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Digitization of the primate collection at the Museum of Nature of the V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University

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The Museum of Nature of the V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University (MNKNU) has the largest primate collection in Ukraine, comprising 217 specimens of 59 species, including *Homo sapiens*. The non-human species represented in the museum comprise 11% of the total number of primates, according to the Mammal Diversity Database v2.2 (further MDD, accessed August 2025), and are distributed across four of the eight biogeographic kingdoms, according to the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). The foundation of the MNKNU's primate collection dates back to the first quarter of the XIXth century, thus, the record for the oldest stuffed animal in the collection - a golden lion tamarin *Leontopithecus rosalia* (L., 1766), - dates back to 1826. The collection is represented by several types of preservation groups and includes 103 stuffed animals of 54 determined species, 87 dry, and 27 wet preparations. In the present work, we report the result of the revision of the primates collection, including taxonomical redetermination, as well as performed digitization of the part of the collection (represented by stuffed animals) accompanied by the original historical inventory data (index cards catalogue, inventory books, and printed catalogues).

Key words: digitization, primates, collection

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Introduction

Digitization and mobilization of natural scientific collections is a global trend. This is particularly relevant in Ukraine as due to the Russian war of aggression the museum collections are at the high risks of destruction. Recently, several initiatives targeted digitization of herbaria or animal collections (Vasyliuk et al., 2022; Novikov et al., 2024; Novikov et al., 2025). One of the outcomes of this process is the representation of the museum collection in the online resources, which implies open access to the otherwise inaccessible scientific and historical data (e.g., Bezzera et al., 2024).

The Museum of Nature of the V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University (MNKNU) has the largest primate collection in Ukraine, which today counts 217 specimens of 59 species, including *Homo sapiens*. In 2009, the museum's catalogue of Primates (Levchenko, Perevozchikova, 2009) was printed in a scarce edition of 100 paper copies and mainly represented summarized data of the inventory books and original records for the vouchers that were acquired from the Kharkiv Zoo.

Russian war of aggression rise concerns about the safety of the Museum and its collections and brings necessity for digitalization of the stored items, in particular the collection of primates as well as historical sources (catalogues, etc.). Given this opportunity, physical and curatorial re-evaluation, taxonomical redetermination, and provenance research were essential and long overdue.

This article along with the provided digitalized GBIF dataset (as the Occurrence data type) altogether describes the collection and additionally cover i) history of formation of the MNKNU's Primates collection, ii) dynamics of the species and quantitative composition of the collection, iii) taxonomic affiliation, iv) types of preservation, v) biogeographic distribution, and vi) IUCN protection categories.

Materials and Methods

I. Historical data of the MNKNU primate collection covers period between 1826-1995 and includes following archival sources:

- i) the original records of the systematic card index of the MNKNU (composed between 1826-1889, and contains 24 records compiled within 1826-1875 for primates);
- ii) Book for recording additions to the Zoological Cabinet. Material Book (maintained 1826-1862);
- iii) Systematic catalogue of objects stored in the Zoological Cabinet of the Imperial Kharkiv University until 1848 (Chernay, 1849);
- iv) Systematic catalogue of objects stored in the Zoological Cabinet of the Imperial Kharkiv University until 1848 (Chernay, 1854);
- v) Inventory book of the Zoological Museum of the Biological Faculty of the A.M. Gorky Kharkiv State University (22 March 1937 - 24 July 1941);
- vi) Inventory workbook № 2 of the Museum of Darwinism of the Biological Faculty of the A.M. Gorky Kharkiv State University (1944);
- vii) Main inventory book of the Museum of Nature of the A. M. Gorky Kharkiv State University (1976) – currently in use and renamed into "Inventory book № 1 of the Museum of Nature of the V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, started Jan. 1976 - ended 1976, from #1 until #1403";
- viii) Inventory book of the Department of the Origin of Human (1948-1995);

All these archival sources were used to compile the only existing catalogue for the MNKNU collection of primates (Levchenko, Perevozchikova, 2009). Noteworthy, no taxonomical (re)determination was made for that printed catalogue.

