

History of Primatology: The Alpha Taxonomist's View

Extended Family: Long-Lost Cousins. A Personal Look at the History of Primatology

By Colin Groves (2008) Arlington, VA: Conservation International. vi + 227 p. \$20.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-1-934151-25-9.

This is an odd little book, one an esteemed colleague of mine would call a *vanity publication*. Written by Colin Groves, possibly the only living primatologist who has the first-hand knowledge to do so, and underwritten by Conservation International, for whom Groves has done much in recent years, *Extended Family* is subtitled "a personal look at the history of primatology." What it turns out to be, mostly, is a chronological amble through the nomenclature and formative classifications of the primates, prettied up with biographical bits about the originators of the names and taxonomies, plus some lovely illustrations. I liked that because I'd had no idea who Erxleben was, or Hoffmannsegg, or Kuhl. I also have a fondness for the same old tomes and had been looking in vain for a biographical entry on Osman Hill. But I think the genius of primatology as a discipline is the cross-fertilizing of functional morphology, behavior, and ecology, as well as systematics and paleontology. We get very little of that here. Hardly more than a paragraph on Schultz, a gracious note of thanks to Sarah Hrdy, a brief homage to Morris Goodman, nothing of the fossil record, no acknowledgment of contemporaries looking at the same museum specimens as Groves did and doing an exemplary job of making sense of ecomorphology after John Napier, whom Groves does highlight, got us on track

in the 1960s and 1970s, creating what is arguably the field's very center. It's that sort of coverage: 168 pages before it gets really interesting, when primatology begins to define itself as a professional scientific enterprise, leaving 37 pages to meander the paths and implications of the field's coalescence.

Colin Groves, primatology's latter-day Linnaeus, has probably touched more primate skins, skulls, distribution maps, and old dusty taxonomic works than anyone alive today, which puts him in a unique and powerful position. Powerful because during the modern era he is virtually alone; primatology has never paid sufficient attention to alpha taxonomy. (Quick: List ten colleagues. Has one of them written a paper on a species-level problem, fossils excluded?) Powerful also because today's single most influential interest group and user of taxonomic information is the conservationist. As a consequence of this situation, a scientific near-vacuum and a utilitarian, albeit noble movement needing to simplify, list, and promote things, Groves' chief recent contribution to primatology, the puffing up scores of subspecies all across the order to the rank of species usually because color differences make each recognizable by eye, goes unchallenged and is mysteriously acceptable to younger researchers. Groan. In the long term, will this be good for science or conservation? It reminds me of Matschie, the describer of mountain gorillas, whom Groves tells us was a profligate species namer but had no biology. Colin has lots of the latter but, alas, few opportunities to name animals from scratch like the old guys did. And so we get reality TV meeting taxonomy: entities without the right stuff attain starring roles as species by fiat.

I hadn't made up my mind about this book until the end. But I began to have doubts on page 56, where Groves diligently identifies a funny-colored marmoset in a sixteenth-century portrait as "certainly" the eastern Brazilian *Callithrix flaviceps*. Certainly? With that evidence? Not to me! Not with those utterly *jacchus*-like ear tufts and without the batman facial mask of an *aurita* or *flaviceps*. When I finally came

to page 197 and saw the following, my one-person jury was in: "I am sympathetic now to putting chimpanzees into *Homo*. There would be three living species in the enlarged genus—*Homo troglodytes*, *Homo paniscus* and *Homo sapiens*. Of course, all the 'fossil hominid' genera would go into *Homo* as well: no more arguments over *Australopithecus*, *Paranthropus* and the rest." There never was a loopier idea. Blame it on the phylogenetic species concept that is the excuse for Groves' taxonomic hyperinflation. Or blame it on Morris Goodman, to whom Groves attributes the specific justification for this breathtaking maneuver: classify according to age of taxon (a concept derived, actually, from Hennig¹). I should have seen that coming on page 92, in Groves' exegesis of Linnaeus, 1758, for the only other scientist I can think of who might appreciate these taxonomic names is the great master himself.

And now what, with all of us losing the touch and feel of paper and forgetting the musty odor of the great libraries, is the real heart of Groves' book? Of course I'll point students toward *Extended Family* as I bless the virtues of knowing the literature. It's healthy to read about Cuvier, Gray, Pocock, Yerkes, and Carpenter. And, it's OK that the book comes off as a prequel to the intellectual autobiography of its author. The format, after all, is preferable to Wikified versions of these stories, some here already and others sure to come. But I won't hand it off to a padawan without verbalizing that exasperating groan and providing a lengthy preamble of my own about prudence, the first rule of systematics.

REFERENCE

1 Hennig W. 1996. Phylogenetic systematics. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

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