Watching Wildlife Australia - Lonely Planet

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Lonely Planet have decided that eco-tourism is a significant part of the travel market, and Watching Wildlife is a series created for the fauna-friendly traveller. This book was the first, and there are now guides for East Africa and Southern Africa.

It's not an easy thing to produce a cohesive travel book. I helped one of the authors with her research on the Western Australian section of this book, and heard some of the difficulties. The editors have to chose a certain style, and then coordinate the writers, illustrators, and photographers. The writers and other contributors also have to try to match the chosen style. The sense of continuity in the guide suggests that they succeeded.

Many scientists get nervous about writing books for the general public. Sometimes its the accusation of ‘dumbing down’ science instead of training people to think better. It's also the loss of precision that gives scientists the heeby jeebies. Academic science emphasises exactitude, but complex discussions of fine points of science can make their papers impenetrable. Of course that's the first thing a creative journalist wants to remove to make the story interesting.

The Wildlife Australia guide manages to deal with the difficulties of balancing science and readability. Of necessity, explanations are simplified, but it doesn't avoid key concepts. If you don't understand the meaning of ‘littoral’ or ‘crepuscular’, or even ‘zooxanthellae’, it's in the brief glossary at the back. Perhaps books like this are a reflection of the growth of environmental awareness in among the general population. Ten years ago, how many people knew what biodiversity meant?

The book is divided into five sections. Nature in Australia is a brief introduction to the peculiarities of the Australian environment, and adaptation of Australian animals. Wildlife Watching gives tips and hints on the art of wildlife watching, the how and when of animal spotting. Habitats covers the different ecological types across Australia, from the snow country, rainforests, and woodlands, to the wetlands and the outback. The fourth section is specific details of Parks and Places, and the final part is the stars of the book in the Wildlife Gallery.
The writing is concise and entertaining. Photographs are well integrated with the text, with thumbnail photos of animals, birds, reptiles and places in the margin of most pages. There's a mixture of general descriptions, wildlife highlights, watching tips, and curious details about specific creatures. Many of Australia's animals are secretive and nocturnal - particularly marsupials - and the general public doesn't know much about them. After reading this guide, you feel that you might have a chance of seeing a dusky antechinus or a brush-tailed phascogale. At least you will know to go down to Dryandra (near Perth in Western Australia) to see woylies.

The authors love their subject and it shows. They do a great service for science and Australia’s wildlife. The book doesn't replace specialist guides on marsupials, birds, or reptiles, but it's a great introduction to wildlife watching. It would be one of the first books I'd put in my glovebox for a journey around Australia.