

# Red-Bellied Monkeys

By Jeff Bentley

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Peter Neuenschwander is a Swiss ecologist, a scientist emeritus at an eminent research institute, and a member of a secret African religious society. He also has a sanctuary for endangered, red-bellied monkeys (*Cercopithecus erythrogaster*).

The monkeys, also called the white throated monkeys, only live in the humid forests of southern Benin and southwestern Nigeria, in West Africa. Most of the forests in this rapidly urbanizing region are now gone. The ones that remain are mostly sacred forests, most of which are small (under a hectare) and under pressure from woodcutters.

Peter had seen the skins of the red-bellied monkeys in collections but had never seen a live one. They had been hunted to the brink of extinction for their red and white-trimmed fur. Then one day Peter's son phoned him to say someone was selling a monkey in the market, and maybe it was the red-belly. Peter could tell by his son's description that it was. So he drove up and bought it. Then a former hunter brought Peter a monkey. The man had given up hunting after his wife had given birth to twins. It was a sign that his hunting days were over, and a lucky break for the monkey.

As Peter slowly collected more monkeys, in 1996, one of his African friends told him about a piece of land that was for sale, and too good an offer to refuse. "I don't want to buy anything," Peter protested.

"Just look at it," the friend said. So he did. And that's how Peter started buying little nuggets of land, eventually owning 25 small, deeded parcels. Some of them were in degraded forest; some had a few trees left. The forest soon began growing back. Peter collected dozens of native plant species from the nearby forest remnants and moved the plants onto his land. Sometimes he would go back later only to find that the plant no longer survived where he had collected it, but it lived on in his sanctuary, which he called Drabo Gbo, after the local village.

One of the larger ones of the 25 lots was a sacred forest, the regional site of the Oro Cult, which is a type of Vodun, a traditional African religion which believes in a supreme God and various spirits. The sacred forest belonged to the Christian part of an extended family,



Red-bellied monkey with a white throat, and a sacred forest

which had split off from the Vodun part. When the Christians decided to sell the sacred forest, the Vodun part of the family approached Peter and asked him to buy back their old sacred forest, which he did. Peter allowed the Oro Cult to continue worshiping in the forest. Peter had previously been introduced into another Vodun cult, the *ẓan gbetos* (night men). So now that he owned the sacred forest the Vodun introduced him into the Oro Cult as well, at a nighttime initiation ceremony conducted in the local language, Fon. “My Fon isn’t very good,” Peter said modestly, although he chatted amiably with his neighbors in Fon.

Primatologists said that the red-bellies would never breed in captivity. But Peter put them in large cages, filled with tree branches and leaves. He paired up the monkeys and they soon began having babies, which later crawled through the large holes of the wire mesh, to live in the forest. It sounds like part of a clever plan, but it was just serendipity, and it turned out to be an easy way to adapt released monkeys to their wild environment.

As he walked us around the forest Peter told us that he also had an endangered species of squirrel, besides flying squirrels, four species of kingfishers, a rare butterfly, an agouti and other animals living on his 12 hectares (30 acres). He also has the mona monkey (*Cercopithecus mona*), which is not endangered and which mixes easily with the red-bellies.

When Peter asked me if I knew much about plants I had to confess that I didn’t. “Well I could tell you the scientific names of the plants, but I won’t. So just enjoy the beauty of it.” But he couldn’t help himself, and he was soon reeling off the names of every tree and shrub we passed.

In the forest some of the children and grandchildren of the original monkeys would come down to low branches to look at us. “They never look in your eyes,” Peter said. It was true. Even as the curious monkeys came down to get a closer look at us, they sat with eyes averted.

When the previous land owners cleared the forest for crops, they left the oil palms standing, for their valuable fruit. As the forest grew back, these stout palms were now over-represented, so occasionally Peter knocked one down and collected the wine that forms in the trunk, about 10 liters per tree.

Peter even had fish, in aquariums on his porch, where the forest grew right to the rafters of his porch. The aquariums were spacious, sometimes with only one fish. “They call this one a tilapia, but it’s really not ... This one looks like an eel, but it’s a completely separate family.” Some of the tanks had tree trunks in them: habitats for endangered forest fish.

One big-eyed fish glided past my elbow. “There’s no overhead light, so he can see you. When you put in an overhead light the glass becomes four mirrors, but *that* fish can see out.”

Some ecologists like animals more than people. But Peter was as understanding of his neighbors as he was of his fish. He knew that the local people lived on a dollar a day. He set up a mill to grind maize and manioc for the neighbors and he hired a miller. But they millers didn’t stay long. The third one was not working out either; he constantly needed new grinding stones, more oil, this and that. Peter gradually transferred ownership of the mill to the man who now runs it as a business, and buys his own spare parts. Many villagers now come to have their bitter manioc processed. The miller needs a place to discharge the waste water, which contains cyanide, a natural product of bitter manioc. So Peter lets the

millar pipe the water into the forest. As we walked past a patch of dark water Peter explained “That pit is slightly poisonous.” But it is biodegradable.

As the little forest recovers and more of the surrounding land is cleared for farming, the sanctuary is rapidly becoming a forest island. The trees make tempting targets and sometimes the neighbors can’t resist poaching one. Peter doesn’t like it, but he understands. “We have to get along. Sometimes my monkeys raid their papayas, and the neighbors don’t kill them. Then I have to go and talk to them, and pay for the damage.” Getting along with the neighbors is the trickiest part of running a wildlife sanctuary.

I asked Peter if he had thought of giving the refuge to an international conservation agency. He had written to some, and only received form letters in reply. “Dear Dr. Neuenschwander, Thank you for your interest in our work ....” Then he realized that he should leave the forest to the local university, where he had made friends with some of the young faculty members. The university agreed.

Tourists have now started to trickle in to the monkey sanctuary. And when some of the local school teachers noticed that foreigners were coming, they brought the schoolchildren for a visit. Of all the visitors, the local children are the most important ones.

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