

Orono couple view rare animals in Ethiopia

BY AISLINN SARNACKI
BDN STAFF

In 58 years of marriage, Ron and Lee Davis of Orono have traveled the world, photographing rare plants and animals and experiencing a myriad of cultures along the way. Whether hiking through a South American rainforest or paddling down an icy river in Alaska, they are continually blown away by the natural beauty of the world.

"In Africa, there are over 100 different kinds of antelope," Ron Davis, 84, said while pouring over a map of Ethiopia at the dining room table of their home. "They range from the size of a rabbit to bigger than a cow."

The couple is piecing together a presentation titled "The Top of Africa: Ethiopia," which is about their most recent adventure seeking exotic and rare alpine animals in the Ethiopian mountains and plains. The event is scheduled for 7 to 9 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 22, at the Fields Pond Audubon Center in Holden, and it is open to the public. Admission for Audubon members is \$5 and for nonmembers is \$7.

"The beauty of the land and the animals and plants — that's what's motivational for me — the natural beauty," said Ron Davis.

Mammals, birds, plants, insects, people, landscapes — the Davises are interested in it all, and they document it well. With his professional grade Canon camera, Davis takes thousands of photos each trip, while Lee Davis writes extensive travel logs. Through these images and stories, they can share faraway places with others back home in Maine.

Over the years, the couple has given many presentations on their wildlife expeditions for the Maine Audubon and other organizations. Lifelong educators, both Ron and Lee Davis retired from teaching at the University of Maine in 2003, and they are now finding more time to volunteer and pursue big projects.

"We're as busy now as we were before we retired," said Ron Davis, who refers to himself as an ecologist and naturalist.

Many people in the Bangor area know Davis as the creator of the Orono Bog Boardwalk, a 1-mile boardwalk that navigates a beautiful peat bog that straddles the border of Orono and Bangor. With the help of 150 local volunteers and the Maine Conservation Corps, Davis led the construction of the boardwalk in 2002 and 2003. He also is one of the founding members of the Natural Resources Council of Maine.

But both Ron and Lee Davis wear many hats. They continue to stay involved with UMaine and are involved in progressive politics and climate change research.

When it comes to their interest in conservation and wildlife, they're active members in the Bangor and Orono land trusts. In fact, in 2008, they donated 37 acres of their 40-acre property in Orono to be a conservation easement held by the Orono Land Trust, where people can enjoy the forest on a mile-long nature trail.

Nearby, the Davises live in a solar-powered home with their dog, Gingah. In the hallway, there are photos of the Davises' two grown daughters, who followed in their parents' academic footsteps to become university researchers and teachers. They, too, travel extensively.

Alongside the family photos, exotic animals adorn the walls. Over the Davises' bed is a photo Ron Davis took in Tanzania of a leopard licking the remains of a gazelle off its paws. And over the dresser is a photo he took of Denali, North America's tallest mountain, at sunrise.

"I soon learned when I met him that I have to be patient when he wants to take a picture of a butterfly," said Lee Davis. "It may take an hour. I just have to relax and let it happen."

The couple go on a long-



RON DAVIS
An Ethiopian wolf trots over the barren terrain at about 13,000 feet above sea level in the Bale Mountains of central Ethiopia in January. Similar to Maine's coyote in build and size, this endangered species lives only at high altitude in Ethiopia. Only a few hundred species remain in the wild.



RON DAVIS
A diminutive malachite kingfisher sits on a reed at Lake Ziway in Ethiopia, waiting to plunge for a small fish, in January.

distance trip once or twice a year, she said, often volunteering as researchers for Earthwatch, a nonprofit organization that connects people to field research around the world.

Their trip to Ethiopia earlier this year lasted three weeks, during which they visited a wide range of habitats and located a number of rare and exotic animals with the help of Volker Stamer, a German who has lived in Africa for 41 years and is working on a book on the birds of Ethiopia.

"He agreed to guide us for a few weeks," Ron Davis said.

Starting in the country's capital, Addis Ababa, the Davises were ousted from their hotel to make room for politicians arriving for a meeting of the African Union. From there, they traveled throughout the mountainous country of central Ethiopia, where they found gelada, a spe-

cies of baboon only found in the Ethiopian highlands.

Another highlight of the trip was searching for the endangered Ethiopian wolf.

"Only a few hundred of these [wolves] are left in existence worldwide now, and they all live in Ethiopia," Davis said. "And we saw six of them."

"We went up in the mountains specifically looking for them," recalled Lee Davis.

At about 13,000 feet above sea level, Ron and Lee Davis came across the rare wolves, which were busy hunting their main food source — mole rats popping up out of underground burrows.

"That was fascinating to me — that whole scene," said Lee Davis, who has studied many aspects of animal behavior throughout her career. "And there was nothing to obscure our view — no trees and no big bushes, just grasses and scrub vegetation."



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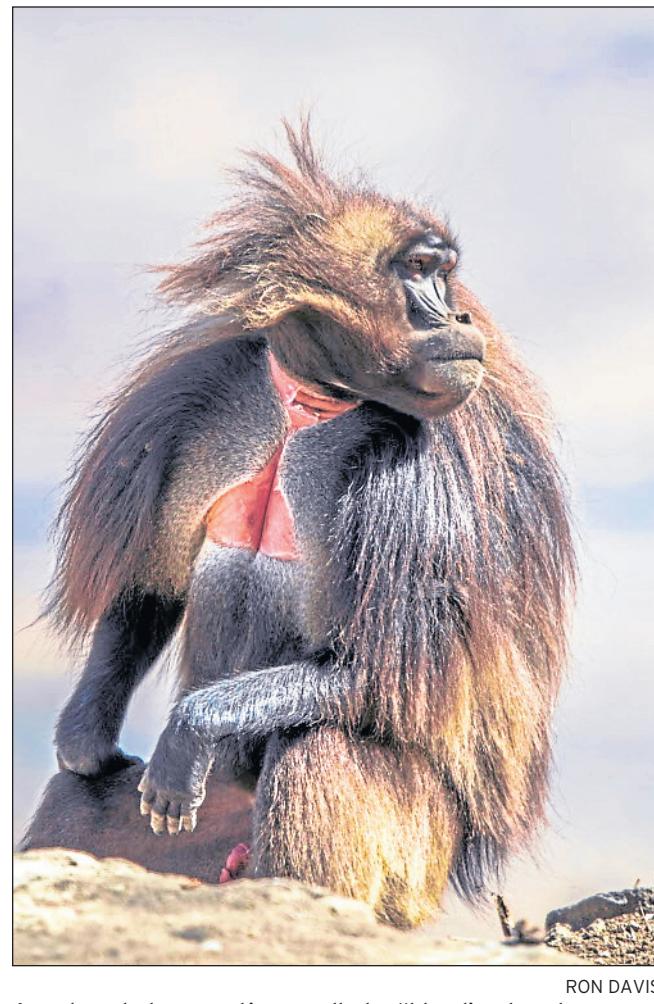


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RON DAVIS
A male gelada, sometimes called a "bleeding heart baboon," strikes a relaxed pose in early February near Debra Libanos in Ethiopia. This species is found only in the Ethiopian highlands and is unusual for a primate in being a grazer, mostly on grass, which it pulls out with its hands.



RON DAVIS
A male Von der Decken's hornbill mounds a small fruit in January near Yabello in southern Ethiopia. The female is encased in a tree cavity and is fed by the male while she incubates the eggs and rears the young.

upcoming program on Ethiopia, visit maineaudubon.org or call the Fields Pond Audubon Center at 989-2591. The Fields Pond Audubon Center is located at 216 Fields Pond Road in Holden.



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