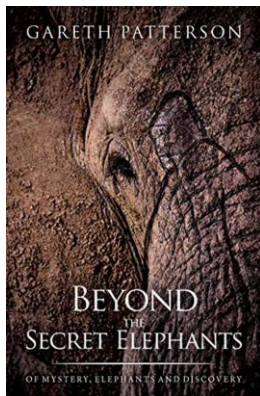




Book Review

Beyond the Secret Elephants: Of Mystery, Elephants and Discovery. By Gareth Patterson. Bryanston, South Africa: Tracey McDonald Publishers. ©2020. ISBN-13: 978-0-639929-3-8. 205 pp. R270 (trade paperback).



Beyond the Secret Elephants, is by Gareth Patterson, award-winning wildlife expert and author of numerous books, known internationally for his efforts to protect the lions and elephants of Africa. In this book we have the sequel to *The Secret Elephants* (2009), which focused on the discovery and two-decade study of a relict population of elephants, the Knysna elephants. Thought to have been extinct, a small number of these elusive bush elephants linger in the dense Tsitsikamma Forest and mountain fynbos (shrublands) along the Cape Fold Mountains of southeastern South Africa. These legendary animals are “so rare, they border on the mythical.” *Beyond the Secret Elephants* continues the story of Patterson’s search for and eventual intimate familiarity with the remaining Knysna elephants, while also revealing in much greater detail the presence of perhaps an even more legendary creature, a relict hominoid known to the indigenous people as the *otang*.

The revelation began when a forestry department scientist asked Patterson, “Gareth, while you are out walking in the forests and mountain fynbos, have you ever come across a type of furry upright walking ape?” Indeed, in the pages of *Beyond* we learn of at least three firsthand encounters with the enigmatic *otang* by Patterson. When combined with several

additional accounts related by local witnesses, a familiar profile emerges – an upright ape-like hominoid (although one witness suggests a more human-like affinity) standing between 5.5 to 7 feet tall, covered with hair described variably as from beige or russet to brown-black; often nocturnal, secretive and elusive, but sometimes curious, and capable of retreating swiftly into the undergrowth. Their alleged footprint is rather human-like, with a non-divergent hallux.

Patterson draws well deserved attention to the concept of relict hominoids, suggesting optimistically that it is gaining mainstream momentum. In the past, such interests were often kept largely to oneself. We learn that Dr. C. K. “Bob” Brain, an esteemed paleo-anthropologist, had conscientiously investigated reports of the *waterbobbejaan*, a possible living relict hominoid in South Africa. The *waterbobbejaan* is described much like the *otang* as over six feet tall, upright, bipedal, with long arms and covered with reddish hair.

Patterson highlights the *Relict Hominoid Inquiry* (www.isu.edu/rhi) and members of its editorial board. One of those, Ian Redmond, primatologist and wildlife conservationist, wrote the foreword to *Beyond*, opening with the admonition, “An open mind is central to science.” Yet Redmond cautions that the scientific establishment can turn hostile in the face of extraordinary and controversial allegations. While anticipating that some will scoff at the suggestion of a relict hominoid, he challenges the reader to consider the evidence.

Patterson cites from Meldrum (2016) addressing the increasing bushiness of the known hominoid family tree, modifying the perception of the pattern of human evolution. No longer conceived of as a single-file march from hominoid to *Homo sapiens*, our phylogeny is complex and ramified with numerous persistent branches, even inter-lineage genetic introgression. He notes the startling recognition of the recent age of *Homo naledi*, a rather primitive hominin whose remains have been surprisingly dated to between 236,000 and 335,000 years ago, overlapping the emergence of *Homo sapiens*. Such a realization makes the prospect of relict hominoids in Africa far less incredible.

Patterson devotes a chapter to the less known examples of possible African relict hominoid, known by such names as *Agogwe*, *Kakundakari*, *Fudu*, and *Ogo*. A brief chapter on the more notorious “*Bigfoot*” provides a snapshot of why he feels serious research and popular interest have become more mainstream in the past decade and a half. Another chapter addresses the *orang pendek* of southeast Asia, which has garnered renewed

interest in the wake of the recent discovery of the diminutive and rather recently persisting hominin, *Homo floresiensis* in Indonesia.

Throughout we find a theme of scientists and wildlife professionals that are not quick to simply reject the possibility of the *otang* and other relict hominoids merely because they “cannot exist.” Instead we see multiple examples of scientifically curious minds that remain open and objective when considering what might be out there. As Patterson notes, “I did not discover the *Otang*, rather I became ‘aware of’ their existence.”

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References

- Meldrum DJ (2016) Sasquatch and other wildmen: the search for relict hominoids. *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 30:355-373.
- Patterson G. *The Secret Elephants*. South Africa: Penguin Books, 2009.