II. Initial taxonomic determination in the majority of cases relied upon the original labeling of the new acquisitions by the Museum. Specifically, that concerned vouchers from the XIXth century: for those items no taxonomical revision has been conducted ever (archival sources **i-iv**).

During the second half of the XXth century, numerous vouchers have been donated by Kharkiv Zoo, and their determination relied upon original Zoo records, which was reflected in the source **viii**. This inventory book is an unofficial list for internal departmental use, and the species names were filled in by hand by two museum employees – Rudaeva A.V. (working years 1945-1996) and Levchenko D.R. (1970-2016). Among them, only three specimens were determined by Rudaeva.

Hereby, the catalogue (Levchenko, Perevozchikova, 2009) followed taxonomical determinations available from the aforementioned sources **i-viii**.

For present work, we conducted verification and critical taxonomical redetermination of the stuffed animals only (n=103), following systematic framework of the order Primates L., 1758 by the MDD v2.2 (accessed Aug 2025), redetermination was made with essential assistance of Dr. Hector E. Ramirez-Chaves (University de Caldas, Manizales, Colombia). We also verified the collection with the Illustrated checklist by Burgin et al. (2020). As for the rest of vouchers stored in the collection (non-stuffed, n=114), we provided already extant taxonomic records indicating the necessity of such revision in the future.

III. Digitization workflow included:

- i) Photographing of the stuffed animals by digital camera Canon EOS 1300D, with processor DIGIC 4+ under the following specification: resolution 2973x2685 pixels, ISO – 100, focal distance 18 mm, color depth 24 (sRGB), no flash used;
- ii) Similarly, photographing of the archival sources **i-viii**; their pdf versions (pages that contained primate records) were prepared for publication with the Zenodo digital repository;
- iii) The primates MNKNU collection dataset was prepared according to the Darwin Core terms, following the taxonomy given in MDD 2025, and published by MNKNU as a GBIF publisher, accessible at <https://www.gbif.org/publisher/151e81a8-6be3-478a-bc84-df631b6b8b98>.

Results

The history of the MNKNU's collection of primates dates back to the early XIXth century. There is no reliable information about the exact date when primates first entered the museum; at that time, it was known as the Natural Cabinet (Redikortsev, 1908; Grubant, Rudaeva, 1955). However, in the "Book for recording additions to the Zoological Cabinet. Material Book," initiated by Professor Krynetsky I.A., there were already 15 stuffed animals of 13 monkey species as of 1836. The oldest stuffed animal in the collection is a golden lion tamarin, *Leontopithecus rosalia* (L., 1766), which dates back to 1826 (according to the card index). In both editions of the "Systematic catalogue of objects stored in the Zoological Cabinet of the Imperial Kharkiv University until 1848," Professor Chernay O.V. reported 10 stuffed monkeys across 9 species (Chernay, 1849; Chernay, 1854). The fate of the remaining 5 stuffed primates from 3 species remains unknown.

The subsequent growth of the collection from the mid-XIXth to the early XXth century can be traced indirectly, as no book-like catalogue is known to have been maintained between 1862-1937, and is essentially an information gap. Although, the museum had preserved the cards of a systematic index that were composed and maintained until approximately 1889. According to these cards, the museum had 24 stuffed primates of 21 species, of which only 17 stuffed animals belonging to 14 species can be located in

the collection to date. Most of the arrivals at that time were made through purchases from famous European exotic animal and natural history dealers: Ludwig Parreyss (Vienna), Salmin (Hamburg), and Václav Frič (Prague). Several stuffed monkeys were purchased from the private hands of Kharkiv citizens in the XIXth century, such as i) confectioner Ardußer (worked at the Moskovska street), ii) commissioner Edelberg Aleksandr N. (1823 – 1899, a Swedish immigrant, Kharkivite since 1850, later a merchant of the 2nd guild and the University's supplier, rented university's land and buildings on the corner of the streets Moskovska-Petrivska-Nikolaevska and Slyusarny Lane where he kept a famous mechanical store (Moskovska str. 7) and a workshop; since 1863 – the Optician of the Court of His Imperial Majesty), or iii) a "Vienna store" owner Klein Julius J. (b. 1823, a merchant of the 3rd guild since 1851).

