

# Books

## Orca: The Day the Great White Sharks Disappeared

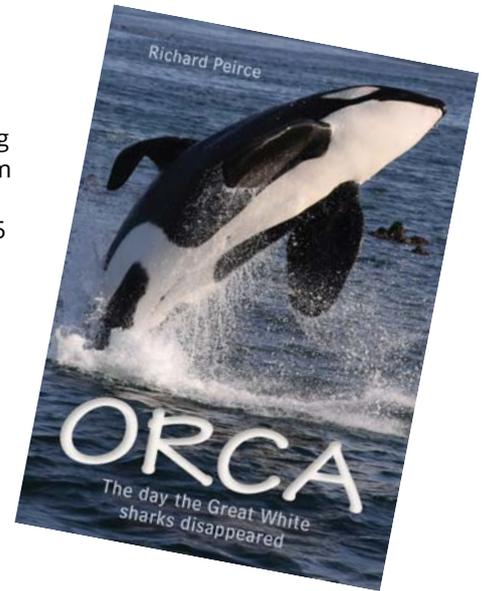
By Richard Peirce. 144 pp. Struik Nature. R190

Anyone who has heard of Gansbaai and the neighbouring village of Kleinbaai on the Overberg coast will likely know that the area is a popular shark cage-diving destination – in fact, it's widely considered the 'great white shark capital of the world'. A steady stream of tourists get shuttled in from Cape Town, 2½ hours' drive away, to take a boat trip out to Shark Alley, a channel between two small islands inhabited by seals and penguins. A 'great white sighting' was virtually guaranteed – until, that is, some killer whales showed up and chased the sharks away. That's the theory at any rate, and it's backed up by circumstantial evidence, such as mutilated carcasses of sharks that washed up on local beaches both here and in Cape Town's False Bay, and sightings of two killer whales, named Port and Starboard because of the way their dorsal fins had bent over to one side.

The book is a highly readable account of these events, and the impact on the cage-diving operators who employ some 200 people. It manages to convey a sense of drama, and captures the mixed emotions of various people in the area. The short chapters and frequent scene changes ensure that the pacing never lags, and impart a style and

structure that bring to mind a long-form article. Indeed, given the book's A5 format, generous line spacing and large photographs on most pages, the book could easily be read in an afternoon.

A short section at the end of the book is dedicated to general information on killer whales – more correctly called orcas after their species name *Orcinus orca* – as well as great white and bronze whaler sharks. The threats posed by longline fishing and abalone poaching are also addressed, and there's a double-page postscript providing an update as of mid-2019.



## The Last Elephants

Compiled by Don Pinnock and Colin Bell.  
488 pp. Struik Nature. R490



This 'coffee table book' combines spectacular photography with chapters written by more than 40 people involved in elephant conservation in some way, from rangers and scientists to activists and safari lodge owners. It came about when the compilers – a former editor of *Getaway* magazine and the co-founder of Wilderness Safaris – became

aware of the results of the Great Elephant Census 2016, which showed that elephant numbers in Africa had fallen to

450 000 from an estimated three to five million a century ago. They sent out an email requesting contributions from people 'on the ground', and had more responses than they had dared hope for. Such was the quality of the writing and photography, and the stature of the contributors, that they needed to do the work justice, so no expense was spared in producing the book. The fact that the Foreword is written by Prince William is testament to its high standard.

### Quick ID Guide:

## Wild Flowers of the Cape Peninsula

By Hugh Clarke and Corinne Merry.  
160 pp. Struik Nature. R130

This handy little book is perfect for those who want to identify flowers without getting to grips with identification keys, which require an understanding of characteristics like leaf type, shape and arrangement. This is because the flowers here are organised purely on the basis of colour, from lilac to various shades of purple, pink, red, orange, yellow, green and white. A colour tab on the edge of each page means that the appropriate colour grouping can be located before even opening the

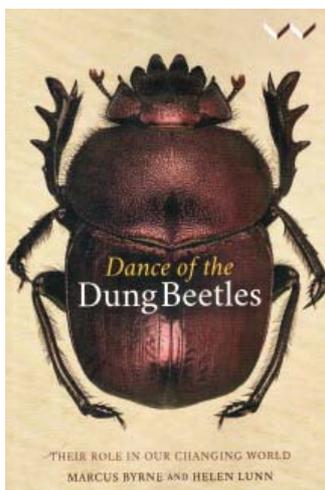
## Dance of the Dung Beetles:

### Their Role in our Changing World

By Marcus Byrne and Helen Lunn. 228 pp. Wits University Press. R320.

Thanks to frequent coverage on TV news and in other media, many of us are aware of the somewhat bizarre dung beetle experiments conducted by Marcus Byrne and colleagues over the years. As explained in this book's introduction, the Wits University professor and a group of scientists from South Africa, Sweden, Australia and Germany have got together annually since 2003 for a working holiday of 'playing with dung beetles'. Sometimes this has involved fitting the beetles with tiny boots or caps, or shining different coloured spotlights on them, or giving them fake dung balls, but in the process the scientists have made some remarkable discoveries about the beetles' behaviour and ability to navigate using light from the sun, moon and stars.

So by their own admission, the authors knew a lot about dung beetle orientation when they set out to write this book, but not so much about some of the other topics



tackled, from Egyptology to evolutionary biology. Based on their research, they were able to use dung beetles to trace the history of science over the last few thousand years, and also explore their cultural importance through the ages. Victorian ladies, for example, liked wearing dead ones as earrings, while the Kamba people of Kenya see the dung beetle as a cursed individual, doomed to roll his dung ball forever because he refused to prepare food for his dying mother.

There are interesting accounts of Charles Darwin's observations on dung beetles, their use as a biocontrol agent to deal with fly plagues associated with cattle farms in Hawaii and Australia, and their ecological role on the Serengeti plains. Some parts are very amusing, but given the in-depth treatment of the topics, the book will appeal mostly to regular readers of the history and popular science genres.



book. From there, the flower can be easily found with the help of a clear photograph, a brief description of the plant and its habitat, as well as information on flowering season. Both English and Afrikaans common names are provided where possible, along with the scientific name and family.

First published in 2007 as *Common Wild Flowers of Table Mountain*, the book was revised to include Silvermine and Cape Point, which meant the number of flowers featured increased from 208 to 360. Of course, this doesn't cover

all flowers found in the area – there are more than 2 285 plant species on the Cape Peninsula, so the authors selected only those that produce attractive, eye-catching and easily seen flowers.

The book begins with a section on walking routes, reflecting the fact that the authors are keen hikers, and there are three attractive maps for these routes, as well as a page on mountain safety.

## Field Guide to Wild Flowers of South Africa

By John Manning. 488 pp. Struik Nature. R390

This is an update of the first edition, published a decade ago. It covers more than 1 100 species, focusing on the country's most common, conspicuous and 'showy' plants, which have been assembled in 10 groups of families with characteristics in common. The identification keys are relatively easy to use, thanks to the accompanying explanatory diagrams, and the short but detailed species descriptions are supported by useful photographs, distribution maps and flowering season charts.