

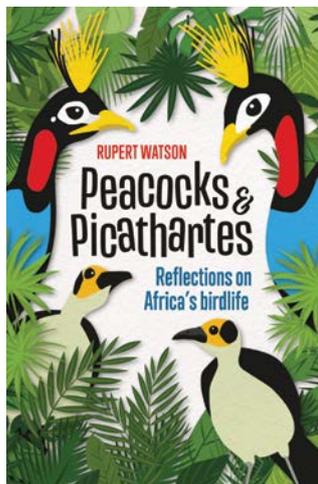


Peacocks & Picathartes: Reflections on Africa's birdlife

By Rupert Watson. 216 pp. Struik Nature. R220

The title of this book is a good hint at the contents, which are the musings of a lifelong birdwatcher, and may only appeal to other committed birders who'd know what a picathartes is. Or perhaps many would not, since there are only two species of the bird, and they're found in the Atlantic rainforests of West and Central Africa.

But while it might be assumed that the peacocks of the title refer to alien birds in Africa – since the common peacock was widely introduced from the Indian subcontinent as an ornamental bird – the species covered in the book is actually the Congo peacock, which was discovered in the 1930s, and hailed as one of the most sensational ornithological events of the 20th century. The author, Rupert Watson, describes his failed attempt to see the bird himself in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).



Watson trained as a lawyer but is now a self-employed mediator, and his work regularly takes him from his home in Kenya, where he has lived for 40 years, to other parts of Africa. He makes the most of the opportunity to indulge his passion for his birdwatching hobby, and this book is essentially a collection of essays on various bird groups. It covers his own observations as well as those by others, so the essays typically include the birds' distribution and taxonomy, accounts of their sometimes quirky behaviours, interesting anecdotes, historical notes and modern-day scientific findings.

You won't find any colour photos here, the only pictorial content being some black-and-white illustrations, but it's an informative and entertaining offering in the natural history genre that would be an appropriate gift for the birdlovers of the family.

Watson has written two other books, including the coffee-table book *The African Baobab*, as well as numerous articles, mostly on natural history, for a range of publications.



Legends of South African Science II

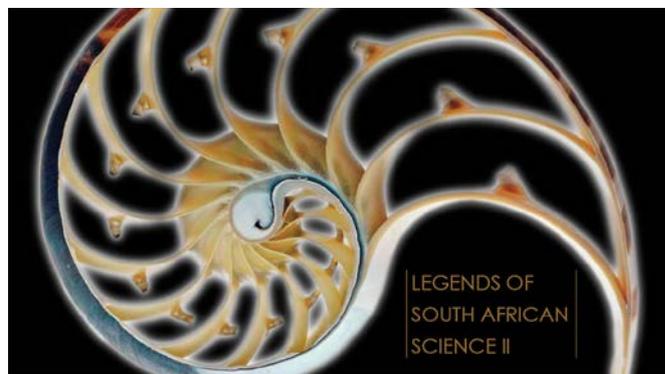
Academy of Science of South Africa. Free eBooklet (4.25 MB PDF) at: <https://www.assaf.org.za/index.php/publications/books>

This eBooklet is a follow-up to the first *Legends of South African Science*, published in 2017 as part of the 20-year celebrations of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf). It profiles 62 ASSAf Members elected between 1993 and 2000, making them some of the longest-standing Members, who represent the apex of academic excellence, societal contribution and knowledge advancement.

Each narrative begins with a brief entry under three standard headings: 'Awards, honours and achievements', 'Defining moment' and 'What people might not know'. This last section turns up some interesting tidbits. Former Stellenbosch University rector Prof. Chris Brink, for example, was a skilled knife-thrower as a youngster, while Dr Phil Mjwara, the Director General of the Department of Science and Innovation, considers himself a failed musician, having tried the trumpet, guitar and piano, without getting quite good enough at any of them. The former Editor-in-Chief of the *South African Medical Journal*, Prof. Daniel Ncayiyana, wanted to be a train driver as a boy but ultimately learned to fly single-engine planes, and retired physicist Prof. Manfred Hellberg became the resident cricket statistician for two newspapers while still at school.

The more detailed body of each narrative provides a personal account of how the various accomplished scientists and scholars made their mark in their field of study. These are not only highly readable and inspiring, but offer a unique perspective on a slice of history.

Sadly, three of the profiled Members – Prof. Anthony (Dave) Walker, Prof. Michael Feast and Dr Neville Comins – have passed away since work began on the publication.



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