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## Research: Gorillas on Visoke and Pandas in the House: A Conservation with Wildlife Biologist and Conservationist George Schaller

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affecting plants, hikers can accidentally crush the butterflies themselves or their eggs and larvae, which are hidden under leaves or in the soil. Hiker presence may also affect butterfly activity—one New Hampshire state biologist reported seeing little to no butterflies on a high-use trail, but dozens of butterflies on a relatively empty trail. Hiker presence has been documented as causing stress that reduces the number of eggs other types of butterflies lay and might be happening with the White Mountain Arctic and fritillary. Though anecdotal, stories like these help scientists begin asking the questions they need answered to learn more.

The White Mountain Arctic and White Mountain fritillary continue to seemingly defy the laws of nature, living their lives in the remaining pockets of alpine zone, remnants of our last Ice Age. State biologists and local enthusiasts continue to spend time trying to spot them, monitoring to learn more about their life cycles and connections to the rest of the alpine ecosystem. No creature, however small, is insignificant—each has a part to play in the balance of life. Should the two alpine butterflies disappear before we know their role would be a tragedy. The Presidential Range’s arctic butterflies may be something of a mystery, but the world would be less without them.

—*Gabriella Gurney*

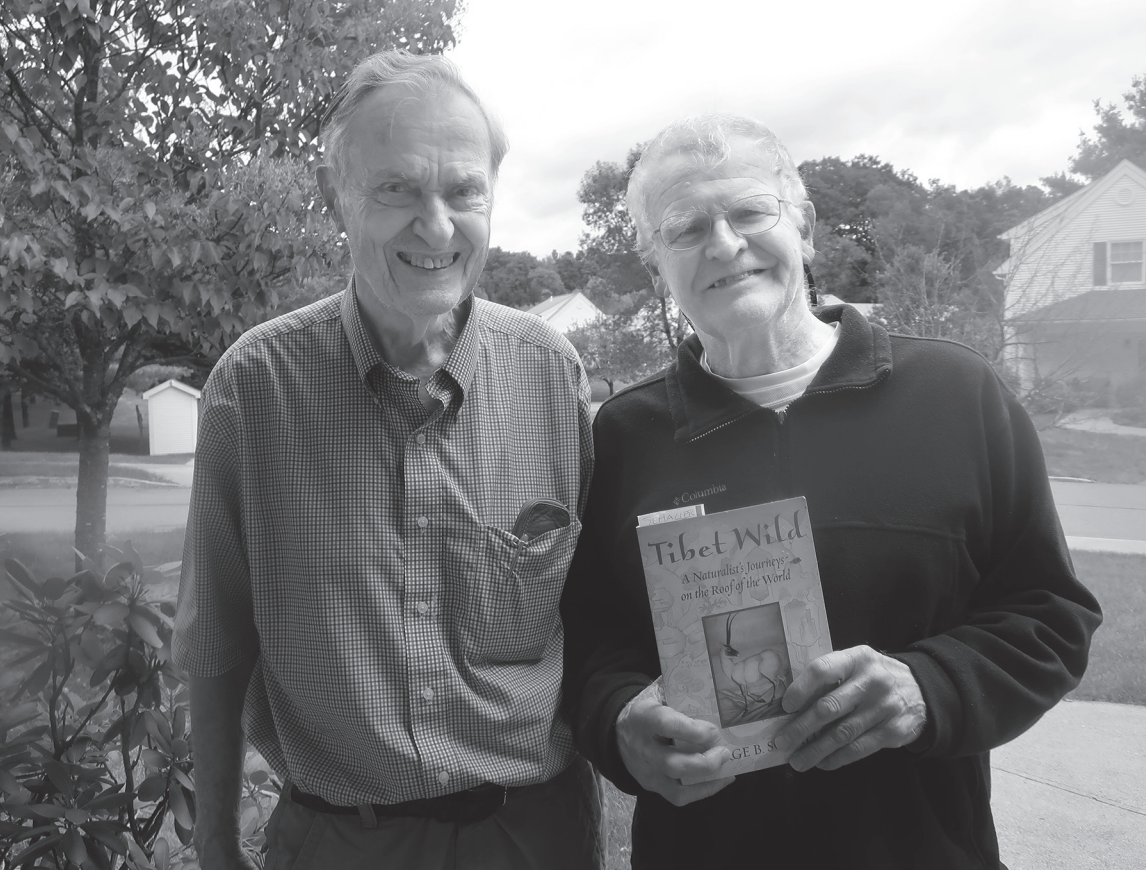
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GABRIELLA GURNEY is the science communicator for the Appalachian Mountain Club.

