

group was spotted about half way from Cape Tuxen to the Argentine Islands. This group did not appear to be swimming in a definite direction, but made off north when approached by a dinghy.

On 21st March in the Errera Channel (a narrow waterway leading off the Gerlache Strait), just off Danco Island, humpbacks were in sight more or less continuously while the ship lay at anchor between 10.30 and 16.00. There was a lot of ice about and it was not possible to keep individual groups under observation for long periods. However, 13 whales were logged: one group of 3 going south; two groups of 2 going south; and a single whale going south; one group of 3 going north and one

group of 2 going north. It is possible that some the animals or groups were sighted more than once. As in the Grandidier Channel, the groups of three were each composed of two large whales and one small one.

Although it was not possible to make worthwhile estimates of the lengths of the whales seen, I believe that in the case of the trios, the large whale which was closely followed by the smaller one, represented mother-calf pairs. If each sighting represents a separate animal, the 5 presumed calves seen represent about 18 per cent of the total observed, an encouraging indication of the regeneration of the stock.

## The Giant Golden Mole

*Walter Poduschka*

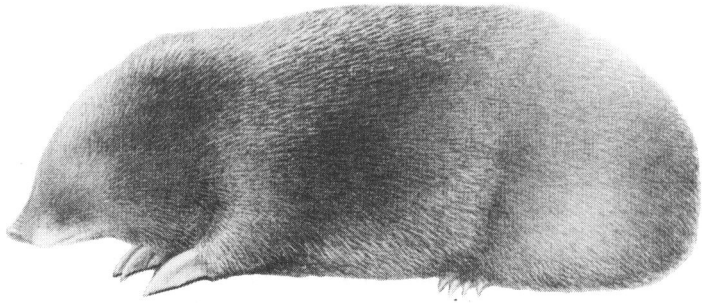
**The South African giant golden mole has been seen by few people; scientifically it is almost unknown. After two visits to South Africa to look for it, in 1978 and 1980, the author, who is Chairman of the IUCN/SSC Insectivore Group, fears that it may already be extinct in the Transkei through loss of its forest habitat, and that the same fate is to be feared in the Ciskei.**

Another black spot in the long history of mankind ruthlessly destroying nature is at hand. The fate of the giant golden mole *Chrysofalax trevelyani* of South Africa is not only precarious but probably beyond hope; another member of the most basic mammalian group, the Insectivores, will soon be gone. Hardly anything is known about its biology, hardly anybody has ever seen it alive. The only existing photographs of a live specimen were taken by an animal dealer – and nobody knows what happened to the specimen. Probably its remains are in a private collection. So, only a drawing can give an impression of this strange animal, old as the hills.

More than 100 years ago, in 1875, the giant golden mole was described by A. Günther, who wrote that this hitherto unknown animal was brought to a Mr Herbert Trevelyan who accompanied a shooting-party in the Pirie Forest near King William's Town (British Caffraria) and believes that it must be very scarce or local, as none of his companions had ever

seen another specimen. As far as we know, this mole lives only in dense, relatively humid primary forests, unlike its nearest relative, *C. villosus*, which occurs also in grassland.

It is about 20cms long, has a dense, reddish-brown fur with a peculiar metallic glimmer, and a slate grey or yellowish underfur. The eyes are reduced and covered by fur, the molars zalambdodont (triangular), which indicates a close relationship to some other African living fossils, the Malagasy tenrecs and the otter shrews of Central Africa, Potamogalidae, which also are only to be found in remote areas and are highly endangered. Not many more than 100 *C. trevelyani* skulls or skins exist in collections all over the world. Apart from the South African scientist J. Meester, who kept one specimen for a few weeks (pers. comm.), hardly anyone has studied it live. Very few scientists have investigated it in the Pirie Forest and nobody has done so in those sites nearby where other early specimens



were collected. So nothing is known about the animal's reproduction rate, gestation period, litter size, or sex ratio – all most important and relevant for protection measures. More than half the known specimens were collected in the last 106 years in areas now included in the sovereign state Transkei, the remainder around East London and King William's Town, focussing in the quiet undisturbed Pirie Forest.

