Book Reviews

Badgers by Michael Clark. Published by Whittet Books, London at £5.95

Over the years I have read several books about badgers, most notably the classic by Dr Ernest Neal entitled 'The Badger', first published by Collins in the New Naturalist Monograph Series in 1948. Now we have another book about the badger, but this one is different. The author, Michael Clark, is fully aware that he is writing about one of Britain's most popular mammals, and that in doing so, he is following in the tradition of Ernest Neal, to whom he makes frequent references.

This book is written for the general public. Like others in this series on various mammals, it is a serious attempt, yet light hearted, to arouse the public's interest in the badger. Well illustrated with pen and ink drawings, mostly of a cartoon type, the book tells the reader a great deal about the whole life style of the badger. As I read through the early chapters, I began to wish I had such a book available to me when I first started watching badgers in the Mendip Hills as a small boy. The author gives, for instance, information on how to watch badgers.

Drawing on his vast experience of badger watching in Hertfordshire and elsewhere, along with his representation of the Mammal Society on the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) panel to monitor the effects of the gassing operations, Michael Clark has a lot to say about the thorny subject of badgers and bovine tuberculosis. Also, using scientific field survey work, especially by Dr Hans Kruuk, he writes at length about the social behaviour of the badger. Such topics as the distribution, density and sett structure are dealt with, along with advice about badgers and the law (Badger Act 1973, amended in the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, and further amended in 1985). Now, of course, burden of proof is placed on the defendant to show he was not committing an offence. What I had not realised was that in 1985 there had been twenty-six prosecutions under the 1981 Act, twenty-four of which were successful.

If I have any criticism of the book, it is the style in which it is written. I found sometimes that the sentence structure did not flow easily, but that may be personal preference. For anyone starting out with the serious intention of studying badgers, then I would highly recommend this book, especially if the reader has little scientific background.

Further information concerning Whittet publications can be obtained from Whittet Books, 18 Anley Road, London W14 OBY.

Michael J.A. Thompson

Collins Guide to Rare Mammals of the World by John A. Burton and Bruce Pearson. Collins, London, 1987. 240pp £12.95.

The problems in writing a comprehensive guide to rare mammals of the world are many. As a recent article in Nature (24.3.88) pointed out if species were not listed in the IUCN Red Data books it did not mean that conservation measures were not needed. In other words what species should be included and which should be left out. The Collins Guide has recognised these problems and in a section entitled 'How many rare and threatened mammals' the authors highlight the fact that the largest groups of mammals - insectivores, bats and rodents - all reach their greatest diversity in tropical areas, and new species are described every year; yet these receive scant attention and the Guide has corrected this by identifying as many species as possible which may be at risk.

There is a good introduction to the book which explains the ecology of extinctions; how millions of species have become extinct through climatic changes, Stone Age hunting, etc., and that every species now in existence, including mankind, will become extinct one day. It draws the parallel that while these extinctons - for example, the dinosaurs - took place over several million years ago in geological terms the scale of extinctions in the 20th century has been quite unprecedented. Today, about 25% of the world's mammals are threatened.

Hunting is cited as an obvious cause of extinction: made easy by the use of modern firearms. For example, having exterminated the Arabian oryx in the wild by the application of automatic weapons from motor vehicles this technique has since been used to great effect on the addax and scimitar oryx. Poaching for rhino horns and mammal skins because of the high prices they demand is, of course, another major threat but, perhaps, the most serious threat of all is habitat destruction. It is here that the authors make the very significant point that while reserves and national parks were created to counterbalance this threat they are unlikely to have significant numbers of species because many of them are in marginal and waste lands - the richest and most productive land being the first to be farmed. This is particularly true in the British Isles: the largest reserves are chiefly in mountainous uplands.

The authors decided that one of the main problems in applying IUCN definitions such as extinct, endangered, vulnerable, etc., is that they overlap to some degree. To overcome this the Guide uses a star rating system: a five star rating to those highly endangered and likely to become extinct down to one star for species which are considered to be of conservation concern. Over 1000 species from marsupials to cetaceans are described and illustrated. Each is given a star rating, brief description and notes on its biology and ecology followed by a summary of its status both in the wild and in captivity and a distribution map. The mammals illustrated are approximately to scale within each plate, a good example is Kitti's hog-nosed (bumblebee) bat which is compared with an illustration of a bumblebee.

The book is undoubtedly the first to give such a