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Book Reviews

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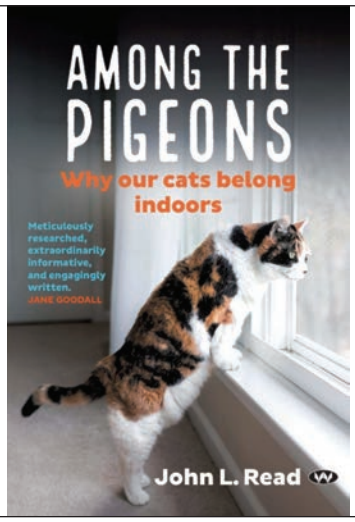
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Read J.L. 2019. Among the pigeons: Why our cats belong indoors. Wakefield Press, Mile End. Paperback, 347 pp. ISBN 978-1-74305-614-1. €29.99.



Recommending 'Cat Wars' to a variety of cat lovers (here, you *should* read this), quickly turned into deception. Intelligent people all, and bird lovers to boot, but none would even consider reading a book that unequivocally showed the disastrous impact of cats on wildlife, especially birds, mammals and reptiles. Humans are proud of their capacity to use their brains and make careful decisions based on evidence, but apparently not when it touches a nerve. John Read's book is written in the same vein as 'Cat Wars' (review in Ardea 104: 290–291, 2016), although it is more personal without losing sight of the facts. His perspective, peppered with research from across the globe, is distinctly Australian, a continent with some 25 million inhabitants and an estimated 2.1 million feral cats after droughts or rabbit disease; cat numbers can triple after wet years. This army of cuddly killers takes an average annual toll of 650 million reptiles and 377 million birds in Australia, not a few belonging to endemic species on the verge of extinction anyway, because of the inroads made by introduced European species. His description of a reintroduction project of quolls *Dasyurus* sp., a carnivorous marsupial, is just one of many examples that brings home the message. In an area where Western Quolls *D. geoffroii* had been wiped out by cats and foxes soon after European settlement in the 1880s, nearly a third of 41 reintroduced quolls had been found killed by cats within three months of reintroduction in 2014. These cats are completely self-reliant, live in the middle of nowhere, yet may attain incredible body masses (especially males). In feral cats, prey size is related to a cat's body mass: the bigger the cat, the heavier its prey (normally prey weight averages less than 50 g, but 200–300 g is within grasp, e.g. rabbits). It is also important to know that some individuals become masters of the predation of unusually large or elusive prey, with an inordinate impact on numbers. The book is replete with sad and sadder stories from both mainland Australia and its islands where the impact of cats is invariably catastrophic. But alas, the common denominator of cats in the wild, seen from the view of cat owners and island inhabitants amounts to: this is someone else's problem to solve, if a problem at all. Denial is widespread, trivializing the cats' impact on wildlife a standard reply. It took dissection of killed cats, opening stomachs and revealing their content, to prove to the local people of Simbo Island that cats wiped out megapode chicks soon after hatching, resulting in an alarming decline of megapode numbers that also threatened the traditional egg harvest. Even so, nobody seemed interested in tackling the problem. The tragedy of the commons all over. This is perhaps typical. Even so-called solutions are almost always half-hearted, sparing the feelings of cat lovers, for example restricting the time the pet is allowed outside (killing goes on), feeding cats (doesn't stop cats from hunting), providing bell or bib (may work for a short time, but cats learn to cope with the handicap) and trapping and neutering (and returning to the wild; killing and spreading diseases go on as before). Meanwhile, cat lovers do not realize that a cat is not your ordinary predator: surplus killing is rife, threequarters of surviving casualties of cat predation still die within 24 hours, prey brought home represent only 23% of what is captured and the unlimited high protein diet enables domestic cats to reproduce much more prolifically than wild cat species). On top of that: cats are afforded freer license than any other pet. It takes drastic measures to prevent a cat's impact on wildlife, as discreetly employed by the self-confessed practitioners of the SSS principle: Shoot, Shovel and Shut-up. Or otherwise by clearing islands 100% of cats (which may – to show the mess we have made – even be counterproductive if islands also hold populations of rats), albeit at tremendous costs. But by far the best solution is: keep cats inside. The latter also solves the problem of spreading systemic infections among people and wildlife (as

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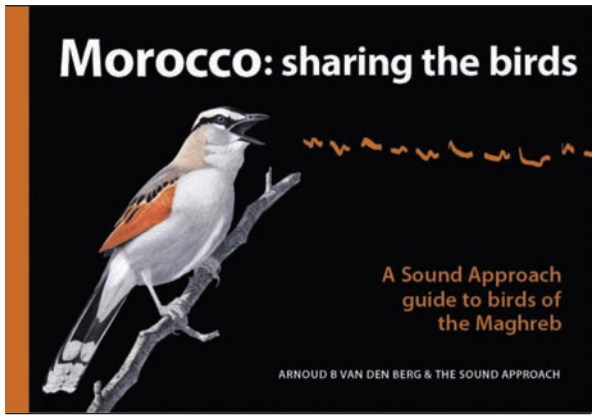
diverse as deer and lynx), and hybridization (with wild cats, not just European but also Asian and African species). Socially unacceptable? That depends. Not that long ago nobody would have thought it feasible to prohibit smoking in offices, demand dog owners to clean up their pet's poo, or establish mandatory leashing of dogs, but lo and behold, times have changed.

