

Search for the Extinct Monkey

by Loretta McLaughlan

A monkey presumed extinct, is not only a celebrity, but if current plans work out, he may soon be a daddy as well.

Lagothrix flavicauda, or "Flauvy" as he is known to his keepers, is the world's only yellow-tailed woolly monkey in captivity. At the moment he is passing his time with a playful common woolly in Lima, Peru, where an expedition is being outfitted to find him a mate.

Until a few years ago the only authoritative report on *Lagothrix flavicauda* was published in 1812 by Alexander von Humboldt, the famous German naturalist and explorer. Humboldt never saw a live yellow-tail, but he was the first to identify it as a separate species after studying several pelts used as saddle covers by mule drivers near Jaen in the district of Cajamarca, Peru. Still, Humboldt knew so little about the monkey that he considered it a new species of howler monkey — not a woolly.

Since only a few pelts came to light during the next one hundred years, many scientists, understandably, thought the monkey extinct. In all, only five skins (the last collected 1926) were known to exist before 1974 — two at the Museum of Natural History in New York and

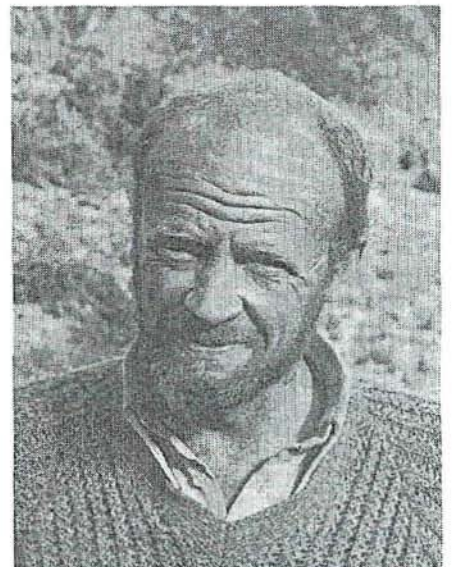
three at the British Museum of Natural History in London.

So rare is the yellow-tail, that it was not until 1963 that the five existing skins were positively identified and linked to Humboldt's discovery. Even then, until Flauvy was discovered, some primatologists wondered if these skins might not just represent a color phase of the common woolly.

For more than a hundred years following Humboldt's discovery, very little was heard of the animal besides the two skins Watkins collected in 1925 and three more discovered by R.W. Hendee in 1926. Looking for a yellow-tail, an expedition led by Dr. Oliver Pearson of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, Berkeley, California, searched the jungles of northern Peru in 1940 without success.

WHEN A three-man research team set out to comb an area of the lower Andes on April 26, 1974, no scientist had ever seen a living yellow-tail. The three were Dr. Hernando de Macedo-Ruiz, curator of birds and mammals at Lima's Natural History Museum, Russell Mittermeier, a primatologist from Harvard University, and Tony Luscombe, a naturalist, recently named consultant to the Pri-

TONY LUSCOMBE — Consultant to the Primate Specialist Group.



HUMBOLDT'S WOOLLY MONKEY

(1/6 nat. size). They take their name from the thick coat of woolly fur which is found beneath the longer hairs.

mate Specialist Group of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources.

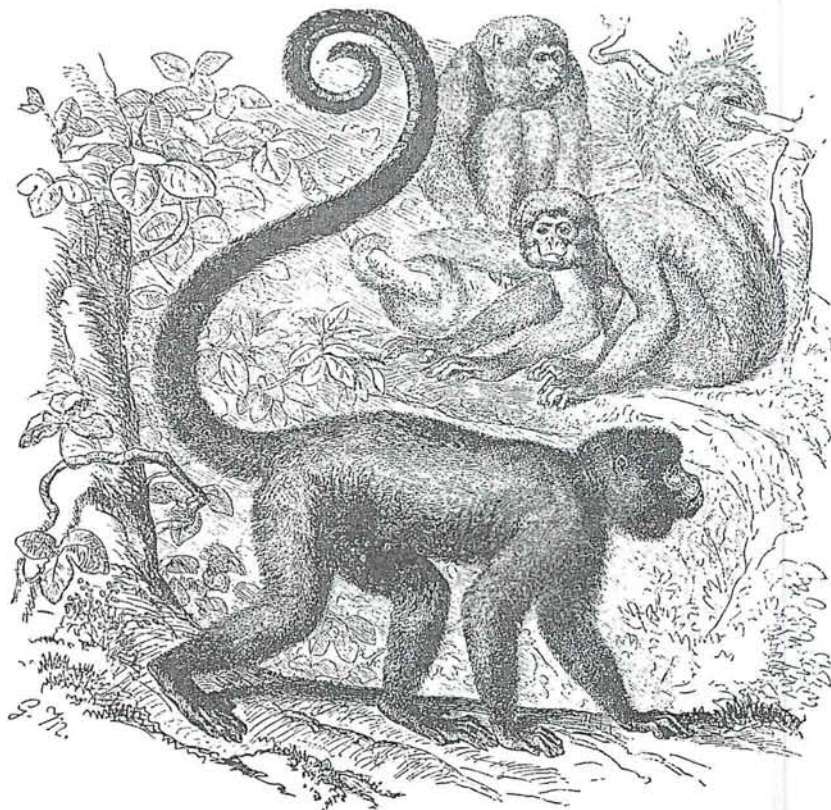
The trio set off from Lima by bus for Chiclayo, 764 kms. north. Their expedition, self-financed, was to last twelve days — the time remaining of their yearly two-week vacations.

Leaving Chiclayo, early the next morning, the group hitched a ride on a passing truck bound for Chachapoyas (see map), the area where the last skins had been found by the 1926 Hendee expedition.

