Sea Otters by John. A. Love
Whittet Books, £8.95

Sea Otters is the first volume in a new Whittet series on world wildlife. It differs from the other Whittet books by including a superb set of colour photographs in addition to the more usual line diagrams.

Although there have been a number of books on otters over the last six years, this is the first devoted to the sea otter, *Enhydra lutris*. John Love has written a most readable account of this, the largest of the world's otter species. Where relevant, other species are represented in block inserts. For example, the coastal otters of North West Scotland and Shetland are described because they are so often confused with sea otters.

The natural history and ecology of the sea otter is a fascinating story. A chapter entitled, "The soft gold rush" describes in depth how the species was practically wiped out by overhunting and exploitation. Breeding in the wild and in captivity are comprehensively covered, while an excellent chapter on diet discusses the effect that sea otters have on creating kelp beds by feeding on sea urchins. It goes on to query whether the depletion of shell fish is the fault of the otter or the fishing industry. Sea otters are in fact the only mammals other than primmates to use tools for getting at certain items of prey.

The problems of reintroductions and the numbers of animals involved in both successful and unsuccessful projects are described in detail and make interesting reading. Finally the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Prince William Sound shows how fragile wild populations are in the face of man-made disasters.

This is the book I would recommend to anyone who wants to learn about sea otters. It sets the new series off to a very high standard.

Gordon L. Woodroffe

THE ROCK HYRAX

It was still dark at 4.00 a.m. when my wife and I, along with our three companions, piled into a hired car and set off from Jerusalem. It was the day on which the Arabs in Israel were on strike, so we were expecting military road blocks, but none appeared.

We drove into the West Bank area before turning east along the main road to Jericho, passing the now ruined Good Samaritan Inn. With only a new moon and our car lights to guide us, we plunged down from the heights of Jerusalem into the bottom of the great Rift Valley, our ears popping all the time as we descended some 3000 feet in a matter of twenty miles. Initially, the only mammal we saw was a hare, *Lepus capensis* (the only species of hare to be found in this part of Israel) which we caught in our headlights as it crossed the road in front of us.

Near Jericho, the road turned south towards the Dead Sea. Gradually, as we travelled along the valley bottom 1200 feet below sea level, the Mountains of Moab in Jordan became more visible, turning from deep purple to dark pink in the pre-dawn light. Our objective was the national nature reserve at Ein Gedi, which we reached just as the sun was rising.

It was still cool when we parked, tumbled out of the car and kitted ourselves out with small rucksacs and binoculars, before setting off for the entrance to the reserve. Passing a warning notice about leopards, *Panthera pardus*, we soon found ourselves in a most spectacular steep-sided rocky limestone gorge. The leopard, through special protection, has increased in numbers in recent years and Ein Gedi reserve is one of its strongholds. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, we saw no signs of this predator.

As the sun got higher in the sky, so the colours of the cliff changed through pinks, ochres, yellows and finally to a dazzling white. The rough path, sometimes crossing steep slopes, often passed close to the cold, bubbling freshwater stream which runs through the gorge all the year around. The steream emerges from a number of springs higher up at the head of the gorge, cutting deep mini-gorges into the limestone and often plunging over rock faces to produce beautiful small waterfalls.

The riparian vegetation was thick and contained a number of interesting birds, insects and flowering plants. These included locally common birds such as Tristram's grackle, *Oxycognathus tristramii*, and the fan-tailed raven, *Corvus rhipiduris*. The latter species is considered to be the one that fed Elijah in the wilderness (1 Kings 17:6).