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review

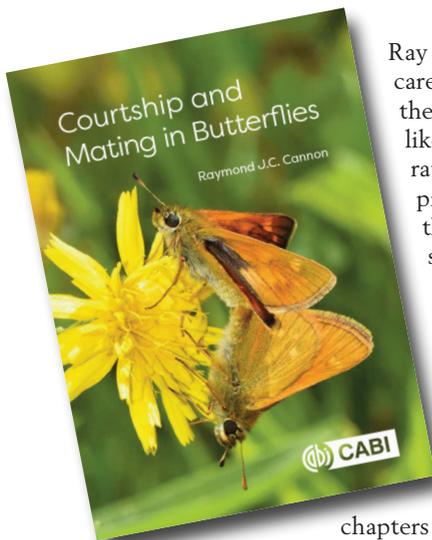
Courtship and Mating in Butterflies

Raymond J.C. Cannon

CABI

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Ray and I were at Imperial College together way back when, and both of us began our research careers studying aphids. Ray moved to the cold hardness of Antarctic invertebrates and then the impact of invasive invertebrates. Neither of us worked professionally on butterflies but, like many entomologists, both have a deep fascination with them which, in Ray's case, started rather later with the advent of digital photography. He has taken some truly marvellous pictures of butterflies around the world, many of which feature in this book. This is not, though, a picture book with a little supporting text, it is very much a textbook with a few supporting pictures. At 375 pages, it is not likely to be read in a hurry and this review, I confess, results from selective reading on the topics that I thought would interest me most. For example, I have often witnessed the phenomenon of "hill topping" and am aware of the trade-offs between "perching" and "patrolling". I now have a much deeper knowledge of the extent of, and reasons behind, these behaviours, and many more. I often found myself thinking "ah, yes, I've seen that – so that's what they were up to". I hadn't realised, though, that females are often just as active as males in soliciting courtships.

After an introduction to the origins, evolution and taxonomy of butterflies, together with a summary of a few pioneering and influential studies on courtship, there are nine chapters dealing with different aspects of the behaviour and mechanics of courtship and mating (mate choice, mate location, vision, courtship (two chapters), mating (two chapters), chemical communication, wing colours). The book has the content and feel of a symposium volume, and it is remarkable that Ray has compiled each of the ten chapters himself by wading, joyfully it seems, through copious papers and volumes (there are 59 pages of references!), succinctly synthesising key points. Of course, only a tiny fraction of the world's species has been studied in this regard, but Ray attempts generalisations where appropriate and with care, and couches the behavioural research findings in their evolutionary, phylogenetic, physiological and ecological contexts. Whilst the book is about butterflies, in many senses butterflies are models, as some of the concepts are applicable across a wide range of organisms.

At £95, this book is perhaps more likely to find its way to university libraries than private bookshelves. It's well worth getting your hands on, though, as, next time you see butterflies indulging in some strange behaviour, you will know exactly where to go in order to find out what it was all about. In the process, your knowledge of, and fascination for, this iconic insect group cannot fail to be enhanced.

Richard Harrington