### **Gorillas on Visoke and Pandas in the House: A Conversation with Wildlife Biologist and Conservationist George Schaller**

After my wife and I moved to a senior village not long ago, I learned that one of the most renowned field biologists of our time, George Schaller, was our neighbor. I learned this by reading the neighborhood newsletter, which announced the death, at age 93, of Kay Schaller, his wife of 65 years. Accompanying the notice was a photo of the Schallers atop Rwanda’s Visoke, one of eight Virunga volcanoes, where the mountain gorillas they once studied live.

I emailed George expressing sorrow at his wife’s passing, adding, “I am guessing I am the only other resident here who has climbed Visoke.” He quickly wrote back, welcoming me “to come and chat about roaming around that lovely region.”



*George Schaller, left, with the interviewer, who holds one of Schaller's many books.*

COURTESY OF DOUGLASS TESCHNER

I had first heard of Schaller through Peter Matthiessen's 1978 book *The Snow Leopard* (Viking Press). In this award-winning account of a two-month journey in Nepal, Matthiessen describes a spiritual quest accompanying Schaller, who studied Himalayan blue sheep and its predator, the rarely seen snow leopard.

Matthiessen wrote that some considered Schaller the world's finest field biologist—and that was early in his amazing career. Schaller did field work for 70 years in 32 countries in Africa, Asia, North America, and South America. He contributed to the creation of more than twenty parks or preserves worldwide, including Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the Shey Phoksundo National Park in Nepal, and the Chang Tang Nature Reserve in China.

It was a most pleasant encounter as he showed me his home and library, and I was impressed that, at age 90, he maintains a fit 6-foot stature and still walks (and sometimes jogs) around the condo village. I shared some of my

writings, and he sent a thank you “for taking me back to the beautiful Virungas.” After a visit to my condo, he wrote, “My gratitude for a most congenial hour of chatting and a fine cup of tea.”

I sent Schaller an article I’d written for the *New Hampshire Business Review* about losing my brother to cancer. Schaller emailed, “You can also teach me about life’s summits and valleys, since I’m in a deep valley now.” I knew he was referring to the loss of his wife. George now lives by himself, visited regularly by his son Eric, a writer and biology professor at nearby Dartmouth College. His younger son, Mark, is a professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

I shared copies of this journal with him, and George loaned me several books and agreed to be interviewed. We sat down for nearly two hours on October 2, 2023. The remainder of this article is based largely on that conversation. His two sons reviewed the manuscript and added some additional details.

Asked about his childhood, Schaller pivoted to talking about his wife and kept coming back to her again and again throughout our conversation. “Let me start with Kay, who was critical to my life, the focus of my life and colleague for 70 years. She raised the children, was a wonderful person, very empathetic, helped me a tremendous amount in my work, and encouraged me no matter what country we were in.”

Schaller was born in Germany in 1933 and lived in European cities as his father was a diplomat. He remembers Allied forces bombing the area near his boarding school, when he huddled with classmates in a train station during evacuation. He later visited bombed-out Dresden with his father. In his 2012 book *Tibet Wild* (Island Press), George wrote that war experiences “may have little relevance to shaping my later life as a naturalist, but they probably did influence my willingness to adapt and endure difficulties in the field.”

In 1947, George moved to the United States with his mother and brother, Chris, settling in the St. Louis area, near some of his mother’s relatives. His father remained behind and, although George rarely saw his father after that, George recalled his dad as a “very, very nice person.” The transition was not easy. George didn’t speak English very well and “wasn’t welcome much with other students.” Cousin Ed Barnes was a big influence, taking him north to Canada, traveling with a gold prospector up past Lake Laberge, and up the Alaska Highway. George and I shared a connection as my grandfather Hans Bent helped build the Alaska Highway less than 10 years before George first traveled it in 1950.

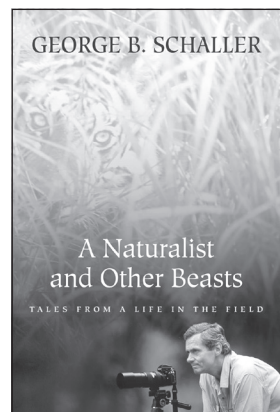
At his cousin Ed's suggestion, George applied to the University of Alaska and, when he did not receive a response, traveled there anyway. The administration had lost his application, but he was accepted on arrival. He recalls the university as "a perfect choice for me—there were only 350 students." One of them was his future wife, Kay, whom he met in 1952. "I liked to run around and be outdoors when I was young but didn't really know that I could study biology," he recalled, but one of his professors, Brina Kessel, "opened up opportunities to follow caribou and look at bears."

Schaller never aspired to summit peaks, but when Austrian alpinist Heinrich Harrer came to Alaska in 1954, Schaller accompanied him on the first ascent of 12,010-foot Mount Drum in the Wrangell Mountains.

