

BOOK REVIEW

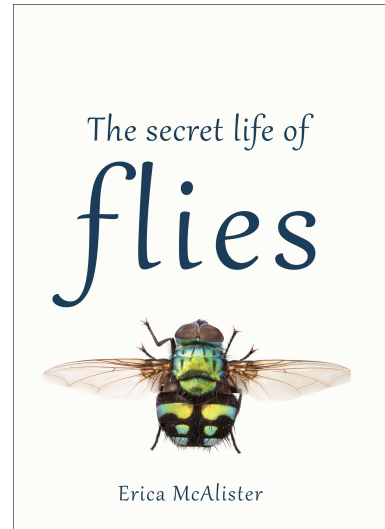
The Secret Life of Flies

Erica McAlister

CSIRO Publishing, April 2017, ISBN: 9781486308026
Hardback with colour illustrations, 256 pp., RRP \$29.95

No doubt, Erica McAlister is a great story teller. Consequently, her book is a great collection of stories – all about flies. In 10 chapters she tells us many things about the order of Diptera. In her own words: *Flies are the most complex, crucial and highly adaptive creatures on the planet. Their story reveals how life without them would be no life at all.*

The book is very readable, because it is not a dry scientific dissertation, but rather a colourful description of the many faceted creature, the fly. The first chapter is about the immature forms and the development of these fascinating insects, while the next one discusses the pollinators, followed by a chapter on the detritivores. We know that flies eat all kinds of stuff – mostly repulsive for us. Human and animal excreta and cadavers are amongst these and let's face it, to write interestingly and enthusiastically about coprophages and necrophages is no mean feat for anyone. McAlister devoted two chapters for these unsavoury critters and presented them in the most interesting manner. In Chapter 6 we can read about the plant-eaters, the vegetarians and in the 7th about the fungus-eaters, the fungivores. Chapter 8 is about the predators and then in Chapter 9 and 10 we learn about the nasty habits of the parasitic flies and the blood consuming sanguivores.



The two most admirable characteristics of this book are: scientific accuracy and its lighthearted story-telling style. McAlister wasn't afraid to tell the flies' story in a populist manner, adding a few anecdotes, humorous remarks which instead of deducting values from the scientifically authoritative text they make it ever so more entertaining, thus more readable. A large number of mostly very good microphotographs, sourced mainly from the Natural History Museum (London) and from a great number of other sources, enhance the text.

But let's have a look at the somewhat negative aspects too. The extent and the quality of this work should have warranted a better edition. Everything seems to be a little too small, starting with the overall format. This is not a guide book, therefore pocket-size (200 x 130 mm) is not the appropriate size for it. To cram everything into this small book, everything else had to be small. The fonts used, especially in the Further Reading, Index, Photo Credits and Acknowledgements sections are just too small. One needs a magnifying glass to read these comfortably. The lack of a Glossary is probably also the result of the lack of space. It would be necessary as it can be anticipated that a fair proportion of readers are not fully versed in zoological terms.

These shortcomings however do not lessen the value of this otherwise excellent work. Who should read it? Just about anyone who is interested in natural history. It should be in the library of amateur and professional entomologists, students, teachers, rangers and so on.

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