

A NATURAL HISTORY OF IRELAND by Christopher Moriarty. Mercier Press, Cork. £1.25 (paperback).

This small book is the fourth in a series of books describing the natural history of Ireland. The others appeared in 1188, 1852, and

1950. Its author claims for it only that "It is a very brief outline of the subject and is written for the general rather than the specialist reader." After a short historical introduction the first half of the book is devoted to a general ecological description of the country in terms of eight major habitat groupings which range from "Cities, towns and suburbs" to "Coast and sea". In the second part the counties are described individually in terms of their wild-life habitats and guidance is given on where the more interesting plants and animals may be seen. No maps are included but two-figure map references are used throughout and we are assured that all places named are to be found on the O.S. $\frac{1}{4}$ inch sheets. There are 192 pages including a detailed 17-page index and 38 photographs depicting a selection of plants and animals, and a few of distinctive habitats.

Despite the severe limitation of size a brave attempt is made to be inclusive, to take account of the wild-life contribution not only of the more natural habitats but also of agricultural land, coniferous plantations, and even urban areas. One result of this is that only a very crude habitat or landscape subdivision is possible. Agricultural landscapes are either "rich" or "poor", and the same goes for fresh waters. The author clearly has a difficult task and is so busy compressing his explanations into a few words and setting down his many and varied snippets of information that he tends to forget his readers. This results in tedious repetition and marked inconsistency. Those readers who need to be told that cereals are planted as seeds and potatoes as tubers are unlikely to make much of the passing references to merlins and nightjars, or lampreys and pipefish. Animals, especially the birds and fishes, are given better coverage than the plants; a reflection no doubt of the author's own special interest and knowledge. Errors must be expected in a book of this kind. Among the minor ones are incorrect map references and a startling loss of an 'O' in line 2 of Chapter 5. More serious are the subtle errors and half truths included in many of the more general statements and explanations. Farmers and foresters in Leitrim and Fermanagh (to name only two) are not likely to go along with the statement that, "The drift material drains well". The explanation of forest destruction and the spread of bogland is sadly misleading.

To make the general public aware of the variety of wild-life habitat in Ireland and to convey some impression of the wealth of beauty and interest to be found there is a major task in itself. To achieve enough understanding for people to go on to explore and interpret for themselves is quite another. Foresters, and others who already have an environmental awareness and some background

knowledge of natural history are unlikely to find in this book much to advance their own education or to use as a model in their growing role of interpretation. Beginners are more likely to be impressed and stimulated by the book than educated by it. This may not be all that its author hoped for but to achieve even such limited success would be highly creditable.

R. E. Parker.