Information, starting from 1937, was obtained from the museum's accounting documents - inventory books (listed above). The second half of the XXth century was marked by considerable extension of the MNKNU's Primates collection, mainly by deposits from i) the Institute of experimental pathology and therapy of the Medical Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R. (Sukhumi, Georgia, since 1963), and ii) Kharkiv Zoo. Thus, taxonomic determination of the vouchers that were deposited in the museum by Kharkiv Zoo just followed the records on the original individual biological cards for those animals. However, often the origin of individuals in the Zoo collection was untraceable: in four cases, we were only able to track them down to two Dutch zootraders: i) G. van den Brink (operated until 1996), and ii) Man in 't Veld (1939-present). Both dealt with the Moscow zoological trade company, which further was selling and redistributing animals to the zoos across the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, Man in 't Veld doesn't keep records from 39 years ago, while paper records by G. van den Brink were destroyed after the legal expiration date of 10 years storage (both pers. comm. Aug 2025).

Both the dynamics of the species and the number of the stuffed animals present in the collection by year are shown in Fig. 1. Notably, the numbers decreased in the reports following publication of the Primates catalogue in 2009: this was caused by recognition of the raising of the family of Tupaiidae Gray, 1825 into a separate order Scandentia Wagner, 1855 and subsequent extraction of the 4 stuffed animals belonging to the 4 species from the list of the MNKNU's Primates and their transfer to the funds of the MNKNU's Department of Vertebrates. Although after the 2009 catalogue publication, there were also new arrivals, summing up to 59 species represented by 103 stuffed animals as of Nov 2025.

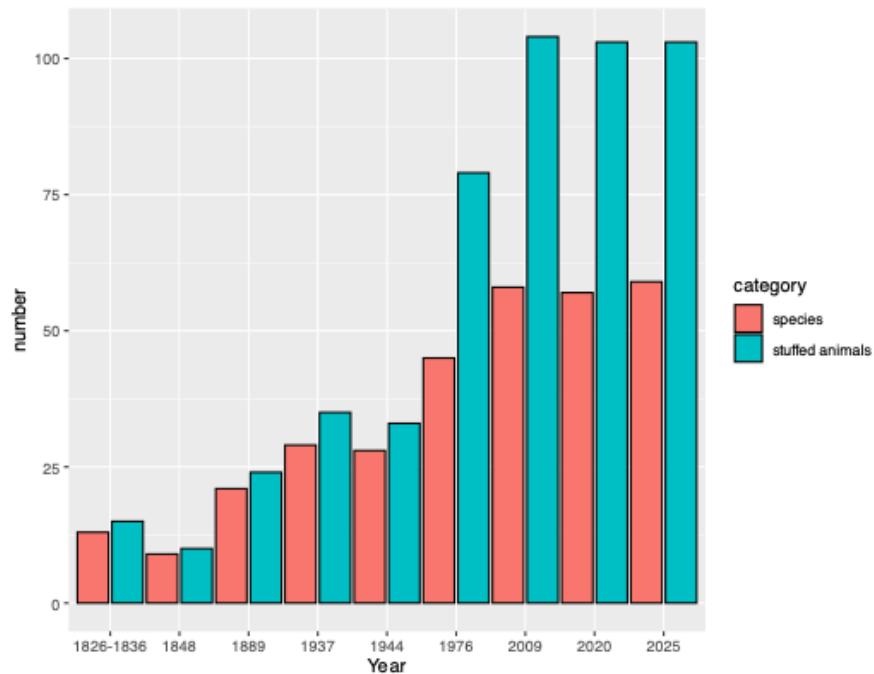


Fig. 1. Dynamics of the MNKNU primates collection composition.

There is an ongoing debate among experts about the total number of primate species. The Catalogue of Life currently lists 528 species (www.catalogueoflife.org). The world primate fauna, according to MDD taxonomy (accessed August 2025), includes 516 species, of which 11% are represented within the MNKNU

collection (Fig. 2). The composition of the primate collection is presented in Tab. 1 in absolute units and in Fig. 3 in relative units.