Kessel encouraged Schaller to do his graduate work at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where he studied with John Emlen, who "made contacts for me to go study gorillas, which led to other things." In Wisconsin, he was also influenced by the work of conservationist Aldo Leopold, whose 1949 book *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford University Press) fostered new ways of thinking about conservation. "I didn't meet him but knew his son Starker."

Schaller's work with the mountain gorillas in Rwanda, before Dian Fossey, was groundbreaking. "Gorillas had such a bad reputation, but I could sleep next to them. They are not ferocious animals like we made them out to be." Schaller later met Fossey and admired her dedication but not her conflicts with the populace. "I always work with local people, and my wife Kay related to local people. She was very compassionate and helpful to them," adding about his wife, "I could not have asked for a nicer colleague."

I asked Schaller how Kay's study of anthropology contributed to their work. It was good background, he said, but "when you work with local people, you *really* learn anthropology." He acknowledges his wife's contributions as critically important. "Conservation is very complex involving local social issues, ethical, and political issues. I had to convince local people, which was difficult unless they had an economic benefit. That is why things take time and are complex." He expressed concern that reduced tourism resulting from COVID-19 could affect community thinking about conservation.



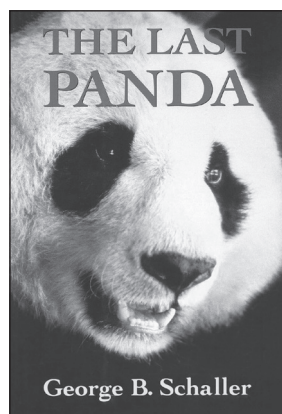
Schaller built cooperation at the community level. “Most countries accepted me especially because I worked with local teams.” But he acknowledges that political events can get in the way. He studied Asiatic cheetahs in Iran and found Iranians to be “very hospitable,” but that work is not currently possible given the current state of United States–Iran relations. “The Chinese were very generous with me, letting me travel to places that had never seen a foreigner, but now American organizations are not permitted there. Mongolia is a country that is still easy to work in.”

In the early years, the Schaller family lived overseas when he did research. He recalled that his wife homeschooled their sons in India and Tanzania. His sons attended the Lahore American School while their father did research in Pakistan.

I asked what it was like to live and move through the wilds while observing animals, and he replied, “That is the life one chose, so it must be quite enjoyable. There is this great sense of anticipation: Are you going to find a pride of lions or will a panda stay near you? You are never quite sure what is going to happen. I just enjoy being out especially if there is a specific goal I can reach.”

Schaller wrote more than twenty books—seven scientific books and “eleven to twelve popular books plus five children’s books. Kay and I did one on lions and another woman wanted a kid’s book on tigers, and we also did a children’s book on a Tibetan dog.” He enjoyed writing the popular volumes. His first popular book was *The Year of the Gorilla* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), and he wrote a scientific book, *The Mountain Gorilla* (University of Chicago Press, 1963). “I understood that doing a scientific book is good for getting another grant,” he said, “but a popular book reaches the public.”

I asked Schaller about his 1970s collaboration with author Peter Matthiessen. “We started corresponding, and I invited him to go with me to Nepal, and he wrote a wonderful book. Locals said they killed snow leopards because they occasionally took a sheep or goat, but the real issue was they made good money selling the skins.” Once tourists came, the local population understood they could economically benefit by taking them to see the snow leopards.



Schaller obviously favored mammals and observed, "If I go study earthworms, nobody would know it." I asked if he had any favorites. "A hard decision. People paid the most attention to the gorillas. Giant pandas were wonderful. Some got used to me and came into the house to sit around. Kay was OK with that. You had to be a bit careful. They stayed at one end of the room. I liked it when they dropped feces so Kay and I could analyze the content. . . . Any animal can get used to people if you treat it nicely."

Schaller sometimes engaged climbers in the remote places where he did research. When Jimmy Chin, Conrad Anker, Rick Ridgeway, and Galen Rowell planned a 300-mile traverse of the uninhabited Chang Tang region of Tibet, Schaller asked them to collect information that helped protect the chiru antelope. Nomads were killing them for both sustenance and to sell the hides, which were woven into expensive shawls. This work was featured in a 2003 *National Geographic* article and later in Ridgeway's book *The Big Open* (National Geographic Society, 2004).

And Schaller revealed that he had climbed some big mountains: Visoke and other Virunga volcanoes. I mentioned Mikenno, in the same range but across the Rwanda border in the Democratic Republic of Congo, one of the most spectacular peaks I had ever seen. I was surprised when Schaller said he had climbed it. He said, "It is not so hard from one angle." His son Eric added that George had climbed Kilimanjaro in Tanzania and, "in Mongolia for a snow leopard study was regularly climbing in the Altai Mountains to take radio collar readings (although not concerned with summiting)."

