

Bob Cornes reviews the new Brock Fenton book

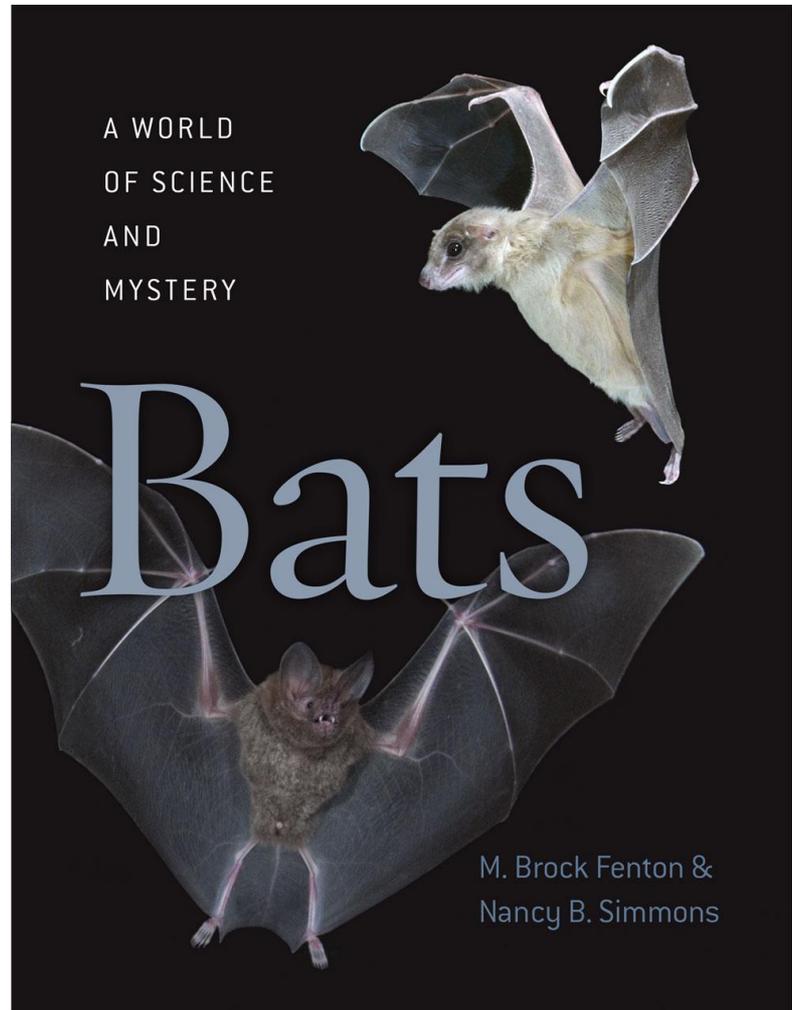
Bats: A World of Science and Mystery by M. Brock Fenton and Nancy B. Simmons, University of Chicago Press (2014) £24.50
ISBN-13: 978-0-226-06512-0
(also available as an e-book)

The authors of this book are highly respected bat researchers, one Canadian and one American. Brock Fenton was Toby Thorne's supervisor for his Masters degree, and a couple of Toby's photos (of equipment rather than bats) are in the book. Both authors have studied bats in the field in various parts of the world and the book is world-wide in scope. British and European bats are frequently mentioned, but, perhaps inevitably, North American examples are most frequently used to illustrate general points. This doesn't reduce the relevance of the book for us, though, because it is a book about bats – not American bats or tropical bats or European bats, but bats in general and in particular. If you are interested in bats, you can't fail to be interested in the subject matter of the book. It very effectively covers a wide range of aspects from how bats fly and how they echolocate to recent research in such topics as bat behaviour and bat diseases, with some reference to bats in art and folklore.

The book has a great deal going for it. It is very well illustrated by excellent photographs, maps and diagrams. The text is impressive, with clear and illuminating explanation of technical matters such as echolocation in a style that can be understood by non-specialists while offering news insights to those with more specialist knowledge. A nice feature is the inclusion of frequent personal anecdotes from both authors such as "Brock encounters a conundrum" and "Nancy finds a cave inside a tree", which convey the excitement and sheer joy of scientific discovery.

Unfortunately, there is a problem. There is a mismatch between style (coffee table) and content (explanation

of



scientific findings for a wide audience). For a reason which is difficult to fathom (perhaps because bats are active at night?), the book has glossy black pages with text printed in white. It is physically difficult to read and, in the case of the captions for the illustrations which are printed in dull red, horrible to look at. There is an attempt to use the widespread approach of including some information in numbered "boxes", but without an enclosing box and with text in exactly the same font and colour as the main text. The result is both messy and difficult to read. It is easy to imagine disagreements and compromises between the publishers and the authors which result in an uneven style. Attempts at informal wording in the desire to achieve maximum accessibility are often clunky, and random exclamation marks do not help. The text is sometimes cluttered by probably unnecessary definitions (e.g. "> = more than", "quiet = less intense") but technical words are still used freely ("nectarivorous", "trophoblast"), sometimes with and sometimes without definition. The quality of

proofreading and editing is not very good, with spelling errors, missing words and poorly constructed sentences occurring more frequently than is comfortable. The index is rather limited, and the glossary of species does not include all species that are referred to. This becomes an irritation because the book uses scientific names only at the first mention of the species, and common names thereafter. Given the variation of common names in different publications, this means that it is necessary to look up the scientific name if you wish to be sure of the species being referred to. If it is missing from the glossary, the result is confusion.

The result is that a book which could have been unreservedly excellent is marred by superficial problems. It is still well worth reading if you can live with the stylistic and presentational issues, and the best of the explanations, personal anecdotes and updates on important topics such as White-Nose Syndrome and Ebola make a certain level of effort worthwhile.