Fiordland is so remote, so rugged, and so difficult to access, that few will get beyond the handful of popular, well-used hiking tracks. As the book’s first chapter states, this is a place that is “as wild as it gets.”

Wild Fiordland: Discovering the Natural History of a World Heritage Area
Neville Peat and Brian Patrick
University of Otago Press, Dunedin, New Zealand.
143 pp., paper. 2005.
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The book Wild Fiordland is well-designed, well-written, and well-illustrated. However, right from the start this reviewer was a bit baffled as to how the book should be generally described. The number and quality of the photographs nudged me toward describing it as a “coffee-table book,” but in truth, as a paperback book of modest size, it doesn’t really fit that category. And although it describes its subject area in sufficient detail to serve as trip planning fodder, I can’t really imagine it being used that way. The truth is that much of them from the Maori language) and Latin binomials are used throughout, a thoughtful touch which one can either skim past or linger over, depending on their interests. There is a little bit of something for everyone, whether ornithology, entomology, or dendrology is of greatest interest. Flightless parrots, bat-winged flies, and podocarp forests are all part of Fiordland’s exotic mix, and all are well described. And there are some real surprises: I suspect that the image of black coral colonies cohabitating with penguins in the fiords would grab most any reader’s attention.

Despite the book’s strong points, I was never really able to get past my initial point of bafflement: exactly who is this book written for? I’m still not sure. I came to the book with some hazy but detailed memories from over a month spent in Fiordland in the 1980s – I recognized many of the place names, I already knew the difference in the 1980s – I recognized many of the species, and I had spent days puzzling over one, whether ornithology, entomology, or botany.

The book is organized by sub-regions, with a good shaded-relief map in the first chapter to help orient the reader and illustrate the area’s rugged topography of sheer mountains dissected by fiords and large lakes. High-quality photographs fill nearly half of the book, illustrating everything from lichens and trees to weevils and fur seals, from glaciers and alpine tussock to craggy islands and barrier dunes. The effort that went into compiling the book is truly impressive.

The writing itself is fine, taking a non-technical tone that I think most would find highly readable, but also striking a good balance by not shying from the use of more specialized ecological terms, when appropriate. Both common names (many of...