# Peter Grubb (1942–2006)

Source: Primate Conservation, 23(1) : 143-145

Published By: Conservation International

URL: https://doi.org/10.1896/052.023.0118

# Peter Grubb (1942–2006)

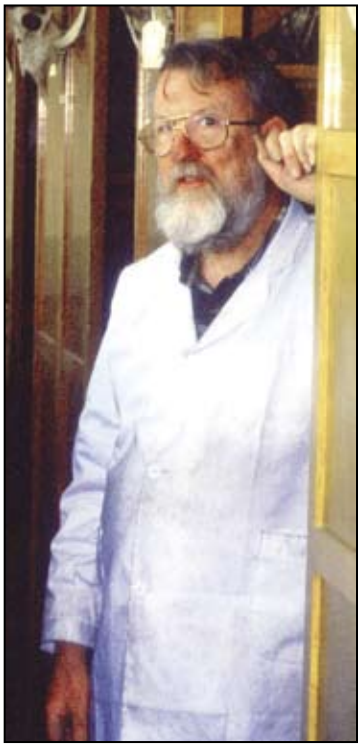
Not only was our science much diminished by Peter Grubb's early death from cancer in December 2006, but I also felt a strong sense of personal loss. I was two years behind Peter as an undergraduate in zoology at University College London, and we each went on to do doctoral research on mammals under Professor Peter Jewell. Each of us developed a strong interest in African mammals, and had special connections with West Africa. Peter's base in the 1970s was Ghana, where he followed in the footsteps of the legendary Angus Booth.

Peter Grubb receiving the Zoological Society of London's Stamford Raffles Award from the President of ZSL, Professor Sir Patrick Bateson FRS, in 2005. The award was for "Contributions to Mammalian Systematics." Photograph kindly provided by Eileen McGrath.

Deteriorating conditions in Ghana led Peter and his wife Eileen back to London in the early 1980s, and Peter took up a job as a school teacher. But his passion for natural history fortunately was not dimmed. I was then in New York, but I kept up a correspondence with him on African primate taxonomy and zoogeography, and when I was able to visit London I quite often joined him in the mammal collection at the South Kensington museum. We ended up collaborating on several projects, and Peter became drawn into an international network of primatologists interested in the application of taxonomy to conservation planning.

In the years that I knew Peter, my respect for him continued to grow. Not only because of the great depth and breadth of his knowledge, his intelligence and his commitment, but also — and very importantly — for the common sense and modesty he brought to his science. In a world that seems ever-more obsessed with self-advancement and materialism, Peter stood out as being interested in science for science's sake. He did not seek celebrity, or regard science as a competition with rivals. This fundamental goodness of Peter's greatly impressed all those who worked with him. He richly deserved the 2005 Stamford Raffles Award from the Zoological Society of London (an award given for distinguished contributions by zoologists outside the scope of their professional activity), and thankfully he was able to receive this award in person in June 2006, before his health seriously deteriorated.

*John F. Oates, London, UK*



Peter Grubb died in London in December, 2006. He was Britain's leading mammalian taxonomist, and one of the pre-eminent mammalogists worldwide. He was trained initially in animal behaviour, and for his PhD did superb research on Soay sheep (an important feral population of primitive domestic sheep), but gradually turned to taxonomy and biogeography, concentrating mainly on ungulates (especially in Africa) but turning from time to time to primates. These studies led him to formulate the system of African mammal biogeography which has become standard today. Early in his career, he worked in the University of Ghana, returning to Britain at a time when academic positions in zoology had largely been filled, and he took a position as a biology schoolteacher. He derived great satisfaction from this work, even though it meant that he had to conduct his research in his spare time. He was an extremely gentle, self-effacing man, whose humility hid an extraordinary breadth of knowledge and understanding, and simple wisdom. I loved working with him, and learned a lot from our many collaborations. I miss him greatly.

*Colin P. Groves, Canberra, Australia*

Peter Grubb in the Institute of Zoology, Beijing, April or May 2000. Colin Groves: "I might say that, although the specimens in the collection are Asian, not African, Peter of course knew all about them, and the importance of all the type specimens. He was overwhelmed. Anja [Braun] and I had arrived in Beijing a few days before him, and found a few important specimens already. When he arrived to join us, he spent the first morning walking back and forth along the shelves, looking at the labels we had made, and going "Good Lord... well... Good Lord", and Anja and I kept looking at each other and grinning."
Photograph by Colin P. Groves.

I emigrated to Australia three months before Peter Grubb died of head cancer on 23 December 2006, and so was regrettably unable to visit him during his last days. He had been ill for two years but remission enabled him to visit the Natural History Museum, London, the site where our paths usually crossed, even if less frequently than before. It was a shock to discover an operation to alleviate his condition had involved the removal of one ear and part of his jaw. It affected his speech but seemed not to affect his characteristic nonchalant manner nor his fervour for recent zoological developments. Common interests often bring people together at the Natural History Museum. That was how I met Peter. It is not, however, an ideal location for conversations. Generally visitors are on a mission. Peter always seemed to be. Visitors are therefore reluctant to adjourn to a more suitable venue, but also reluctant to forego the conversation. Our conversations usually occurred in the echoing confines of the Mammal Section corridor where Peter was often browsing the library, consulting the accessions registers or simply signing in. Despite concerns about disturbing staff in the adjoining offices, those conversations were one of the great pleasures of visiting the museum, and the museum will not be the same without them.