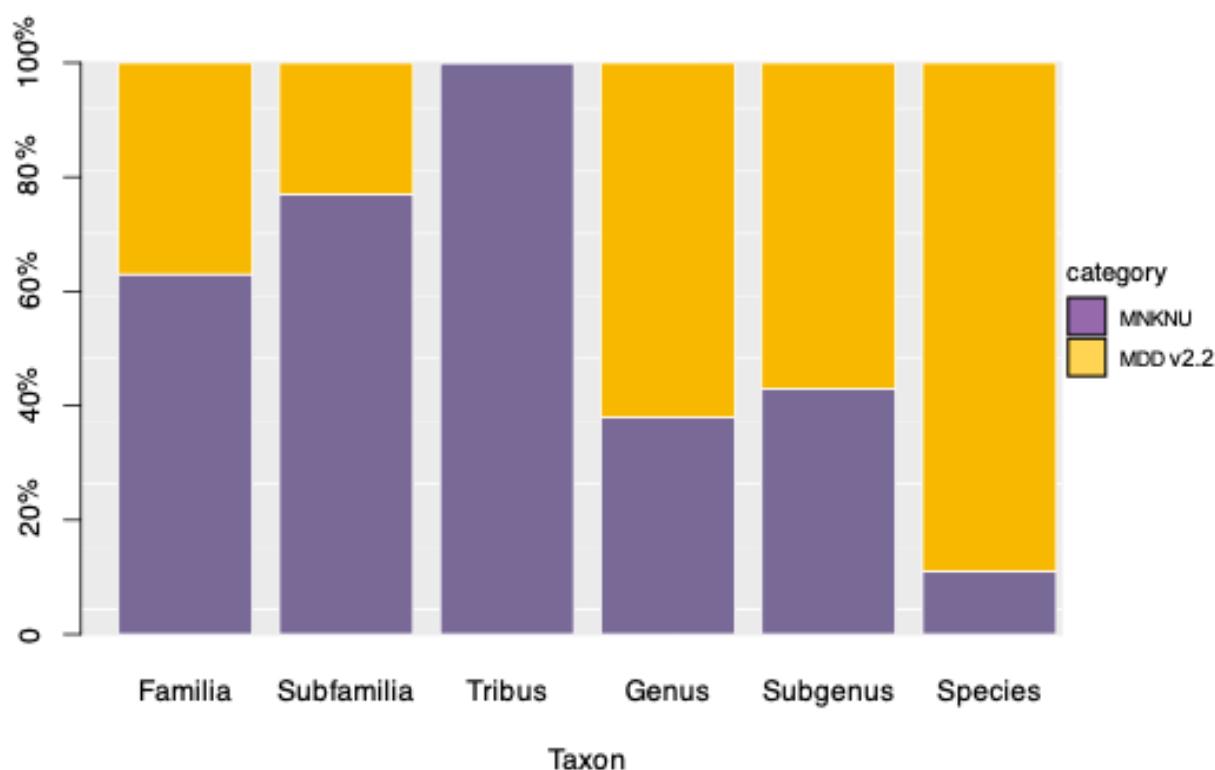


Figure 2. Representation of the main taxonomic groups of primates in the MNKNU collection relative to the taxa recognized by the MDD v2.2.

Table 1. The MNKNU primates collection composition.

No	Taxon	Preparation							N	
		Stuffed animal with a skull	Stuffed animal skullless	Dry preparation						
				skeleton	skull	bones of the postcranial skeleton	skin	preparation in agar (according to Talalayev)		
1	Daubentoniiidae									
1	<i>Daubentonias madagascariensis</i>	1							1	
	Lemuridae									
2	<i>Lemur catta</i>	1		1					2	
3	<i>Lemur sp.</i>				1				1	
4	<i>Varecia variegata</i>		1						1	
	Galagidae									
5	<i>Galago gallarum</i>		3	1					4	
6	<i>Galagooides demidoff</i>		1						1	
	Lorisidae									
7	<i>Loris tardigradus</i>		1	1					2	
	Tarsiidae									
8	<i>Tarsius tarsier</i>		1						1	
	Atelidae									
9	<i>Alouatta seniculus</i>	1			1				2	
	Callithrichidae									
10	<i>Callithrix jacchus</i>		3						3	

