

Parks. We are living, she hopes, through a third of those occasional moments of introspection and spiritual renewal. We have moved on from *whether* to preserve beauty to *how* to preserve it.

How, indeed? Fiona Reynolds might answer: by caring about it. Her own campaigning career took her through key positions in the National Parks, the CPRE and finally the National Trust, which she directed for 16 years. She took part in many of the events outlined in these pages: the 'debilitating compromises' which prevented the National Parks from achieving their promise; the half-forgotten 'success story' of the NT's Project Neptune to preserve the best remaining stretches of the coast; the transformation of the Forestry Commission from a shameless advocate to a responsible public body. Her personal involvement in these events lifts this book from becoming a mere review to something better: a sustained argument, with examples and anecdotes, and their historical context. She argues, calmly but persuasively, that the unspoken word 'beauty' really does lie at the heart of what the Trust and others have tried to achieve. In the words of a young person from the city, beauty 'makes you think nice thoughts'. It makes us feel better about ourselves, and about respecting others, including the other species that inhabit this planet. A better sense of beauty might even stop people from chucking rubbish out of their car windows. We can at least hope.

It is in the nature of any political argument to emphasise certain things and downplay others. In presenting what is essentially a hopeful and optimistic portrayal of how things are, Reynolds lifts her eyes away from some of the shadows. One is population, the ultimate driver behind the landscape of the future. Population has become the elephant in the room; but no one dares mention it for fear of seeming illiberal. In her enthusiasm for tree-planting she overlooks the considerable downside of this practice: the importation of diseases that are currently killing off our mature Ash, Juniper, Alder and other native wild trees. These will have a greater impact on the future landscape than hastily planted nursery saplings that might or might not survive climate change. Nor does she really acknowledge the very considerable contribution to beauty made by our wild flowers (in that connection, the Trust's record of preserving wild habitats was until quite recently patchy at best). Indeed, I received the impression that, like so many of our leading campaigners, she knows more about social history and legislation than about nature and ecology.

All the same, *The Fight for Beauty* is a clear, wise and pleasantly written retelling of the century-long struggle to preserve and protect the best of Britain's landscapes and wild places. Wealth alone will not make us happy. The human spirit craves spiritual satisfactions and in this book Fiona Reynolds has found a word that sums them up: beauty. If we keep that simple notion in mind, who knows? We may not win the fight but at least we shall know what we are fighting for.

Peter Marren



Guests of Summer A House Martin love story

Theunis Piersma
BTO, Thetford 2016
124 pages, line-drawings
ISBN 978-90-858157-0 £9.99 pbk

More like this, please! This is a delightful little book that can be read easily in a day. It is essentially a monograph on the House Martin, but it is delivered in a relaxed style which feels more like a friendly chat with the author as he sits in his garden, in Friesland, watching the comings and goings of his own colony of these underrated birds. As with all good conversations of this type, there is an easy mix of scientific revelation, personal anecdote and mystery. Piersma, a highly accomplished Dutch ornithologist and currently chair of Flyway Ecology, knows his stuff. Using innovative research and drawing on work from fellow scientists, he is able to tease out answers to questions that have long puzzled people about this unassuming migrant, which he calls an 'insect-eating orca'. Like many in southern England, my house has empty House Martin boxes where there were apparently thriving colonies in the 1980s. I miss their excited chattering and was heartened to read how important these 'birds of happiness' are to many others on both sides of the North Sea. Piersma explains what we know about their decline, but, as all good scientists do, he also points out how much we do not know. As he puts it: 'Knowledge is like a balloon that keeps expanding. The bigger it gets, the larger the interface with the unknown.' What I had not realised was how the lifestyle of House Martins has more affinities with that of Swifts than with that of Sand Martins and Swallows. The book was originally published in Frisian, and has been adapted for a British audience. It is introduced by Ian Newton and has a classic cover artwork by Carry Akroyd.

Andrew Branson



Floodplain meadows – beauty and utility

**Emma Rothero, Sophie Lake
& David Gowing (eds)**
Floodplain Meadows Partnership,
Naturebureau, Newbury 2016
104pp, colour-illustrated
ISBN 9781473020665 £12.50 pbk

Floodplain meadows must be the original and historically most important source of fodder grown from grass. Created and maintained by seasonal floods, they were productive enough to support farmers' herds and flocks through the winter and indirectly fertilise the ploughlands on the higher ground. Like all types of traditional meadow, many have been destroyed, but among the survivors are common meadows, which may have been mown continuously for centuries.