Until 1960, no roads entered this region. In that year, the Peruvian army, with funds from the United States A.I.D. program, began construction of the highway known as the *Marginal de la Selva*. Its purpose was to open up isolated jungle areas to colonization and economic development.

The Marginal Highway slices through the known habitat of the yellow-tail. Professional hunters, employed by the road crews, regularly shot monkeys, bears, and other large animals for food and skins. Restricted to an area threatened by destruction, and prized as food because of its large size, chances of finding a live yellow-tail monkey looked bleak.

THEIR TRUCK pulled over several times to pick up travellers. At one stop, several hunters climbed in, and while helping them aboard, Dr. Macedo spotted animal skins in one of their plastic bags. Introductions followed, and after some discussion, one of the hunters pulled out his largest skin — unmistakably the pelt of a yellow-tail. Dr. Macedo says, "We were elated. After carefully plying



the hunter with questions, we arranged to meet him the following week so he could take us to his hunting ground".

The crew was in good spirits when they arrived in Chachapoyas, having proven, only 24 hours into their trip, that their search had some chance of success. There was even talk of finding a live specimen. But exploration is a curious thing. The goal may seem to be within easy reach only to be more distant than ever.

Finding nothing in Chachapoyas, they travelled on to the small town of Rodriguez de Mendoza. That evening, a local guide assured them he knew where to find a yellow-tail.

Their guide showed up the next morning clutching a whiskey bottle no longer full. By midday, he had led them many miles along mountain paths, stopping frequently along the way to fortify himself. He was most successful at finding the bottom of the bottle.

Late in the afternoon, they decided to turn back. Their guide snored noisily by a mountain stream. Time was running out. Since there was still a chance of meeting up with the hunter whose skin they had purchased, they left their guide to sleep it off and headed back.

"The hunter was there right on schedule," said Dr. Macedo. Once again hopes rose. "We climbed several hours along the steep mountains to the hunter's 'place' — an idyllic little collection of thatched huts near a waterfall. The following day we set out up a verticle hill into the mountain rain forest where the first specimen had been shot. We spent the whole day searching, but without success. That night, we slept in a cave with a well-stocked fire beside us to scare away predators and the vampire bats which probably lived there". The following day was a repeat of the previous one — no luck. "We returned somewhat dis-

appointed; this had been our last chance to see a live yellow-tail."

They did find two more skulls and three more skins in the hunter's house, thus, nearly doubling the number of specimens in the world's museums. But this was poor compensation for the disappointment of not seeing the animal in the field. The expedition was over. It was time to go to Lima.

With only a few hours left, they began asking the locals of Pedro Ruiz about monkeys. A crowd of children gathered and they were led to a house containing stuffed monkeys. Taxidermy is a rather popular hobby in Peru, but these were badly mounted, all common, and no yellow-tails. Walking back to the center of town, another young fellow stopped them, stating that he knew where a live monkey was kept. They didn't believe him, but he persisted. The house was close, he said, so... they went.

"As soon as we saw it, we knew that luck was really with us", Dr. Macedo related with a smile. "There, sitting attentively on a chair, was a healthy, Peruvian yellow-tailed woolly monkey — the first living example of its kind ever seen by any scientist".

As the monkey scampered from one family member to another, shyly eyeing the strangers, it became apparent that the "extinct" yellow-tail was a happy member of that Peruvian family. Not only that, but he was a lover's gift to his girlfriend, the eldest daughter of the household. She would do nothing until she talked to him.

Another day passed before this fellow, a soldier, could be found. As expected, he was unwilling to part with the animal. Dr. Macedo, however, explained the importance of the yellow-tail to Peruvian zoology, and the soldier's sense of patriotism prevailed.

The New York zoological Society is funding the next attempt to find a yellow-tail — hopefully a female of suitable age to provide Flauvy with a mate. Tony Luscombe, one of the members of the original team that discovered Flauvy, has worked out a general strategy for the next expedition. Since he does not expect to be lucky enough to buy a second *Lagothrix flauvicauda*, and as, this time, he will have more than twelve days in the field, his preparations are somewhat more elaborate. Using blowguns, or alternatively a CO₂ rifle, with tranquillizing darts, and equipped with an array of ingenious traps, the expedition hopes to capture several specimens or enough to start a breeding colony. The expedition is purposefully ambitious, as this may be the last chance to save the yellow-tail from extinction.

It is by no means certain that any yellow-tail remains in the wild, nor is the problem solved by simply finding a mate for Flauvy. Breeding animals in captivity is tricky. Further, it may be that Flauvy has already sexually imprinted on one or more of his keepers. In such a case, he will not mate with a female yellow-tail, no matter how alluring her simian charms, since he will only regard humans as desirable.

DR. HERNANDO DE MACEDO—RUIZ - *Curator of Birds and Mammals at Lima's Natural History Museum.*

There are ways around this problem such as artificial insemination, but many obstacles as well.

To save the yellow-tail, much has already been done. Dr. Macedo's team has recommended that the species be given full protection within Peru. Also, at their request, the monkey is now listed as an endangered species in the *Red Data Book* of the International Union for Conservation of Nature. Finally, there is now considerable interest in creating a national park or sanctuary to include the monkey's known habitat. Such a protected area would save many other rare and endangered species, like the spectacled bear (*Tremarctos ornatus*); the mountain tapir (*Tapirus pinchaque*); the cock-of-the-rock (*Rupicola peruviana*); and the marvellous spatula-tailed hummingbird (*Loddigesia mirabilis*).

Reports on the upcoming expedition will appear in later issues of the *South American Explorer*. □



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