As Chairman of the Insectivore Group of the Species Survival Commission (SSC/IUCN), I have to be responsible for any rare or endangered insectivore. In October 1978 I visited the Transkei and Pirie Forest for the first time to learn about the animal for myself and study its chances of survival.<sup>2</sup> In Pirie Forest I saw a fair number of the typical *Chrysofalax* molehills with their equally typical low inside temperature (113°C), but the forest is so small – only 8939 ha – that the animal's long-term chances of survival are poor. A distribution map of the collecting sites – the first ever made – showed that the whole home range (including the Transkei) is hopelessly split up into small patches, and so of course is the available gene pool. The species is now in the 'endangered' category in the IUCN Red Data Book.

In March/April 1981 I tried again,

sponsored by the South African Nature Foundation. In the Transkei I toured a fair part of the surviving forests in places where specimens had formerly been collected, or were reported to have been found. The results were discouraging. Although the Transkei Government is anxious to protect its last forests, declare them as national parks and fence them in, it has to be admitted that most are but a few miles across and irrevocably separated from each other. Some are on the rocky slopes of steep gorges, which for sure cannot be used to grow maize or graze animals, but equally are no use for a golden mole to dig its tunnels. And in all unfenced forest areas, on hills or lower down, there are plenty of cattle and boys with slingshots; no wild mammal or bird has a chance. Other forests are turned over into quick-growing 'wood factories' where eucalyptus and pine have replaced the exploited natural forests. On this second visit to the Transkei, despite all my searching, I could not find a single trace of *Chrysofalax*. But I did succeed in raising some interest there and local scientists will try to discover some remote humid forests suitable for *Chrysofalax*, where this harmless and antique animal, dating back to at least the lower Miocene, could possibly survive.<sup>5</sup>

#### PIRIE FOREST AND MADEN LAKE



After leaving the Transkei I toured some golden mole sites in the corridor between the Transkei and the Ciskei where a few specimens had been collected, or found drowned after a flood some decades ago. But around Stutterheim, Amabele, Macleantown, and Kei Road there is no primary forest left; only uniform tree plantations indicate where they might have been.

### Fewer Molehills

I returned to Pirie Forest and met my next disappointment. Probably as a result of long drought, the number of molehills, which on the previous visit were to be found even down to the shores of the small Maden Lake, had decreased drastically. This was not from any lack of the mole's favourite food, the giant earth worm *Microchaetus*,<sup>4</sup> for the soil of the dense and entangled forest was dotted with innumerable faeces of *Microchaetus*, clusters of digested earth from deep layers, with a diameter of up to 8cms each.

### Independence

Unfortunately, another threat is looming. In December 1981, full sovereignty was to be handed over to Ciskei, a new homeland of the Southern Xhosa. King William's Town will remain in Cape Province, but the fate of Pirie Forest is less clear. In July I was told that in the main it will remain in the hands of the South African Government, but there is still uncertainty about some of the boundaries. Hitherto it has been a so-called Independent (State) Forest, managed and supervised by the South African Department of Forestry; when handed over, it is expected to become the State Forest Isidenge. Usually the governments of new

homelands ask for initial help from specialists in forest protection, but this had not been done in April 1981, and I heard that people were going into Pirie Forest to strip the bark from certain trees – in order to make medicine and face cream. Two of the trees involved are Cape chestnut *Calondendrum capense* and Cape onionwood *Cassipouorea slanaganii*. The new government emphasises its intention to protect the natural heritage, but it is up against the shortsightedness and greed of local people who believe that in their own country they have the right to destroy anything for even momentary benefit. The killing of trees, collecting of firewood, and snaring of duikers, lynx, jackal, etc. that can be expected would destroy the golden mole's last worthwhile stronghold – and also incidentally finish off one of South Africa's important populations of the endangered Cape parrot *Poicephalus robustus*.

After two visits to South Africa on behalf of the giant golden mole I foresee its extinction in a very few years. In Transkei I have no hope; I am afraid this endemic animal has vanished already. As for the Ciskei, I have little hope left. The insane pressure for freedom to destroy nature at will is too great, and there was and is too little real and active interest in its protection. We shall harvest our terrible inclination for big and boasting talk by losing for good another modest and unknown species, a mute and helplessly doomed part of the loudly acclaimed 'world heritage'. But nobody would be happier than myself if my pessimistic words proved wrong.

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