

Pterosaurs: Natural History, Evolution, Anatomy  
by Mark P. Whitton.  
Princeton University Press 2013.

As a child I watched the film the Lost World which featured flying dinosaurs called, as I recall, Pterodactyls, and which so frightened me that I thought the name was spelt Terror-dactyls!

One of Mark Whitton's great achievements is that while maintaining a scientific approach to the subject that is his passion his considerable sense of humour is found in the text, and also in some of his superb illustrations.

Pterosaurs is divided into 26 chapters, considering all the different forms of flying dinosaurs, and in addition to the drawings of these extraordinary creatures there are also anatomical and skeletal diagrams as well as photographs of fossil discoveries, of which there have been many.

Pterosaurs ruled the skies for 150 million years, some of them reaching vast sizes with colossal wingspans, but while they were peerless in flight on the ground they were slow moving and ungainly, dragging themselves along using a combination of wings and legs. They are clearly a key part of the evolutionary transition that some reptiles made into birds, although, mercifully, no living bird looks anything like them.

This is a book of impeccable scholarship, but it is also very readable for the non-scholar and amateur pterosaurophile: my favourite illustration is that which demonstrates the range of pterosaur wing shapes, giving the clearest indication that I have yet seen that the USAF Stealth fighter bomber owes much more to the flying dinosaurs of old than could be otherwise imagined.

A wonderful book!

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh