

# John Dawson Skinner: Mammalogist (1932–2011)

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**How to cite this article:**Nel J. John Dawson Skinner: Mammalogist (1932–2011). *S Afr J Sci.* 2012;108(1/2), Art. #1061, 2 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/sajs.v108i1/2.1061>

When John Skinner passed away last year just short of his 79th birthday, he left behind a great many saddened but grateful friends, colleagues and students whom he had helped advance in their careers; collaborators on a host of research projects; and foreign co-workers who had visited the Mammal Research Institute (MRI) at the University of Pretoria. During the 26 years of his directorship of the institute, he built it up to become the leading centre for the study of mammals in Africa – the continent containing the world’s most spectacular mammalian fauna.

Skinner was blessed with the gift of being able to recognise research ability in students, often still at undergraduate level; he learned early that a few days on a field trip with a student revealed much of what could later be expected, and many continued their research paths under his tutelage. A second trait of Skinner’s was his eagerness and ability to collaborate with other researchers, both local and from overseas. This trait led to a steady stream of gifted visitors, either doing research on their own or with Skinner and other MRI inmates – but their specialised knowledge and skills rubbed off on MRI students and staff, to their profound advantage. Many of these visitors continued their research and collaboration with Skinner over extended periods – David Macdonald, Tim Clutton-Brock, Malcolm Coe, Hector Dott and Abraham Haim are but a few that come to mind. A third talent, perhaps evident only to those who collaborated closely with Skinner, was a rare ability to stretch funds to the utmost. It was astounding what he could accomplish with the (at times) limited resources at his command. Skinner also had the ability to select resourceful, committed research assistants over the years, to help not only him and co-workers, but at times also students with their field work. All these traits, and the capacity for hard work and cooperation, could not but result in an extraordinary scientifically productive career.



John Skinner (right) with students in the 1970s watching turtles hatch at Kosi Bay (photo: Jan Nel).

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Many delightful and entertaining – and totally unforgettable – dinner parties were held by John and his late wife Patsy at their home in Irene. The company and flow of conversation was always sparkling; the food superb; and the sound of merriment was heard until the wee hours. Overseas visitors were often invited – on such occasions I first met both Iain Douglas-Hamilton of elephant fame and Alan Newsome of the CSIRO, to name only two of many.

To Skinner's other qualities was added a wonderful sense of humour – and an infectious laugh – as well as an ability to trot out sometimes risqué jokes at appropriate moments. This sense of humour stood him in good stead during the many field trips he undertook with students to destinations all over southern Africa, or even on occasions when students tried to outfox him. During one of his opening talks at an MRI research meeting, and being well prepared as always, he never looked at the screen but continued talking until a great outpour of mirth interrupted his flow of words: students had inserted a slide of a full-frontal nude of impressive proportions in between those of histological preparations. John laughed the loudest of us all. To my mind all these qualities – dedication, hard work, an ability to recognise research opportunities and bring them to early fruition, being able to identify suitable students or collaborators – played no small part in his immense scientific output – more than 350 original scientific publications, and more than 100 doctoral and master's students who graduated under his tutelage.

Yet despite all the effort and time he devoted to furthering the MRI, nurturing students and publishing, Skinner found time to contribute to enhancing broad scientific endeavour in South Africa. He was at one time President of the Royal Society of South Africa; President of the Zoological Society of Southern Africa; President of the Biological Society of Southern Africa and Editor of the Transactions of the Royal Society of South Africa, and an active member of many scientific societies. He was also instrumental in commissioning Reay Smithers to research and write the first edition of *Mammals of the southern African subregion*, a publication which after three editions is still regarded as the standard reference work on this group. Alas, the relegation of the revered Smithers to co-author of the second edition (he having passed away during its preparation) caused great dismay amongst many who felt that the changes made from the first edition did not warrant such a move. This move was to some extent rectified when the third edition, co-authored by Chris Chimimba, was very substantially revised.

Skinner's dedication to furthering mammalogy, and his record both in terms of publications and training graduate students, led to many accolades being conferred upon him. He was chairman of the Hyena Specialist Group of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature for 10 years – a taxonomic group close to his heart on account of his own research on it. He was awarded the Gold Medal of the Zoological Society of Southern Africa; the Senior Captain Scott medal of the Biological Society of Southern Africa; the merit award of the South African Association for the Advancement of Science; and voted one of the four outstanding young South Africans in 1972 by the Junior Chamber of Commerce. Yet the award that he cherished above all was that of a DSc (*honoris causa*) by the University of the Witwatersrand just a few months before his death. The citation noted that:

no one has done more to bring zoology to the attention of the South African community, whether it be game farmers, agricultural extension officers, or the visitor to a national park, or to bring South African mammalogy to the attention of the international research community.

Skinner was born in Johannesburg, where he attended St John's College. He took his first degree, in Animal Science, at the then University of Natal, before spending some years at Mara Research Station, now in Limpopo Province, where he developed his research abilities. After some years spent here he undertook postgraduate studies at the University of Pretoria, the quality of which led to him being offered the chance to read for a PhD at Cambridge University. On his return to South Africa he spent a few years at the Irene Animal Production Institute. Already at this stage his research commitment was legendary: he would, on a Friday afternoon, drive to Bloemhof to work on springbok growth and meat production with Jan van Zyl, who was then in charge of the Panfontein Research Station. Late on Sunday afternoon he would drive back to Pretoria, ready for a full week's work. This habit was my first intimation of his prodigious work output. Skinner was appointed Director of the MRI in 1972 and retired after 26 years; from 1985 he was also head of the University of Pretoria's Department of Zoology for some years.

Skinner was unstintingly supported in his endeavours by his wife Patsy, whose death sadly preceded his by 20 years. He leaves a daughter Lila, sons Charles and Donal, and their families. For John, as said of Christopher Wren: *si monumentum require, circumspice* [if you require a monument, look around you].