



EXPLORER, CONSERVATIONIST, MUSEOLOGIST Mykola Shcherbak (31.10.1927–27.01.1998).

In 90th anniversary of his birthday

Mykola (Nikolai Nikolaevich) Shcherbak was one of the world's authorities on amphibians and reptiles (especially lizards), a well-known zoologist and zoogeographer, traveler and collector, museologist and nature conservationist. His most valuable scientific achievements include the formation of Ukrainian herpetological school and the founding of the modern Zoological Museum in Kiev, the city where he lived his whole life.

Being born in 1927 in the family of a military engineer, Mykola Shcherbak from his early years passionately loved nature. Recalling his childhood, he wrote: "I was catching birds, lizards, looking for nests, collecting everything like Alexander von Humboldt, from insects to minerals". In 1941, when the family rushed

out of Kyiv, escaping from the Nazi occupation, "The Life of Animals" by Alfred E. Brehm was in his luggage. However, after returning from evacuation in 1944, he entered the Kyiv Polytechnic Institute for the course in chemical technology (it was his father's will). Very soon he understood that zoology rather than chemistry was his life mission, and followed it by joining in 1945 the Biological Faculty of Kiev State University. In 1948, his training was interrupted: Shcherbak was arrested on fabricated allegations as a "Ukrainian bourgeois nationalist" and imprisoned in a forced labor camp in Mordovia. After Stalin's death, he returned to Kiev, where he was treated for tuberculosis for six months, and then completed his studies at Kiev University. In 1957, he began working at the Zoological Institute of the Academy of Sciences, and, during 1959–1962, he was simultaneously a postgraduate student there. In 1963, he received his Candidate of Sciences degree from Leningrad University. He became head of the Department of Vertebrates and Zoological Museum in 1965. From 1966 and for the rest of his life Shcherbak headed Zoological Museum as a department of the Natural History Museum of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences. In 1972, he finished his doctoral degree, in 1982 was awarded the title of Professor, and in 1992 Shcherbak was elected a corresponding member of the NAS of Ukraine in the specialty "Zoology of Vertebrates".

Mykola Shcherbak was a highly productive scientist. During his scientific career, he became the author or co-author of 27 monographs and popular science books, as well as about 300 articles. His scientific interests included, first and foremost, the systematics of Palearctic reptiles. Singly or with his colleagues, he described 3 genera, 4 subgenera, 10 species and 11 subspecies of reptiles and amphibians (lizards, geckos, toadhead agamas, snake-eyed skinks, lizards, blunt-nosed viper, and frogs). Among them are *Eremias andersoni* from Iran, *Tenuidactylus turcmenicus* from Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, *Alsophylax tokobajevi* from Kyrgyzstan, *Cyrtodactylus mintoni* from Pakistan, *Tropiocolotes levitoni* and *Eremias afghanistanica* from Afghanistan, and *Gonydactylus paradoxus* from Vietnam. He was also interested in the faunistics of Eurasia. Due to his efforts, new data were obtained on the distribution of many species in the former USSR. A bit later, he was intrigued by zoogeography and developed the principles for the herpeto-zoogeographical subdivision of the Palearctic realm. Conservation was yet another significant aspect of his scientific life. He co-authored the 1978 and 1984 editions of the Red Data Book of the U.S.S.R., was the editor and co-author of the Red Data Book of Ukraine. Animal Kingdom (1994). Shcherbak is also known as a popularizer of zoology. He published over 90 popular science and popular works on amphibians and reptiles, rare species of vertebrates and arthropods, problems of nature conservation, endangered species of Ukraine, about the zoological museum, scientists and, of course, about his expeditions.

He was a great traveler. Most of Shcherbak's publications were based on his own field work and are therefore enriched with his original observations on natural history, including ecology and behavior of animals. He left field diaries of his 62 expeditions from 1956 to 1993, the majority under his leadership. The main destinations were the deserts of Central Asia, hard-to-reach areas of the Pamir, high plateaus of the Western Tien Shan, Far East, Transbaikalia, but Shcherbak and his staff also frequently traveled to other regions of the USSR. There is probably not a single area in that country that he hadn't visited.

Important purpose of the expeditions was to enrich the collections of the Zoological Museum. From every trip, they brought a huge amount of material on various groups of animals, including reptiles, amphibians, birds, mammals, fishes, insects, mollusks, etc. Shcherbak also managed to bring material for the museum from family vacations, trips to congresses, or private visits. He was well versed in practically all groups of land vertebrates and, as it should be with a good expert, he knew the rarities particularly well and always tried to get them for the museum directly or through some form of exchange. That is why the museum has on display a tuatara (*Sphenodon punctatus*), a Mongolian ground sparrow (*Pyrgilauda davidiana*), a white-shoulder eagle (*Haliaeetus pelagicus*), rare cranes (*Grus leucogeranus*, *G. japonensis*), an echidna (*Echidna sp.*), and many others. During the years of his work, the collections of amphibians and reptiles grew from a few dozen to over 40,000 items. It is interesting that museum's collection of mollusks was founded in the early 1970s also due to his efforts. N.N. Shcherbak also personally collected

mollusks in all his trips, from the Caucasus, Central Asia and former Soviet Baltic republics to Germany, Sweden, Vietnam and Australia; totally 5,800 samples of Bivalvia (106 species) and about 6,500 specimens (167 species) of gastropods. At present, the zoomuseum collection of mollusks include more than 150,000 items.

He was extremely efficient and energetic in his scientific, organizational and public work. In addition to his duties as a head of the museum, expedition management and environmental activities, Shcherbak was an active member of the European Herpetological Society, Deputy Chairman of the Herpetological Committee of the USSR, Vice President of the A.M. Nikolsky Herpetological Society, and a member of the Presidium of the Ornithological Society of Ukraine. He was a member of editorial boards of the scientific journals *Herpetozoa* (Austria) and *Vestnik Zoologii*, the main zoological periodical of Ukraine. He also was an active member of organizing committees of nearly all herpetological conferences of the USSR, participated in the work of a number of problem scientific councils of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, Academy of Sciences of the Ukrainian SSR, and NAS of Ukraine, etc.

A talented teacher and mentor, Shcherbak spent a lot of time training young professionals. Twenty-one candidate and three doctoral dissertations on zoology were defended under his supervision. He created and headed the school of Ukrainian herpetologists, constantly provided his great support to herpetologists of Central Asia and other regions, a number of nature reserves, the Kiev Zoo, etc., never refusing to consult anyone who needed it.

In 1997, Kraig Adler wrote: "Nikolai was an ebullient, gregarious, and charming personality. His great enthusiasm for reptiles and their study was always obvious, and such enthusiasm was necessary in order to exist under the old Soviet system and still be productive. He was fiercely proud of his national heritage — most decidedly Ukrainian — and the only time I saw him upset was when a foreigner mistook him for a Russian".

Scientific work of Mykola Shcherbak was internationally recognized for his life and remains relevant today. In 2017, the search on the Internet for the key words "Shcherbak + herpetology" in Latin script shows thousands of links; the same words printed in Cyrillic, in 40 seconds reveal tens of thousands of references testifying to the vitality of his scientific heritage. M. M. Shcherbak Zoological Museum is one of the most popular departments of the Natural History Museum of the NAS of Ukraine which is visited annually by up to half a million people. Shcherbak continues to be present both in science and in the museum that he presented to his beloved city of Kyiv.

Editorial Board

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