No	Taxon	Preparation							N
		Stuffed animal with a skull	Stuffed animal skulless	Dry preparation				Wet preserved	
				skeleton	skull	bones of the postcranial skeleton	skin	preparation in agar (according to Talalayev)	
11	<i>Callithrix penicillata</i>	2							2
12	<i>Leontopithecus rosalia</i>	1							1
13	<i>Saguinus midas</i>	1							1
14	<i>Saguinus oedipus</i>		1	1					2
	Cebidae								
15	<i>Cebus capucinus</i>	2	2						4
16	<i>Cebus olivaceus</i>	1							1
17	<i>Cebus sp.</i>								1
18	<i>Sapajus libidinosus</i>		1						1
19	<i>Sapajus nigritus</i>	1							1
20	<i>Saimiri sciureus</i>		1						1
	Pitheciidae								
21	<i>Chiropotes sagulatus</i>	1		1					2
	Cercopithecidae								
22	<i>Allenopithecus nigroviridis</i>		1		1				2
23	<i>Cercopithecus campbelli</i>		4		2				6
24	<i>Cercopithecus cebus</i>	1							1
25	<i>Cercopithecus diana</i>		2		2				4
26	<i>Cercopithecus mitis</i>		1		1				2
27	<i>Cercopithecus mona</i>				1		1		2
28	<i>Cercopithecus petaurista</i>	1	1		2		1		5
29	<i>Cercopithecus sp.</i>	1							2
30	<i>Chlorocebus aethiops</i>	1	3		2		3		9
31	<i>Erythrocebus patas</i>	1	2		4		2		9
32	<i>Cercocebus atys</i>	3	3		1				7
33	<i>Cercocebus galeritus</i>		1						1
34	<i>Macaca arctoides</i>	2							2
35	<i>Macaca fascicularis</i>	2	1		2		2		1
36	<i>Macaca fuscata</i>		1		1				2
37	<i>Macaca mulatta</i>	1	6	1	3		2		3
38	<i>Macaca nemestrina</i>		3		2		1		6
39	<i>Macaca nigra</i>		2		3		3		8
40	<i>Macaca radiata</i>		1						1
41	<i>Macaca sylvanus</i>	2							2
42	<i>Macaca sp.</i>	2						2	4
43	<i>Mandrillus sphinx</i>		1						1
44	<i>Papio anubis</i>		2						2
45	<i>Papio cynocephalus</i>		2						2
46	<i>Papio hamadryas</i>	1	6		4		3		14
47	<i>Papio papio</i>		1						1
48	<i>Papio ursinus</i>		2						2
49	<i>Papio sp.</i>				1				1
50	<i>Theropithecus gelada</i>	1			1				2
51	<i>Colobus guereza</i>		1						1
52	<i>Nasalis larvatus</i>	1							1

No	Taxon	Preparation							N		
		Stuffed animal with a skull	Stuffed animal skulless	Dry preparation				Wet preserved			
				skeleton	skull	bones of the postcranial skeleton	skin	preparation in agar (according to Talalayev)	head hair		
53	<i>Trachypithecus cristatus</i>		3	1						4	
54	<i>Trachypithecus pileatus</i>	1								1	
	Hominidae										
55	<i>Gorilla gorilla</i>			1		1				2	
56	<i>Homo sapiens</i>			1	2	13		5	1	36	
57	<i>Pan troglodytes</i>	3	1	1			1			10	
58	<i>Pongo pygmaeus</i>	1								1	
	Hylobatidae										
59	<i>Hylobates moloch</i>	1								1	
	Total	34	69	10	38	14	19	5	1	22	217

