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With Compliments

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SKUTCH, A. F. 1976. Parent birds and their young. Pp. xviii+503, 116 plates. Austin & London: University of Texas Press. £17.90.

Potential buyers should not be misled by the title of Dr Skutch's latest book into thinking that it is a superficial popularization of an appealing subject. It is in fact an extraordinarily thorough survey of the reproductive behaviour of birds, from pair formation to the attainment of independence by the young. No other book covers the same ground so comprehensively. A great deal of use is made of the author's personal observations, as would be expected of one who must have spent more hours in a hide watching more species of birds nesting than any other ornithologist, living or dead; but in addition there is extensive coverage of the literature of the New World and Europe, and ample coverage of Africa and Australasia. Oriental birds seem rather neglected, but in any case they are on the whole less well documented. Some idea of the richness of the contents can be gained from the fact that the activities associated with incubation and hatching occupy six chapters totalling 67 pages, while chapters are devoted to subjects which hardly receive more than passing mention in the more ordinary literature on breeding behaviour, such as 'The male parent's discovery of the nestlings' and 'Leaving the nest'. In all of these and many other chapters there are important facts of bird biology which cannot be found in any other book. There is only one theoretical chapter, the last, on 'Regulation of the rate of reproduction'. In it the author sets out his reasons for believing that in the humid tropics, at least, reproductive rates have been adjusted to balance the mortality, and not *vice versa*. Those who disagree with this conclusion will nevertheless need to take account of the facts that are given in support of it.

Dr Skutch writes for the layman who has an intelligent interest but has not read widely in the ornithological literature. This is no disadvantage for the expert ornithologist; the writing is clear and graceful, and the book can be read with pleasure from cover to cover. The author does not hesitate to apply moral standards to the activities of birds, or for that matter to the whole of nature. Thus, in one of the chapters on helpers at the nest: 'Rarely a nestling, or a chick still dependent on its

parents, makes gestures of helpfulness, such as arranging nest materials or passing a morsel to a sibling, reminding us of a little child who tries to help an older person at a task beyond its strength, perhaps only getting in the way. In either case, the assistance rendered is of little value but the inclination to give it is precious.'

This is a large and rather square book, printed on heavy paper of good quality and well bound. The text is in two columns. The black and white plates, mainly photographs, admirably illustrate the text. For reading, it needs to be put on a table or other firm surface, but probably few readers who embark on it will be deterred by its physical bulk from continuing to the end. It is an outstanding addition to ornithological literature.

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