

A tribute to Burkart Engesser

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An often heard FAQ is: I found a fossil mammal, what should I do? There is only one way to find out, call Dr. Burkart Engesser at the Natural History Museum in Basel, he is an renowned expert on the subject.

He was born in Basel in the first half of the last century on a Wednesday afternoon. According to his own perception, he was a bad pupil with many similar teachers. After school followed a period of hard thinking what he should study, either old languages or palaeontology. From 1963 to 1971 he studied zoology with Adolf Portmann, but also took lectures in Geology/Palaeontology, botany and anatomy. Furthermore he was interested in art history and philosophy. Between 1962 and 1967 he worked as free-lancer at the Natural History Museum Basel for an hourly wage of 1.80 CHF. In 1971 he finished his Ph.D. on the Miocene mammals from Anwil. First he was completely disappointed because no elephants, rhinos or apes were found but only micromammals. However, this disappointment was soon replaced by sheer fascination and passion for small mammals that still endures today.

From 1972 to 1973 he was a research fellow at the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh and did fieldwork in Wyoming, Utah and Colorado. From 1973 until today he is curator of the osteological collection of the Natural History Museum in Basel.

Burkart excavated at many famous localities in Spain, France, Italy, Indonesia, China and of course in the Swiss Molasse Basin. His main interests are systematics and evolution of Cenozoic mammals in Europe and Asia. His favourite mammals are Talpids, Gymnourids, Soricids, Eomyiids, Glirids, Petauristids and Cricetids.

He initiated the construction of an automatic screen washing machine in order to process tons of Cenozoic sediments for extracting the micromammals in the Swiss Molasse basin. This resulted in the first and still valid biozonation of the Lower Fresh-water Molasse (Oligocene and Agenian) of Switzerland and Savoy on the basis of fossil mammals.

His numerous monographs nicely illustrate his excellent drawing skills and his passion for art. His spare time – if there is any – is devoted to his own paintings. During this time he can be seen in front of his sketch pad with an ever smoking pipe in his mouth. Scientifically he has a strong antipathy for dinosaurs, because they get more interest than mammals. And finally, you should never enter his office while he is absent; otherwise you may be spooked by his little cozy snapping turtle that sits there since more than 20 years, waiting to bite your fingers off.

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