

Obituary for Donald R. Davis (1934–2024)

Erik J. van Nieukerken, nieukerken@naturalis.nl & Jadranka Rota, SEL president, jadranka.rota@biol.lu.se

On Saturday 12 October, Donald Davis passed away at the age of 90. Don, as he was known to most, has been a life-long taxonomist of lower Lepidoptera, where his concept of lower Lepidoptera was very wide, and comprised not only the non-Ditrysians, but also all Tineoidea and Gracillarioidea. Don wrote numerous taxonomic papers on these groups, varying from small contributions to heavy monographs. All his papers are lavishly illustrated and almost always comprise SEM micrographs of morphological details of immatures and adults. A good example is his last large monograph, on the New World Adelidae, with Matthew Medeiros, published in 2023, a 215 pages thick [monograph](#).

Furthermore, Don contributed to the recent proliferation of phylogenetic papers, where his in-depth knowledge of morphology added a lot of information to the molecularly based phylogenies. Many people, including ourselves, collaborated with Don, and experienced this always as very pleasant. Don was an excellent taxonomist, and he made many groups better known, including new and poorly known families, such as the Acanthopteroctetidae, Palaephatiidae, Neopseustidae, Andesianidae, Arrhenophanidae, Opostegidae and others. His works on the Prodoxidae, together with the late Olle Pellmyr and others, are landmark studies for Yucca moths and showed how diverse this group in reality is. Although Don has never been a member of SEL, he collaborated intensively with European lepidopterists, notably the late Ebbe Nielsen and Niels Kristensen, who shared Don's interest in the non-Ditrysians and their morphology and co-authored several studies. Don was also the author in two chapters in Kristensen's Lepidoptera volume in the Handbooks of Zoology. He further participated in other

major compilation works, such as the checklists of the North American and Neotropical Lepidoptera, and in the important work on Immature Insects (edited by F. W. Stehr).

For us, Don has been an example and a teacher, and we are proud to have been able to collaborate with him on several occasions. Don at-

tended the SEL congress in 2015 in Germany and 2017 in Croatia, and we also met him in several other international conferences. His fieldwork was concentrated in Latin America, where he intensively collected in Chile and Costa Rica, but he also collected in various parts of the United States. On one of his trips to Chile, in 1980,



Don Davis in his office in 2006 at the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC (Photo: Erik van Nieukerken).



he met the Danish Argentina expedition – with Ebbe Nielsen and Ole Karsholt – in the Andes, at the border of the two countries.

Don was an exceptional individual in many respects, with many different layers to his personality not immediately apparent when first meeting him. Over the years, he shared some of his fascinating life stories with us. Coming from a humble background, he developed a deep interest in the natural world and a strong passion for it already as a young boy. Don was extremely curious and this side of his personality, combined with a strong propensity for

perseverance, enabled him to produce so much exceptional work on the various groups of Lepidoptera in which he was interested. He had a wonderful sense of humour and a positive outlook on life, and we will always remember him with a benevolent and slightly mischievous smirk on his face.

Until the very last, Don worked on further large studies, especially on North American Gracillariidae and Acrolophinae. It is unfortunate that these will not be finished now, but he has laid a strong foundation for others to work further on these, but also on other groups where he left unfinished

manuscripts, artwork and manuscript names.

Don was always a very kind and helpful person, who will be dearly missed by the Lepidopterological community, his colleagues and of course his family and friends.

We wish Mignon and their children Marisa and Steve a lot of strength to cope with their loss.

Erik van Nieuwerkerken
Jadranka Rota

More information on Don's work:
<https://naturalhistory.si.edu/staff/don-davis>



Don and Mignon Davis on the field excursion at the 20th Congress of Lepidopterology, Podgora, Croatia (Photo by Hossein Rajaei).