

What this book is about

Over the past 30 years I have worked with wetland plants much of the time, since I founded the first specialist wetland nursery, Dragonfly Aquatics, in the 1980s, and have been researching plant and animal interactions since that time. Yet my background is in zoology, and I first began to study plants seriously by way of understanding their roles as habitat. Plants are only a part of what habitat is about, and are largely irrelevant to the habitat needs of many wetland animals other than in a general way as shelter, and for their role in improving water quality. For some others, they are just the vegetation that gets in the way of their hunting.

It has taken me around 30 years to put what I have learned about wetland biology, ecology and natural history into a practical form that can be used to understand what is happening in wetlands today, not just the natural processes but also the numerous impacts of what we like to call civilisation. Part of what has slowed the process down is the time it took to realise that quite a bit of what is popularly regarded as the basics of wetland management and restoration is a set of clichés and aphorisms rather than knowledge based on the ever-increasing literature and science of various aspects of wetland ecology.

Among other things I emphasise repeatedly is the need to shed our preconceived ideas of what looks to be an attractive habitat, and concentrate instead on what the animals themselves see, experience and are adapted for – their needs rather than our ideas. Many of the examples chosen show rich and diverse habitats that most people wouldn't look at twice, and there is a danger that in following clichéd management practices to satisfy our need for beauty, we may destroy some diverse and fascinating worlds while creating poorer habitats for a few of the most common, widespread and adaptable animals.

I have also tried to put a new and very different slant on the impact of birds on whole ecosystems, as the success of a wetland is all too often judged by the arrival of a few (or sometimes hundreds) of birds. These are the wild cards in wetland ecology, able to come and go so their presence is not necessarily a sign that a wetland is anything more than a way stop, and with powerful impacts on many other animals in ways that are not always obvious. Birds are an essential