

Joseph Jordania (2016) In: *Behind Jim Corbett's Stories: analytical Journey through Corbett's Places and Unanswered Questions*. Logos Publishing.

## **WAS A TIGER SUBSPECIES REALLY NAMED AFTER JIM CORBETT?**

It is a well-known fact among Corbett fans and biographers that a tiger subspecies was named after him in 1968. Most of the available sources mention this fact, and there had never been any suspicion in the reality of this claim.

However, according to the available information, coming from students of the Tejpur University of Assam (India), during the lectures they are taught that the name "panthera tigris corbetti," attributed to the Indochinese subspecies of the tiger, refers not to the hunter/author Jim Corbett, but to a researcher from the Natural History division of the British Museum, G.B. Corbet, a colleague of Dr Vratislav Mazak. It was Mazak who is credited with the research and naming of the new subspecies of the tiger. Tejpur University lecturers apparently teach that Corbett's first biographer, D.C. Kala made a big mistake attributing the naming of the "panther tigris corbetti" to Jim Corbett, and after this the same mistake was later repeated without checking facts by all the other sources. This small chapter is written to clear up this controversy.

Let us first of all find out, who is G.B. Corbet, and could the tiger subspecies be named after him?

His full Name is Gordon Barclay Corbet (not Corbett with two "t"). He is an expert on mammals, had been working for a long time at the British Museum of Natural History. He has written number of books, both popular-science and scholarly publications. Among his books are:

"Finding and identifying mammals in Britain," Natural History Museum Publications. Revised edition came out in December 1975.

"The Mammals of the Palaearctic Region: A Taxonomic Review," published again by the British Museum (Natural History), on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1978 (314 pages), publishers is Cornell University Press.

"A World List of Mammalian Species" British Museum (Natural History), 1991 - [Mammals](#) (243 pages), Publisher: Oxford University Press; 3 edition came out in

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April 4, 1991. This is by far not the full list of the publications of Gordon Barclay Corbet.

As we can see, Gordon Corbet "fits the profile" of a scholar, who contributed to the research of the sphere of the mammalia, and as a matter of fact, the famous 1968 article of Mazak makes one of the first references to the publication of Gordon Corbet. Therefore, Gordon Corbet was a professional biologist, unlike Jim Corbett, who has never gone to the University, never obtained any scholarly degrees (including famed PhD), and has never published any scholarly articles in any of the peer-reviewed biological journals. At least to some readers a professional biologist Gordon Corbet might seem a more convincing candidate for the highest honour of naming an animal species after him, that Jim Corbett, who obtained his knowledge from simply spending decades in Indian jungles, without any formal education.

So which of these two Corbett's was honoured by naming one of the most charismatic animal subspecies after him, professional expert of mammalian species Gordon Corbet, or a hunter-turned-conservationist-turned-author Jim Corbett?

To clear doubts on this subject I searched for the original 1968 article where the new tiger subspecies was introduced to the scholarly world by Dr Vratislav Mazak. This article is not easy to find for the English speaker, as it appeared in French. Its title is "Nouvelle sous-espece de tigre provenant de l'Asie du Sud-Est."

Even if you do not read French, there are plenty of similarities between French and English words, so it should not too difficult for the English speakers to understand what is written in the article. Topic of our particular interest was found on the pages 105-106, where there is a special small section about the naming of the suggested new tiger subspecies. Here is the entire French text from the article - read it slowly:

"Derivatio Nominis:

" Le tigre de la Peninsule Indochinese et de l'extreme sud de la Chine est nomme d'apres feu Jim Corbett, excellent naturaliste, qui a consacre sa vie a l'etude et a la protection de la nature indienne, et notamment des tigres."

As we can see, there can be no doubts, the name "Jim Corbett" is very clearly written in Mazak's 1968 article.

