summarizes measurements and weights of Mascarene endemic birds and their eggs.

The editor and authors of *Studies of Mascarene Island Birds* deserve praise for compiling this scholarly reference volume. The detailed descriptions of each species' natural history fulfill the expedition's conservation goals and should stimulate additional research interest in the birds of the Mascarene Islands. Compiling these accounts was no simple task, given the undigested state of information made available by colleagues. The history of each species also had to be deciphered from the conflicting impressions of a host of casual visitors with varying backgrounds. The results of such research are necessarily of mixed quality, but the authors succeed in developing a coherent and constructive perspective.

This severely overpriced volume is an important contribution to the literature on the natural history of endangered birds and related conservation programs. It reflects some of the guilt that resides in our modern conservation conscience, focused symbolically on one of our most callous mistakes. Just imagine how much richer our natural world would be with dodos as well as pink pigeons in the Mascarene forests.

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Primatology

Primate Societies. BARBARA B. SMUTS, DOROTHY L. CHENEY, ROBERT M. SEYFARTH, RICHARD W. WRANGHAM, and THOMAS T. STRUHSAKER, Eds. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1987. xii, 578 pp., illus. $70; paper, $27.50.

Both human and non-human primates have occupied a strange and unique place in scientific investigation. Aside from the excesses sometimes found in grant proposals and sporadic wild leaps made recently into the arena of human sociobiology, most biologists only rarely devote more than lip-service to the idea that humans, too, are animals. The study of human behavior and human biology is almost exclusively the province of those in departments of medicine, psychology, sociology, and anthropology, where the continuity between humans and most other animals is often nearly invisible. Across this gulf that separates research on humans and most other animals stand nonhuman primates, as Jane Goodall aptly put it, "in the shadow of man." Large, socially living, flexible, slow-maturing, long-lived, and with low reproductive rates—these subjects who do not provide large quantities of simple data are discouraging for biologists. Yet the lives and life histories of primates have long intrigued a few biologists, and as our closest relatives primates warrant special attention within medical and social science departments. As a result, the few European and even fewer American biologists who first studied free-living monkeys, apes, and prosimians were joined from the outset by a broad range of social scientists in the task of describing and understanding these complex, highly social animals who are both so much alike and significantly different from humans and from their non-primate mammalian relatives.

These sociological and intellectual tendencies of science have had a significant impact on primate research over the past 25 years. Not only have scientists from disciplines with widely differing theories, approaches, and assumptions studied primate behavior, they have increasingly influenced each other and enriched our understanding of their complex and intriguing subjects. For a time, the diversity seemed to be a mixed blessing, as much a stumbling block to real progress as a benefit. With the publication of *Primate Societies*, however, Barbara Smuts, her co-editors, and their 46 contributors enthusiastically celebrate the end of the field's awkward adolescence and its entry into adulthood. In almost 600 pages that focus on field studies, the editors have managed to produce an integrated work of considerable scope utilizing a surprisingly successful interweaving of taxonomic and topical themes. Concepts and approaches from cognitive psychology, anthropology, and evolutionary biology, among other fields, inform and shape the wealth of recently acquired data that are presented, some of them for the first time, in this impressive volume.

It is not very long ago that most of the public thought all non-human primates were chimpanzees or gorillas, while many experimental psychologists and biomedical researchers thought they were all rhesus macaques, referred to, even in technical publications, as "the monkey," a nasty beast that spent its life in a cage hardly larger than its own dimensions while providing the data critical to decisions bearing on human behavior and medicine. We have come a long way. No reader of this book can fail to appreciate the diversity of primates or the impact of phylogeny or ecological and social context on the behavior of these complex animals. In a volume that both laboratory researcher and serious non-professional will find accessible, *Primate Societies* conveys the rich and vibrant tapestry, the patterns and the variations within those patterns, that describe the social lives of prosimians, monkeys, and apes—from the 60-gram mouse lemur to the 160-kilogram gorilla, nocturnal primates and diurnal ones, leaf-eaters, frugivores, insectivores, and omnivores, monogamous species, polygamous ones, ones with stable social groups and ones with fluid ones, that majority of species in which males