Unlike many researchers, Schaller did not want a university post. "One of luckiest things happened in 1966 when the New York Zoological Society (now the Wildlife Conservation Society) put me on staff, giving me a good basic income, but I still needed grants to travel and do research." I asked about the many awards he received, and Schaller observed, "If it was a money award, I applied all the money to research, in effect a grant. Yes, it feels good to get awards."

People romanticize wildlife research, but there is a lot of hard work and discomfort, requiring enormous discipline to observe animals closely over many days and hours. "When it is 40 below zero, it is not that much fun, but somebody is paying you, so you work hard and adapt. I longed to be with the family, and if Kay wasn't with me, it was a lot harder. It was a wonderful thing having Kay in a tent or cabin with hot food and a cup of tea."

Schaller recalled fondly "the best project" in Tanzania's Serengeti, "with animals all around, plus Kay and my kids, plus other biologists and their kids.

It was a community. A lot of studies by other people continued for twenty or more years.” He recalls going back years later and seeing the impact of so many tourists, such as twenty cars surrounding mating lions.

In 1960, the Schallers moved to rural Ryegate, Vermont, to be closer to New York and, while the family still owns that property, they later moved to Connecticut for better schooling for the two boys. George’s sons recalled a mid-1970s White Mountains backpacking trip across the Presidential Range. Mark remembers “being impressed by the efficient ingenuity of a breakfast dad made one morning on the camp stove: a kind of porridge of leftover rice and powdered milk.”

Schaller laments that the Amazon has vast expanses of rainforest, but, “you can walk for a couple of days and never see a monkey because local people have eaten them all. Nothing you can do about it.” He wonders about Bigfoot. “I have never met one,” he said with a smile, adding, “There is some evidence, so you can’t say no.” Ever curious, he “has a box of articles.”

I asked about a new species of scorpion named *Liacheles schalleri* in his honor. He casually recalled collecting it but did not remember where. “Maybe India. I collected it so they could identify it,” he noted, remembering also a lizard and pressing many plants for the New York Botanical Garden.

I asked Schaller what he was most proud of, and he quickly answered, “my family,” before summarizing what I find most impactful about this work. “I’ve done something useful to help the countries with wildlife and conservation and was fortunate to get young people from these countries to keep working in their country. That makes me proud for them. You initiate it, but then you have the local people take over generation after generation. For example, the Chinese from Peking University who worked with me on the panda had students who also worked on the panda, and they had students who worked on the panda. Each one added something new. It is very satisfying.”

Despite this incredible legacy, Schaller can be hard on himself. He wrote in *Tibet Wild*, “My inner voice points to failures.” When asked about this, he observed, “Some people spend twenty years with one species. I skim off the top for two to three years and say I am out of here. I have a short attention span. You should spend your lifetime somewhere, but I am not that kind of person. I go get basic information and, if it looks reasonable, I make a recommendation to the government of that country to set up a reserve and propose potential borders. I found that I am quite realistic, and most governments are interested; they follow through. Adding up the reserves I promoted, it

is a couple hundred thousand square miles, the total area about the size of California.”

While he has not traveled since COVID, I asked about future plans. “Good question. The Brazilian government has asked me to return to the Amazon. I was asked to revisit the area in Nepal where we did wildlife surveys in 1973 and 2016 to note any changes in the wildlife and the local communities. I am ready to go again.”

—*Douglass Teschner*

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DOUGLASS TESCHNER of West Lebanon, New Hampshire, has published many stories in this journal over the last half-century. His account of climbing the Rwanda volcanoes is in his piece, “Africa Mountain Journal: 1971–2015,” in the Winter/Spring 2017 issue. A former Peace Corps director, he is now a leadership trainer and coach.

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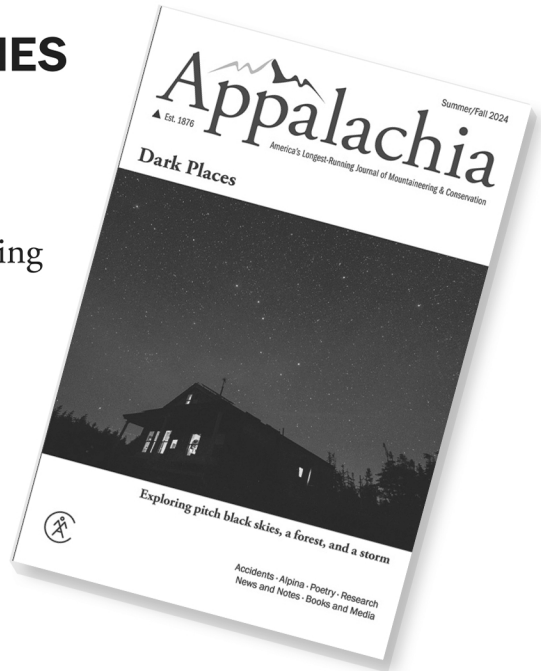
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