

Observer's Books - Pocket-sized guides to nature

To the 21st century observer the Victorians' interest in natural history seemed to revolve around 'collecting', as witnessed by the mahogany cabinets full of stuffed birds, eggs, butterflies and anything else they could get their nets, guns and hands on. But in the early 20th century wider access to education, printed works and both private and public transport thankfully allowed 'spotting' to replace 'collecting' as the main aim of the amateur naturalist.

Observer's Books, published by Frederick Warne, certainly got with the spotting zeitgeist. The first and most successful title of these handy pocket guides *British Birds* was published in 1937, followed the same year by *British Wild Flowers*. *British Birds* trailed the concise 'one per page' format and contained beautiful illustrations. It was the most popular of all the guides, selling 3 million copies. The late 1930s and 1940s saw the publication of several more nature-based field guides: *British Butterflies* (1938), *Trees and Shrubs of the British Isles* (1938), *British Wild Animals* (1938), *Freshwater Fishes of the British Isles* (1941) and *British Grasses, Sedges and Rushes* (1942). The series only deviated from the natural history theme with the publication of *Airplanes* in 1942 but in common with the flora and fauna of earlier titles it was also a guide to spotting, this time enemy aircraft.

Paper and labour shortages during World War II limited production, but post-War Warne expanded its field guides, for example *British Ferns* (1950), *Common Mosses* (1954), *Fungi and Liverworts* (1954) and added other subjects such as earth sciences, domestic animals, transport and the arts. The expansion of titles in the series and their continued commercial success can be attributed to a number of factors. One was their size, they literally were pocket guides. They cost a few shillings. They were physically appealing, with illustrations on every page. The increase in private car ownership from the 1950s and the growth of new roads built in the post-war period opened up the countryside and seaside for day-trips. These little books were the reference work in the glove box.

Observer's Books enjoyed the output of some eminent authors. *British Birds* was authored by Stephana Vere Benson; the Hon Secretary of the Bird Lover's League, with a talent for vivid descriptions of bird calls, for example, 'A high squeak like a wheelbarrow with a rusty wheel' (Spotted Flycatcher, of course). The renowned mycologist and talented illustrator Elsie Maud Wakefield was responsible for *Common Fungi* (1954); Patrick Moore for *Astronomy* (1962). The prolific WJ Stokoe wrote a number of titles including *British Butterflies*, *Wild Flowers*, *Trees* and *Wild Animals*.

Observer's Books popularity was also the result of their occupying a middle ground between other highly successful post-war natural history books. The beautifully illustrated Ladybird Books, although often authored by experts, were aimed squarely at children. Collins *The New Naturalist* series, which included titles such as *Sea Shore* and *Insects*, was in its size and content definitely aimed at more than the glove box. It can be claimed that Observer's Books formed part of a post-war desire for self-improvement and knowledge beyond formal education. Those of us whose childhood was illuminated by the weekly edition of the dull but worthy children's periodical *Look and Learn* can attest to that.

Ironically Observer's Books, which heralded spotting over collecting, themselves became collector's items. The series had a change of image and dust jackets in 1971 and 1979 and a greater range of subjects were introduced, some proved popular but others were obscure and specialised such as *Jazz* (1978) and *Vegetables* (1977). Several new titles were added between 1979 and 1982 but sales and interest in collecting declined. After the take-over by the Penguin group in 1985 the books continued to be produced but the titles were shortened to just 'Observers'. A few titles were re-introduced in 1996, this time published by Claremont. It would be assumed that the 1999 *The Observer's Book of Observer's Books* would be the final publishing flourish for the series, but no. The 2003 *Wayside and Woodland* rounded the number of available titles up to 100. Second-hand books are available at all prices depending on age and condition and they remain a perfect companion for a spot of spotting on a nature ramble.

