

Review

Portrait of a Desert: The Story of an Expedition to Jordan. By Guy Mountfort. Illustrated by Eric Hosking. Collins, London, 1965. 192 pages; 68 plates (11 in colour) incorporating 116 monochrome and 26 colour photos; 8 line-drawings and a map. 36s.

This is an account of the expedition of many talents which Mr. Mountfort led to Jordan at the invitation of King Hussein in the spring of 1963. Jordan's conservation problems are all too familiar in an age when human pressure is bearing more and more heavily on natural resources. The larger mammals have been almost completely exterminated by indiscriminate shooting (with shameful assistance in the past by British soldiery). Running parallel with this has been the destruction of natural habitats, with the felling of woodlands by man and the clearing of desert scrub by both man and the all-devouring goat. This, coupled with inefficient land husbandry, has accelerated the process of soil erosion and, if this is allowed to continue, the point will soon be reached where the land is incapable of supporting the human population, swollen as it has been by so many refugees from old Palestine. This was the background against which Mr. Mountfort and his team were asked to advise how the natural resources of Jordan could best be preserved and developed for the benefit of the country.

And what wonderful natural resources these are! The scenery ranges from the near-tropical vegetation of the Jordan valley with its two large lakes to the bare lava desert of the north and the fantastic cliffs of the sand desert of the south. Scattered throughout the country are the relics of so many different civilisations—the rock-dwellings of Petra, the city amphitheatres of the Romans, the lonely desert hunting-lodges of the Umayyads and the castles of the Crusaders—with the living legend of Lawrence thrown in for good measure. Few countries are endowed with so many tourist attractions, and for the ornithologist there is the interest of a specialised desert fauna, the presence of a number of oriental species and the immense flood of migrants which is channelled through the land corridor on the east side of the Mediterranean. One can pay Mr. Mountfort no higher compliment than to say that his book does full justice to this most fascinating country.

It is profoundly impressive that the Jordanian authorities, with so many much more pressing problems on their hands, should find time to feel concern for the vanishing wild life of their country. It is also most encouraging to read that there is every prospect of early action being taken to implement the expedition's recommendations that three of the most important areas which they visited should be made into national parks, and these should undoubtedly provide a major tourist attraction.

REVIEW

If these plans are carried through, the preservation of a most interesting desert fauna and a quite unique series of historical buildings will owe a great deal to the thoroughness of the expedition as a whole and to the enthusiasm and organising genius of Mr. Mountfort in particular. The day may not be so far away when ornithological safaris will be taking the golden road to Petra and Azraq, and this book, with its quite superb illustrations, should ensure full bookings for a long time to come.

D. G. ANDREW