

Book Review

Britain's Mammals: A Field Guide to the mammals of Britain and Ireland by Dominic Couzens, Andy Swash, Robert Still and Jon Dunn (Princeton University Press)



This lavishly illustrated guide crams in a huge amount of information in an accessible format. The stunning photos capture the charisma of our mammal species as well as key identification features and are likely to entice readers out into the field in order to try to catch a glimpse of these often elusive animals.

It begins with an overview of the biology and life-cycle of mammals followed by a very interesting history of Britain's and Ireland's mammals detailing the earliest records of native and introduced species and last records of extinct species. It's fascinating to read how our mammal fauna has changed over the millennia. A well-presented summary of mammal taxonomy is followed by a useful overview of each order of mammals outlining the key features of the species that occur within each order and family.

A section on watching mammals provides lots of useful tips on where and when to look for different species, well-illustrated information on field signs, plus techniques and equipment including important guidelines on good practice and which activities require a licence. The individual species accounts include helpful illustrations of key identification features and similar species are pictured side by side to illustrate diagnostic features.

The sections on watching and identifying bats give a useful overview of the challenges to bat identification, the different methods available for unlicensed and licensed bat enthusiasts, and how to get more involved through your local bat group and participation in the National Bat Monitoring Programme. There is an excellent illustrated key to identifying bats in the hand (for those with an appropriate bat licence), followed by sections looking at the identification of bat calls from broadband and heterodyne detectors.

Given the complexity of identifying bats from their calls, there is only space for a brief introduction to sonograms, though the main types of call structure are clearly illustrated. The guide to identifying each species on a heterodyne detector crams in a lot of useful information on just two pages. One error is that for noctule and Leisler's bat "chip-chop" calls the "chip" is given as the lower frequency call and the "chop" as the higher frequency call. This is usually described the other way around which makes more sense to my ears. A guide to identifying bat droppings completes a well-rounded overview of bat identification.

The bat species accounts are well up to the standard of the rest of the book with superb photographs often highlighting key identification features. A really helpful feature of this book is the "where to look/observation tips" information for each species. Quite rightly there is a need to manage expectations of seeing some of the rarer bat species, though I feel that for one or two

species the advice could be a bit more encouraging. For example, Leisler's bat can be easier to find than the text suggests and is probably overlooked in some areas so is ripe for some exciting local discoveries.

The book concludes with a further reading list with a good mixture of general and more specialist books on the UK's mammals, including key texts on bat identification, but in itself this is an invaluable guide to take out into the field and also a pleasure to peruse at home.

Philip Briggs