

BERNARD VERDCOURT (20.1.1925–25.10.2011)

COLLEAGUES AT RBG, KEW

Bernard Verdcourt (widely known as BV to colleagues), the well-known Kew botanist who has died aged 86, made contributions to two distinct fields of East African natural history: he was an acknowledged expert on African plants, but – unusually – also on non-marine molluscs: snails and slugs.

Almost one-third of the great Flora of Tropical East Africa, dealing with 12,500 species, was from his pen. His extensive researches on East African molluscs culminated in “A Revised List of the Non-marine Molluscs of East Africa” in 2006, as well as a mass of publications towards the goal of a descriptive account. He was one of the few people in the world who could name molluscs from the area. A number of eminent malacologists have commented that they never understood how Bernard had time to study plants given his publication output on molluscs, remarkable in that botany was his profession, snails a hobby.

BV was born in Luton, Bedfordshire, on 20 January 1925, and went to Luton Grammar School. His love of botany was fostered by the Luton amateur botanist John Dony, and V.H. Chambers, the hymenopterist, who also lived locally, infused him with a growing interest in entomology. During the Second World War he was called up in 1943, and after aptitude tests went to Reading University to train as a Radar Officer; he graduated in 1945 with a degree in Radio Engineering, Physics and Chemistry, just after the war finished. After three years with the Printing, Packaging and Allied Trades Research Association as a microscopist, mycologist, photographer and general dogsbody to Frank Armitage, he joined the East African Agriculture and Forestry Research Organisation in 1948.

Following a year’s training at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, he took ship to East Africa, and worked at Amani in Tanganyika (now Tanzania) under P.J. Greenway. He helped move the famous Amani Herbarium to its new building in Nairobi, where it became the East African Herbarium; it is now part of the National

Museums of Kenya. The move involved driving quarter ton trucks full of specimens down many muddy hairpin bends. Fifteen years of naming many thousands of plant specimens for various researchers and the general public gave him an unrivalled knowledge of the East African flora and its literature, much called upon in later years by more specialised colleagues. Time for research and writing was very limited, but he gained a Ph.D. externally in 1955, and collected over 4,000 plant specimens with many duplicates; many of these are cited in literature. He also collected East African land snails and slugs, now mostly in the National Museums of Kenya and the British Natural History Museum. From 1958 to 1964 he was Botanist-in-Charge of the East African Herbarium. In 1964 he returned to England and worked at the Kew Herbarium, first as Principal Research Fellow, and later as a Principal Scientific Officer, until his retirement in 1987. He refused promotion to the next rank, believing that others more worthy had been overlooked, and irritated authority in a number of other ways, otherwise it is very likely he would have risen higher. After his retirement he continued his work on the Flora of Tropical East Africa, the Flora Zambesiaca and the Revised Flora of Ceylon; in his eighties he was still working in Kew four days a week, publishing prolifically, and much sought after for advice, plant identifications, and his enjoyable and rather exclusive coffee circle. His civilized coffee breaks in a hidden corner of the Kew herbarium will be remembered by many staff and foreign visitors; beans were freshly ground in an ancient Peugeot coffee mill, and conversations ranged widely.

Apart from a period in the mid-1970s during which he worked on New Guinea legumes, and some contributions to the Flora of Sri Lanka, he was almost entirely devoted to East African botany. Similarly he scarcely studied other molluscs, though he did add the snail *Perforatella rubiginosa* to the British list, and worked on the minute snails of the genus *Carychium* in Britain, with Hugh Watson. Louis Leakey, the palae-

ontologist, encouraged him to work on fossil Kenyan molluscs, and the resulting 1963 paper with its paleoclimatic conclusions is often quoted in works on hominid evolution. It was also at Leakey's request that he drove a young Jane Goodall from Nairobi to Gombe Stream Reserve in West Tanzania, where she embarked on her now famous chimpanzee studies.

In 1978 he was climbing a small rock hill in Tsavo, collecting plants and slugs, and was looking into the crown of an *Acacia* when he trod on something soft and yielding. Looking down he found he had trodden on a lion – a youngish male. Bernard retreated, yelling loudly at the lion, who got up rather lazily and started following. Once he had managed to get about twenty feet between them, Bernard turned tail and fled down the rocks in a klipspringer-like fashion. He later realized that this was the area of the infamous 'man-eater of Tsavo' episodes during which about 140 railway workers were killed and eaten . . . A meeting with Richard Leakey the next day was not easy, as a very sore throat and an almost complete loss of voice made communication difficult.

Bernard was always very interested in insects and contributed over 150 articles from the age of 19 onwards. His most significant finds were the rare flies *Leopoldius signatus* and *Oxycera dives*. He collected *Meligethes* beetles in East Africa, including numerous new species. In later years he was immeasurably saddened by what he saw as the virtual extinction of insect life in Britain, the diversity of his childhood having disappeared. Throughout his life he maintained his interest in Bedfordshire and was responsible for the first records of numerous organisms for the county. He had an extremely catholic private library of many thousand volumes and was very conscious of the importance of archives and anxious that unique material should go to an appropriate place.

BV had an intense dislike of all sports and games, much to his father's regret; but he did take part in motor racing in East Africa, including in the very tough East African Safari Rally (then called the Coronation Safari), and even finished once, in 1958, with Alan Rogerson in his Peugeot 403. He had a particular interest in historic cars of the Peugeot marque, and was a keen member of the Club Peugeot U.K.

He enjoyed controversy, and was not afraid to speak his mind, either to eminent colleagues or senior management. He once reviewed a revision by a colleague as 'abysmal', and did not suffer fools, gladly or otherwise; but he was an inspiration to many younger colleagues, especially in Australia, East Africa and Europe, who admired his knowledge, his incisiveness and his clear view of what was important in systematics, as well as what was not.

He was a prolific author, and published well over 1200 papers and books on entomology, malacology, botany and the Peugeot marque, but felt he had scarcely done anything of real scientific worth: "just a mass of descriptive material, useful, requiring judgement and knowledge but scarcely any intelligence" as he said himself. Others felt differently, and he was honoured with the Kew Medal in 1986; he was President of the Conchological Society in 1969–70; in 2000 he was honoured by the Linnean Society of London with their Gold Medal and he was named a Corresponding Member of the Association of American Plant Taxonomists in 2008. Typically, he grumbled about the latter ('they didn't even ask me') and was photographed glumly holding his champagne, while a crowd of beaming colleagues raise their glasses around him.

Bernard Verdcourt was married twice, firstly to Lorna Crompton and secondly to Helen Dadd (née McInnes), a cat judge and wine merchant. He is survived by both wives and a daughter, Helen Louise, from his first marriage.