

## In remembrance of Peter Mundy.

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In 1972 when Peter Mundy was conducting a literature search for his D. Phil, my sister in the university library, mentioned that I had found an active Wahlberg's Eagle (*Hieraaetus wahlbergi*) nest. This was the catalyst that produced a lifelong friendship with Peter.

Peter had selected ten study sites spread through Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia), Botswana, and South Africa to study "*The Comparative Biology of Southern African Vultures*". These vultures being the: African White-backed (*Gyps africanus*), Cape (*Gyps coprotheres*), Lappet-faced (*Torgos tracheliotos*), Hooded (*Necrosyrtes monachus*) and White-headed (*Trigonoceps occipitalis*). The study areas in Zimbabwe were in the Chirisa, Chizarira and Gonarezhou Game Reserves as well as Wabai Hill. While the Cape Vulture study areas were Roberts' Farm, Skeerpoort, Manoutsa and Zastron in South Africa, Mannyelanong and Manyana in Botswana. In 1975 Peter added the Dronfield Ranch outside Kimberley, in South Africa, as a comparison between the northern African White-backed Vultures in Zimbabwe and this, the southernmost breeding area for this species.

The Gonarezhou Game Reserve had many nesting Lappet-faced Vultures along with some White-headed Vulture nests. There were plenty of African White-backed Vultures foraging in the Game Reserve but not many nested there.

The far-flung nature of Peter's study areas necessitated a great deal of travelling between Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Botswana. On his way to and from South Africa he would stop off in the Gonarezhou to catch and ring vultures using a "cannon net" with his renowned combi van used as a holding pen for the caught birds. We had many a ride from capture sites to our processing camp, with 20 or more vultures scrambling around in the back of the combi, this really sharpened one's concentration both as a driver and passenger! We also monitored the breeding Lappet-faced and White-headed vultures in the game reserve. I had succumbed to Peter's passion for vultures, and he mentored me in my studies on the Lappet-faced Vultures as well as the eagles breeding in the Gonarezhou.

In those early days Peter was well known for his bartering and negotiating skills. These skills were developed while grown up in the East End of London in the latter years of the Second World War. In the 1970s Rhodesia (as it was then) was under international sanctions, many sought after food items were not readily available in the country. While on the other hand, several local commodities were much sought after in South Africa. Peter was quick to work this situation to his favour, supplementing his meagre research stipend. So, it was Mazoe Orange Juice and Tanganda Tea to South Africa to sell and on the return trip it was Marmite and Quality Street Chocolates, among other things. This bartering turning a nice profit to keeping him in beer and food, but there was never much left for clothes!

In 1979, just before the country's independence, these negotiating skills came to the fore when Mundy, Snyder, and Ogden (of Californian Condor fame) had to enter the Gonarezhou through a "Freedom Fighter Assembly Point". These fully armed combatants in the Assembly Point had not been paid for several months and they wanted this rectified before they would let Mundy and Co through the gate. When it became clear that the National Parks official was not making any headway with negotiations and things were becoming very tense, Peter stepped in and in his characteristic cockney style managed to defuse the

situation and they were eventually allowed to enter the park. When they reached our camp, on the Lundi river, later that afternoon, Snyder said, “having gone through that incident I can handle whatever the “Greenies” care to throw at us.” This was in reference to the plan to bringing all the free-flying Californian Condors into a captive breeding programme.

Many years later, Peter, now a Professor at the National University of Science and Technology in Bulawayo, would use those negotiating skills to find working and postgraduate positions for many of his students as they graduated from this institution.



**Figure 1:** Peter Mundy photographed below a typical Lappet-faced Vulture nest, atop a *Terminalia* tree in scrub mopane in the Gonarezhou National Park, Zimbabwe, October 1975 (left); and holding a White-headed Vulture captured using a cannon-net trap in Gonarezhou National Park, November 1976 (right).

