

Peter John Mundy, 1941-2023.

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As a child in war-ravaged London, Peter Mundy would scramble across the rubble, scavenging anything of interest and imagining himself as a great vulture soaring over the vast African plains. His childhood fantasy led him to Africa in the early 1970s and within two decades he had established himself as the leading authority on African vultures with the publication of *The Vultures of Africa*. A group of American bibliographers wrote: “It will be on the shortlist of great books on birds of prey.”

Born in 1941 in Somerset, where his mother had been evacuated from London’s badly bombed East End, Peter grew up in Romford, Essex. There, he acquired the broad Cockney accent that never left him and amplified his incisive sense of humour. He attended the Royal Liberty Grammar School, excelling in science subjects and participating in the British Schools Exploring Society’s six-week expedition to Iceland in 1960. After leaving school and working as a grave digger for a brief period, he took up a place at Worcester College, University of Oxford.

Peter was there to read Zoology, but opted instead to read the complete works of Dostoevsky and to learn to play the baritone saxophone. Inevitably, he was rusticated, and he spent the next few years playing the saxophone with various R ‘n’ B bands, ending up with Screaming Lord Sutch. His last gig with Sutch (known for his horror-themed stage show, and later founding the Official Monster Raving Loony Party) was in France in 1966. The band had expected No. 1 billing, but found themselves No. 2, the top spot going to a couple of folk singers from the US – Simon and Garfunkel.

Later that year Peter returned to academia, taking up a place at King’s College, London, to read zoology. This time he stuck to his chosen subject. By now he had married his first wife, Valerie Nice, and had joined the Communist Party, now and again taking time off from his studies to push Communist Party leaflets through letterboxes. It was at King’s College that he took up birding, acquiring his first binoculars at the age of 27. After graduating, Peter got a job teaching English and Maths in a secondary school in Sokoto, north-western Nigeria, and there he made his first foray into studying vultures in the wild. He wrote (in 2022): “In Sokoto I met Allan Cook, and we bird-watched the place flat! We started working on the biology of the Hooded Vulture, estimating there were 1,500-2,000 of them in and around the town. A recent survey there found one.”

In 1972, the University of Rhodesia offered Peter a DPhil place in its zoology department. With Valerie, he sailed from Southampton to Cape Town, bought a VW Combi and drove north to Johannesburg to meet vulture enthusiast, John Ledger, and then on to Salisbury. Just a year later Peter and John founded a group that was to make a huge contribution to the study and conservation of vultures in southern African – the Vulture Study Group (VSG). The VSG’s core unit expanded to five when ornithologist Steve Piper, publisher/conservationist Russel Friedman and bird artist Duncan Butchart came on board. Peter mused later that “we admired, loved and respected each other, such that there was never an argument or fracture – which must have contributed to the VSG’s success.”

Valerie did not settle well in Rhodesia and returned to the UK. But Peter and his Combi stayed. Anyone hitching a ride with Peter in those days would have found that they were not his only passengers. Also taking a ride would be Adolf and Eva, two large Lappet-faced Vultures who often occupied the back of

the Kombi. It turned out later that Adolf was Eva and Eva was Adolf – most vultures are not sexually dimorphic, making it almost impossible to sex them, even for a vulture expert.

By 1977 Rhodesia was caught up in the turmoil of the liberation war and the conscription net was flung wide, taking in as many white men it could. Peter was conscripted that year and became a machine gunner. But the year had its bright side too. He met Verity Cubitt, a sociologist engaged in research at the University, and they married in 1982, two years after the war ended and Rhodesia became Zimbabwe.

In 1979, along with his VSG colleagues John and Russel, Peter attended the International Symposium on Vultures, held in Santa Barbara, California – a milestone in the evolution of the VSG. “Many of the early vulture researchers were there and it was a wonderful occasion,” Peter wrote later, adding, “We noticed that the US had several female researchers, whereas all of us from the Old World were male!” In 1982, the VSG published Peter’s DPhil thesis ‘The Comparative Biology of Southern African Vultures’. The aforementioned American bibliographers said of it: “In terms of detailed quantitative field studies on Old World vultures, this volume has no equal.”



Figure 1. Peter Mundy photographed “dancing with vultures” in 2004, shortly after he became a zoology professor at the National University of Science and Technology in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

In 1984, after a short stint with the Endangered Wildlife Trust in Johannesburg, Peter was appointed the Ornithologist with Zimbabwe’s Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management (DNP), and he and Verity moved to their DNP home on the shores of Lake Chivero, some 35 km west of Harare – an idyllic place for a birder. Their son Matthew was born in 1984, and their daughter Emily in 1987. It was while living at the lake that Peter began to write the text for his major work, *The Vultures of Africa*, with co-authors Steven Piper and John Ledger, illustrator Duncan Butchart and editor Eleanor-Mary Cadell. Published by Acorn Books and Russel Friedman Books in South Africa in 1993, it was later bought by Academic Press in London, who sold the entire print run of 7,000 copies.

The family moved to Bulawayo in 1989, and the DNP's Ornithology team moved into a large building on Main Street that also housed Zimbabwe's Central Intelligence Organisation. This must have caused concern in some quarters. Peter's irreverence and outspokenness were characteristics he seldom attempted to hide, and were the stuff of the countless anecdotes attached to him. Nor did he shrink from peppering his speech with expletives if he felt no harm was done. A friend once remarked that he was the first person she'd met who could use the F-word in a single sentence as a noun, verb, adverb and adjective, and still make sense.

In 2003, after participating in many bird expeditions and attending many international symposia, Peter retired from the DNP. At the suggestion of Dr Yogi Naik, a researcher at the National University of Science and Technology (NUST) in Bulawayo that he join the university, he became a professor in the newly established Department of Forest Resources and Wildlife Management. His passion for working with his students, in the classroom and in the field, soon became clear to everyone and he would later describe his time at NUST as exhilarating. After graduation, many of his students went on to universities elsewhere in the world. "Zimbabwean students are welcomed everywhere," Peter wrote, "because they are hard-working, motivated, honest and smart." On retirement from NUST in his 80th year, in 2021, he was made a Professor Emeritus.

Before his retirement, however, Peter had been diagnosed with cancer of the jaw. Trips to and from Johannesburg for treatment ensued, despite the barriers erected by the Covid pandemic. In late 2022 his medical team moved him on to treatments he could take in Bulawayo, in the comfort of his home. His son Matthew and granddaughter Ashley flew from Australia to spend time with him in December. He died on 3rd February 2023, with Verity and his daughter Emily at his bedside.

Looking back on his life in 2022, Peter wrote: "I have sometimes wondered what good I did for the birds of Zimbabwe. Certainly, I wrote lots of papers about them, and I ringed thousands of them. But..." There are no 'buts'. The birds of Zimbabwe, of southern Africa and indeed of the whole continent, as well as the people who work to study and conserve them, could have had no better champion.