Peter and I became familiar with one another's research interests through such encounters, but it was not until February 2000 that I came to know Peter better personally when, as members of the IUCN/SSC Primate Specialist Group, we were both invited to participate in the workshop "Primate Taxonomy for the New Millennium", held at the Disney Institute, Orlando, Florida. Being assigned to different groups, he to Africa, me to Asia, we saw little of one another during the sessions but the trip included the bizarre experience of some of the world's leading primate taxonomists travelling (by rail) on an "African wildlife safari" in a vehicle resembling a large jeep at the Animal Kingdom theme park in Disney World. This involved negotiating "a rickety bridge" and detecting "elephant poachers". I wondered whether the "driver" could have delivered his script had he known the credentials of his passengers. Later Peter and I returned side-by-side on a switchback to the age of the dinosaurs! As always, Peter took everything in his stride and seemed to enjoy it well enough. I got to know him better in 2004 when we shared accommodation at the XX Congress of the International Primatological Society, Turin, Italy, where we both presented follow-up papers on the Orlando workshop. We found a small restaurant with pavement tables in a street arcade and spent most evenings enjoying a couple of beers, excellent Italian pizza and convivial conversation.

Peter was not only a primatologist. His expertise on ungulate taxonomy earned him authorship of the Artiodactyla and Perissodactyla sections in Wilson and Reeder's (1993, 2005) *Mammal Species of the World*. He was also self-effacing; maintaining, for instance, that one paper of his on zoogeography came about only because the conference organizers had mistakenly invited him instead of his botanist namesake. The breadth of his knowledge really came home to me when I asked him for pre-submission comments on my taxonomic revision of the Indian langurs. To my surprise and delight he methodically processed the 30,000 words one by one, resulting in substantial textual improvements. Commas, especially those preceding the conjunction "but", were a major casualty. One of his suggestions was that "Anis" should be translated from the French as "coucals or koels". Within days of being asked to write this memoir a common koel turned up in our garden. To my recollection I have never seen one before, not even in captivity. This one further reminded me of Peter by confounding confident identification. According to the field guide, adults have a black cap; juveniles a "rufous" one. Fittingly, on this occasion it was golden.

*Douglas Brandon-Jones, Brisbane, Australia*

Peter died after two major operations (in January and August 2005) to remove a tumour, probably the result of the radiation treatment that he received after an earlier operation to remove a similar tumour when he was 13. He and I graduated from the same Zoology Department, University College London, and became colleagues in the Zoology Department of the University of Ghana (1968–1980) where I had preceded him in 1960 and followed him to London in 1986. In Ghana he was my valued critic and confidant on African place names as we were both involved with relating taxonomy (of mammals in his case, snakes in mine) to geographic sources and we both mounted expeditions to European and US museums to discover their unrecognised treasures. It is only after his death, as I helped his widow Eileen McGrath sort out his books and papers, that I have learnt something of his family background and how that contributed to the formation of his character.

Peter's father William was unusual in attending Glasgow University at the age of 16 and graduating with a First Class Honours Degree in Chemistry at age 19. William Grubb worked for awhile as a research chemist at ICI, later becoming a science teacher and moving, in 1948, from Scotland, where Peter was born, to Ealing in West London. William had a library of several thousand volumes, catalogued and largely retained after his death by Peter's sister Katrina. Having access to London Zoo and the museums, including the Natural History Museum, provided Peter with opportunities to meet exotic animals and to practice his drawing skills

which had been apparent in his mother, Anne Sirutis, a school teacher from Lithuania. His younger sister Katrina is an exhibiting artist, which supports the idea that Peter acquired some graphic skill from his mother. From an early age Peter delighted in the natural world, whether animals or plants, and not only drew but cut out and kept every published picture he came across! He later accumulated a similarly eclectic collection of photographs and specimens.

Peter's first job after graduation was to work as a Research Assistant in the Wellcome Institute of the Zoological Society of London and be posted to St Kilda where his work on Soay Sheep culminated in a PhD, with a Certificate of Commendation for the Thomas Henry Huxley award of the Zoological Society.

His second assignment was as part of the Royal Society Expedition to Aldabra, Indian Ocean, to work particularly on the giant tortoises. With this background it seems strange that in Ghana he did not emulate in the field his eminent predecessor, primatologist Angus Booth (1927–58) but spent more time in foreign museum collections. No doubt he realised, as did I, that much in those institutions remained unpublished or unevaluated until mapped in relation to specimens in other collections. It is easier to study African collections brought together in one place rather than attempt new collecting in Africa itself. Much of Peter's original, unpublished data has been salvaged by Colin Groves and will not be lost through Peter's untimely demise. He leaves behind his widow Eileen and children Elizabeth and Christopher.

*Barry Hughes, London, UK*