Read's book is crammed with first-hand experiences, the author's own research and many examples from the ocean of other studies, well told and backed-up with science and stats in short boxes. The latter are particularly effective for those who prefer hard facts over anecdotal data or who might think that the stories present a biased view on cats. If anything, the science surrounding cat-related problems is massive and cannot be disregarded. Read's story is the more poignant because of its Australian and Polynesian perspective, a part of the world where European introductions have played havoc among the indigenous fauna. There may not be a silver bullet to solve cat-related problems, but looking away is certainly not the solution. For a starter, cat lovers should read this book (and 'Cat Wars'), then reconsider their arguments for free-roaming pets. Protection societies should be much more outspoken in their views regarding cats (and similar hot issues). And to give a Dutch perspective to the Australian experience: The Netherlands has 17 million inhabitants and 2.6 million cats, on a surface area of 0.5% of Australia. Imagine that!

Marra P.P. & Santella C. 2016. Cat wars: the devastating consequences of a cuddly killer. Princeton University Press, Princeton.

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van den Berg A.B. & The Sound Approach. 2020. Morocco: sharing the birds. A Sound Approach guide to birds of the Maghreb. The Sound Approach, Poole. Hardback with USB drive, 308 pp. ISBN 978-90-810933-9-2. €64.95.



All books published so far by Sound Approach are labours of love combined with high quality research, not least the present one about Moroccan birds. Setting a new standard is not nearly adequate to describe the combination of informative personal perspectives, good photography (details, habitats, postures), specific information on habitats, behaviour (not just vocal), conservation status, threats, hints for birders and – of course, the gist of the concept – high quality sound recordings with substantial background information. Starting in the early 1970s, van den Berg visited north-western Africa a great many times, including the Western Sahara after the war had ended there. One of the advantages of having a long history with a region, is the view on changes in bird distributions and numbers. Not all of these are as sad as the demise of the Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris*, experienced first-hand by van den Berg (even to the point that he recorded just-heard calls by imitating the sound in a dictaphone and entering this "sad imitation" as the opening record on the USB). *Tenuirostris* has been wiped off the face of the earth, a fact sufficiently dramatic to justify spending an entire chapter on this species and the birders' and conservationists' madness surrounding it. A sobering story, in many respects. Perhaps the chapter on the narrow escape from annihilation, and subsequent increase, of the Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita*, can be seen as a counterpoint to the curlew's story: from dwindling to a single colony at Agadir in the late 1980s to 147 pairs with 170 fledglings in several Moroccan colonies in 2018, which is still precarious but definitely an improvement. Sound-

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recordings for this species were mostly from the breeding station at Bireçik, Turkey, as Moroccan sites are strictly protected (a historical record of courtship-feeding from 1978 was found in the recording archives of Phil Hollom, and included on the USB).

The book is not a bird-for-bird description of the Moroccan avifauna, but instead treats species groups that present challenges to birders and are typical for the region (southern Iberian Peninsula and Morocco/Western Sahara, with emphasis on Maghreb). Sound recordings lie at the heart of between-species comparisons, not surprising given the focus on vocalizations in the perception of Sound Approach. The result is an impressive 321 sound recordings and 100 sonograms explained in the book, with 894 recordings of all known songs and calls of 141 Maghreb key species on the USB drive. Among the species groups treated, several tricky ones stand out, notably the nightjars, sandgrouses, Bonelli's Warblers (with a suggestion of a third species inhabiting Morocco, on top of Western *Phylloscopus bonelli* and Eastern *P. orientalis*, based on inconclusive evidence from a few DNA samples), larks (a birder's delight, not least because of far from clear-cut vocal and plumage differences between species, and perhaps also their sometimes unpredictable occurrence in arid regions relative to rainfall), wheatears (as challenging as larks; species closely resembling each other in plumage and sound, turned out to be not each other's relatives, as in Western and Eastern Black-eared Wheatears *Oenanthe hispanica/melanoleuca* and Pied and Cyprus Wheatears *O. pleschanka/cypriaca*, not to mention the enigmatic Seebohm's Wheatear *O. seebohmi* of which a special plate showing ages and sexes was prepared by Killian Mullarney), scrub warblers and chaffinches. Some of these groups are fitted out with new identification criteria based on sounds. The *Sylvia subalpina* group, recently split into three species, is mentioned in passing but not treated. Altogether an impressive testimonium of single-minded dedication moulded in a strict format still allowing for personal touches, poetic asides and non-avian extras.

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