During Peter’s early years he had a 150cc motorbike for field work. On one occasion he brought this with him to the Gonarezhou. Now the Gonarezhou was, and still is, renowned for having some of the most temperamental elephants in southern Africa. Over many years these pachyderms had been poached, shot at, and more recently subjected to culling exercises. I was still new to this game reserve and thought using the bike to check for active Lappet-faced nests would be a good idea. So, we loaded the bike into a somewhat old and well-used aluminium rowing boat to get across to the southern bank of the Rundi river. This exercise involved first sealing the holes of the missing rivets with mud from the riverbank. Then punting the boat, bike and us across the 400 m wide river, sort of Gondola style, while keeping a wary eye out for hippos. This stretch of the Rundi had the highest density of these beasts in Zimbabwe. We reached

the southern bank safely and headed off into the game reserve. We spent the day riding through the scrub mopane identifying a number of active Lappet-faced nests in Terminalia trees which grow out above the scrub mopane. This habitat allowed us to also keep an eye out for elephants, and fortunately none were seen that day. On the way back a Bateleur's nest caught our attention and delayed us while we checked it out. In our hurry to get back to Chipinda Pools we rode over a pile of rhino dung and the back tyre blew. In Black Rhino country, one never rides or drives over their dung due to the thorny nature of their diet. No trouble, Peter has experienced this minor setback before. My task was to hold the back wheel off the ground. Peter had the tube out, patched and back in the tyre in minutes. Meanwhile I scanned the thick bush on either side of us, for this stretch of road was where I had seen a female leopard with two cubs the previous week! The sun was fast setting, so I was hoping the leopard was not out looking for her evening meal. Peter had the wheel sorted and we went on our way again. Back at the Rundi river, the sun had set. In the twilight we loaded the bike into the boat, patched the leaking rivet holes and started punting our way across the river. An inquisitive hippo bull made his way towards the boat grunting loudly, so we punted for all we are worth. Neither of us had heard a more pleasant sound than the hull of that leaky boat scraping along the northern sand bank. Beer and a hot meal cooked by my wife helped put a rosy tint on the day's activities.

Peter's first book was his thesis, *The Comparative Biology of Southern African Vultures*, published by the Vulture Study Group in 1982.

He then co-authored, *Africa's Feathered Locust* with Mike Jarvis, published by Baobab Books, Harare in 1989.

Peter was the Scientific Editor for *The Black Eagle, A study by Valerie Gargett*, published by Acorn Books and Russel Friedman Books in association with The Trustees of the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund in 1990.

This was followed by *The Vultures of Africa* which was co-authored with Duncan Butchart, John Ledger, and Steven Piper, with Eleanor-Mary Cadell as editor, published by Russel Friedman Books in South Africa and Acorn Books internationally in 1992.

Peter was also a co-author with L. C. Rookmaaker, I. E. Glenn and E. C. Spary of *Francois Levillant and the Birds of Africa* published in 2004 by The Brenthurst Press.

Peter edited the *Vulture News* in 1983 and 1984 when its focus was on southern African vultures. Today this journal is still being published, and now caters for vulture research internationally.

From 1985 onwards Peter contributed to the "Recent Literature" section of *Vulture News*, which was a valuable reference source for those working on vultures around the world.

Peter spent from 1972 to 1982 working on his D. Phil, during this time also establishing the Vulture Study Group with Dr John Ledger, which was later backed by the Endangered Wildlife Trust, chaired by Clive Walker. Peter was employed by the EWT as its first Research Officer.

From 1984 to 2003 Peter was the Ecologist (Ornithology) with the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management, Zimbabwe. He made a substantial contribution to ornithology, establishing monitoring programmes and amending legislation around game and water birds in particular.

On retiring from National Parks, he joined the National University of Science and Technology in Bulawayo, heading the Department of Forest Resources & Wildlife Management. At the age of 80, (in 2021) Peter retired from the University and was made a professor emeritus. He served in that position until his passing on 3 February 2023.

They say it takes:     a minute to find a special person,  
                              an hour to appreciate them,  
                              a day to love them,  
                              but then an entire life to forget them.

For me, Peter Mundy filled the first three of these statements. However, his contribution to vulture conservation, training of wildlife ecologists and his involvement in the natural sciences will not be forgotten, not even in an entire lifetime.

Peter leaves his wife, Verity, their son Matthew, daughter Emily and granddaughter Ashley, along with a formidable legacy not only in vulture conservation but in the wider field of nature conservation in Zimbabwe and southern Africa.

My heartfelt condolences to Verity, Emily, and Matthew.  
Rest in peace my vulture friend.



**Figure 2:** Peter Mundy accepting the first Endangered Wildlife Trust Birds of Prey Programme’s Steven Piper Lifetime Achievement Award for Vulture/Raptor Conservation in 2010. (Photograph: André Botha)

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