

2002

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Recommended Citation

Hanbury, David (2002) "Studying Bush Babies," *The Catalyst*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

DOI: 10.18785/cat.0102.08

Available at: <https://aquila.usm.edu/southernmisscatalyst/vol1/iss2/8>

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Studying Bush Babies

By David Hanbury

For an undergraduate student to engage in what promises to be groundbreaking, revolutionary research is an extraordinarily unique experience. In August of 2003, I was given the opportunity to participate in a research program advancing the understanding of primates through behavioral research of prosimians known as bush babies (*Otolemur garnettii*), at The University of Southern Mississippi's Laboratory for Prosimian Studies. Through research and observation, I am learning something new



every day about the behavioral, cognitive, and anatomical differences and congruencies between humans and our fellow primates.

Bush babies are native to the African countries of Somalia, Kenya, and Tanzania. They are smaller than other primates and weigh approximately two pounds. Bush babies have hands that resemble those of a human. Rather than paws, they have small hands and fingers with nails instead of claws. They are nocturnal but their keen sense of smell and hearing adequately compensate for their lack of good vision. Bush babies are omnivorous and eat almost anything, from Fruit Loops to Vienna sausage. However, their daily diet in captivity consists of high-protein monkey chow.

Bush babies have numerous advantages in research over other primates such as chimpanzees, lemurs,

and macaques that are more commonly studied. They are not aggressive and are easy to handle. Due to their small size, bush babies are less costly to study and maintain than other primates.

Furthermore, in bush babies, there is low risk of the disease transmission that exists in some monkeys.

The University of Southern Mississippi's group of twenty-four constitutes one of the few bush baby colonies in the U.S. These primates came to Southern Miss one and a half years ago.

However, the

colony's bush baby founders were brought to America by U.S. Army researchers in 1981. After completing their studies, the Army donated the bush babies to the University of Memphis. When the Memphis colony was disbanded after twelve years of research, Southern Miss adopted a subset of the animals. Currently, the bush babies are housed at the Hattiesburg Zoo and are not on public display.

Only noninvasive, behavioral research is conducted with the bush babies, and as is with all animals, is strictly monitored by the University Animal Care and Use Committee. No research is considered that may be potentially harmful or cruel to the bush babies. One of the things we are currently studying is the sex ratio bias in bush babies. In humans the ratio of newborns is about 106 males to 100

females. In bush babies, the ratio is much higher, about 130 male offspring to 100 females. This semester, though, my main project is to build a complete computer database of the information we have on each bush baby. Other potential projects for the future include a study of mother-infant interactions, studies of cognitive abilities of the bush babies, and studies of the animals' social behaviors.

Southern Miss is currently building the bush babies a laboratory that will allow us to expand our studies of the animals. The new laboratory will consist of multiple rooms to house the bush babies in, as well as a room in which we can observe them out of their cages, interacting with each another. We are already developing new research protocols. We anticipate that, through the efforts of the researchers at the Southern Miss. Laboratory for Prosimian Studies, the bush baby will become a valuable primate model for the study of behavior and cognition.



David is an 18 year old freshman biological sciences major with a minor in pre-veterinary medicine. Prior to

moving to Hattiesburg, David lived in Ashland, Kentucky, where he worked as a veterinary technician at Guardian Animal Hospital. During that time, he worked with both domestic and exotic animals, including wildlife. This job opened David's eyes to the world of science and gave him the knowledge and experience needed to become part of a research program at Southern Miss's Laboratory for Prosimian Studies working with bush babies. Working with these primates has opened David's eyes to a variety of opportunities for the future, including graduate school at Southern Miss and the continuation of my research. He very much enjoys what he does.