If you access the article it is also easy to see that one of the first references in this article is made to a work by G.B. Corbet. Most likely this was the foundation for the suspicions that the naming was referring not to Jim Corbett, but to Gordon Corbet.

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Another interesting question connected to the naming of the tiger subspecies after Jim Corbett is how Doctor Vratislav Mazak, ethnically Czech, could learn about Jim Corbett? Although for most of the people in the Western World Jim Corbett books are freely available, Dr Mazak did not belong to the Western world. Mazak was born in 1937 and grew up in Socialist Czechoslovakia. And as we know, for the people from socialist countries most of the western publications were out of reach. And still, it is most likely that Dr Mazak was fascinated by Corbett books and personality most probably from his teenage years. How was this possible? According to the common knowledge of Corbett lovers (see also all the published Corbett biographies), no Corbett book has ever been translated to any of the languages of any of the socialist countries.

Well, Corbett fans and scholars need to change this opinion drastically. We need to know that in Soviet Union (and in other socialist countries under the Soviet guidance) publishers were totally negligent towards the copyright rules of the Western Society, and they were freely translating and publishing any works of Western authors if these works (and authors) were considered appropriate for the socialist morale and socialist readers. Jim Corbett, with his explicit love and sympathy for the poor of India, was one of the few authors that were widely known throughout Soviet Union and other socialist countries. The author of this chapter himself comes from the former Soviet Union, and I can say, that in my teenage years I have read Jim Corbett "Men-Eaters of Kumaon" both in Georgian and Russian languages. There is more. I am sure, that apart from Russian and Georgian translations, there were many more translations made in most (or possibly all) fifteen official languages of the former Soviet Union. I mean languages like Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Armenian, Kazakh, etc. Unfortunately, these translations are not known to the most of the Western Corbett fans, and even to Corbett biographers.

As a socialist country at the time, Czechoslovakia most likely had at least some of Corbett books translated, and most likely Mazak became a lifelong fan of Corbett from his teenage years. Mazak grew up to be a prominent paleoanthropologist and biologist. As paleoanthropologist, he is credited (together with Colin Groves) as the describer of *Homo ergaster*, one of the most important direct human ancestors, and as biologist, he is known for proving that Indochinese tiger was in fact a separate subspecies of the tiger. Other indications of Mazak's deep reverence for Jim Corbett can be found in his other publications. For example, in his later article "Panthera Tigris" (in journal "Mammalian Species", 1981, No 152, May 8, pages 1-8) Mazak cites Jim Corbett works ten times. Unfortunately, Vratislav Mazak, brilliant scholar, died in 1987 at the young age of 50.

After seeing the French original, we have to acknowledge the good work that D.C. Kala did in presenting the original French text in his biography: "World recognition from brother naturalists came in 1968 with the naming of a subspecies of tiger after Corbett. This is *Panthera tigris corbetti*, found in Indo-China and extreme South China. It is slightly shorter than the Indian tiger and characterized by a 'darker ground coloration and more numerous, rather short, narrow and rarely doubled stripes'. It was named after Corbett by Dr Vratislav Mazak to honour "the excellent naturalist who devoted his life to the study and protection of Indian wild-life, particularly the tigers."

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And finally, those who would like to see the original Mazak 1968 article for themselves in order to make sure there are no mistakes made by the author of this chapter, please search the internet with the original French title of the article (Novelle sous-espece de tigre provenant de l'Asie du Sud-Est), or go directly to this address:

[http://www.degruyter.com/dg/viewarticle/j\\$002fmamm.1968.32.issue-1\\$002fmamm.1968.32.1.104\\$002fmamm.1968.32.1.104.xml;jsessionid=F3D5EF14A8F463B3E4FE48FA66C56795](http://www.degruyter.com/dg/viewarticle/j$002fmamm.1968.32.issue-1$002fmamm.1968.32.1.104$002fmamm.1968.32.1.104.xml;jsessionid=F3D5EF14A8F463B3E4FE48FA66C56795)