

Alexander Duff-Mackay: In Memoriam

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ALEXANDER DUFF-MACKAY: IN MEMORIAM

30 December 1939—6 March 2003

With the demise of Alex Duff-MacKay in March last year we lost an important herpetologist and one of the most knowledgeable biologists in East Africa. He lived his entire life in Africa, in fact never left the continent, and gained a unique, broad knowledge of its fauna, far beyond his professional topic, reptiles and amphibians.

I have two mental pictures of Alex from the years when we worked closely together.

The one is from our first night at the coast south of Mombasa, in pouring rain. I had never collected frogs at the East African coast so virtually everything we encountered was new to me, and we found a lot of species that night. Alex knew them all without hesitation, in most cases as soon as we heard the voice, but nevertheless shared my excitement.

The other picture is of us sitting on a granite knoll in Tsavo a late afternoon drinking lukewarm beer, waiting for the sunset and for a herd of elephants to leave the waterhole and go home, so we could move in. We discussed frogs, and Alex told me about his observations, some going back to his childhood in Tsavo. Both there in Tsavo and at the coast, I repeatedly said “but this has never been published, you must write an article”.

Perhaps these reminiscences are typical of Alex. On the one hand his pleasure of being in the field, where he felt totally at home, and his immense bank of knowledge of East African reptiles and amphibians, on the other hand his reluctance to publish.

Alex suffered from what one of his colleagues called the “Nairobi Cramp”, a reluctance to publish that, at that time, allegedly was not unknown at the Museum.

I believe the reason was not lack of self-confidence—for Alex was in his own quiet way very sure of his professional abilities. Perhaps growing up together with his reptiles and amphibians made it difficult for him to acknowledge that what for him were trivial observations were worth publishing. Or perhaps a hard daily workload in a museum with a small staff, large obligations and a steady flow of demanding and time-consuming visiting colleagues occupied his days.

A bibliography of Alex’ scientific papers is slim, but does little justice to his professional impact. His inspiration and help to colleagues, and his generosity in sharing his precise observations and information, makes him an important contributor to much work on East African herpetology, even if his name does not appear on the front page. This certainly goes for my East African tours and papers where his knowledge laid a foundation and where we, during the month-long collecting tours, kept up an almost continuous dialogue and, I believe, sharpened each other’s wit.

I had the pleasure of travelling with Alex Duff-MacKay on two long tours, in 1968 to Uganda, Kenya and northern Tanzania, and through Tanzania in 1971, and benefited from his knowledge, which he generously shared, his skill as a field collector and his practical skill. And not least by him being such a pleasant companion.

Alexander Duff-MacKay was born in Mombasa in 1939 and educated in Nairobi and at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa, where he took a degree in Zoology and Entomology. After graduating he was appointed as Forest Entomologist at the East African Agricultural and Forestry Research Institute before joining the National Museum in Nairobi in 1964, where he spent 31 years till his retirement in 1995.

He moved in 1989 from Nairobi to Tigonini with his wife Joy and his son Ian, and pursued his many interests there, including continued field observations on the amphibians and their

apparent, unexplained decline in the Kenyan highlands, and including his interest in repairing and making stringed instruments.

His later years were not easy. He was hard hit by diabetes so he lost a great deal of his eyesight and was in periods confined to a wheelchair but he continued to take an active interest in his surroundings.

Arne Schiøtz

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