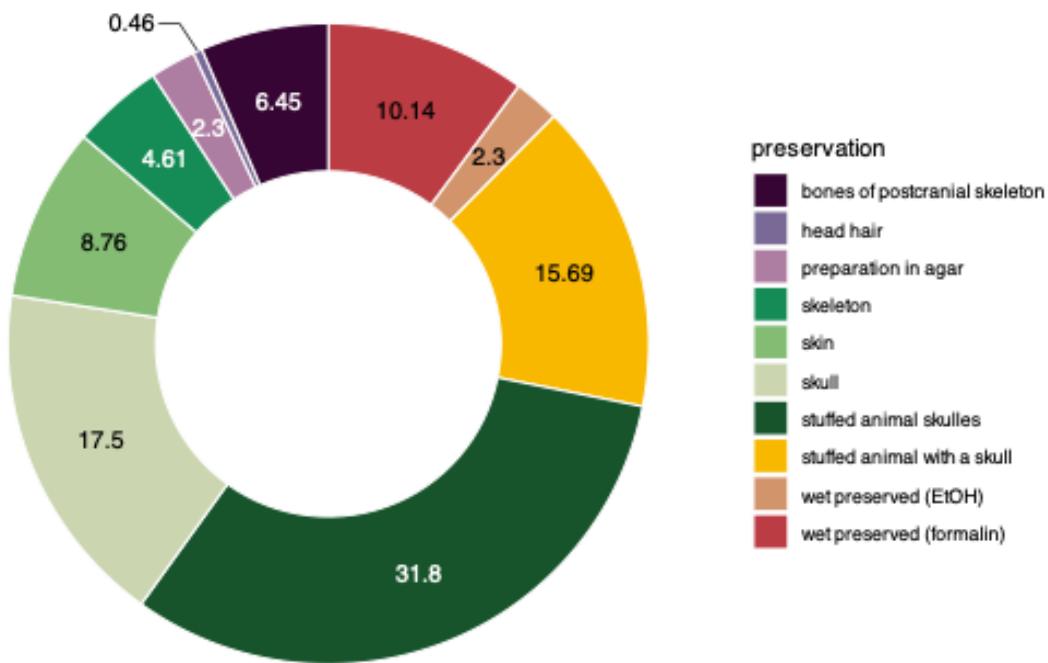


Fig. 3. Proportions (in %) of different storage categories of the vouchers within the MNKNU primate collection.

To summarize, the Primates stored at the MNKNU generally suffer from a lack of information about the collectors, dates, or collection localities (field labels), which in certain cases hardens taxonomical identification.

For all 54 species of the primate collection, which are assigned to the species, we have affiliated their protected status according to the IUCN lists in different categories: CR – 6 species, EN – 12 species, VU – 8 species, NT – 7 species, LC – 20 species, NE – 1 species (www.iucn.org) and are distributed in four of the eight biogeographic kingdoms according to the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) system (www.worldwildlife.org).

The primate collection of the MNKNU is used as a teaching material for the general zoology classes, mammalian taxonomy, or zoogeography, and is placed in the scientific and exhibition complex "Origin of

Man". In 2018, the exhibition was completely dismantled for renovation. Before the outbreak of the large-scale Russian military aggression in February 2022, repairs were carried out, and in 2023, new exhibition showcases were installed. Work has begun on introducing the primate collection into the exhibition.

Digitized MNKNU primate catalogue metadata is accompanied by the photos (n=176) of stuffed animals (n=103) can be found on the GBIF platform (https://ukraine.upt.gbif.no/manage/resource?r=mnknu_catalogue_of_primates). We also digitized the archival sources i-viii (see Material and Methods), in particular the relevant pages with records on primates (n=73), are uploaded into Zenodo repository (see References for DOI).

Discussion

Digitization of the primate collection is the first experience of such work at the Museum of Nature of the V.N. Karazin KNU. The need to create digital copies of museum collections is especially acute during wartime. The risks of loss or damage due to hostilities of exhibits, collections, and historical sources of information are just increasing. The result of creating a digital version is preserved information that allows to continue working with the collection, promotes scientific research, and can serve as visual material for online educational purposes without physically moving and using the vouchers.

As a result of the work that has been launched, not only photographs and information about the exhibits of the collection are freely available (see GBIF), but also the museum's historical sources as the systematic index cards, pages of inventory books, and printed catalogs are now publicly available via the data repository Zenodo (see References).

Data on the species composition and number of the primate vouchers hosted within the natural history collections in Ukraine, obtained from both open sources and via personal communications, are given in Tab. 2 and Fig. 4. Unfortunately, it is impossible to conduct a full screening due to martial law in the country (not all collections are eager to provide data). However, data analysis indicates that the primate collection of the Museum of Nature of the V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University is currently the largest in Ukraine.

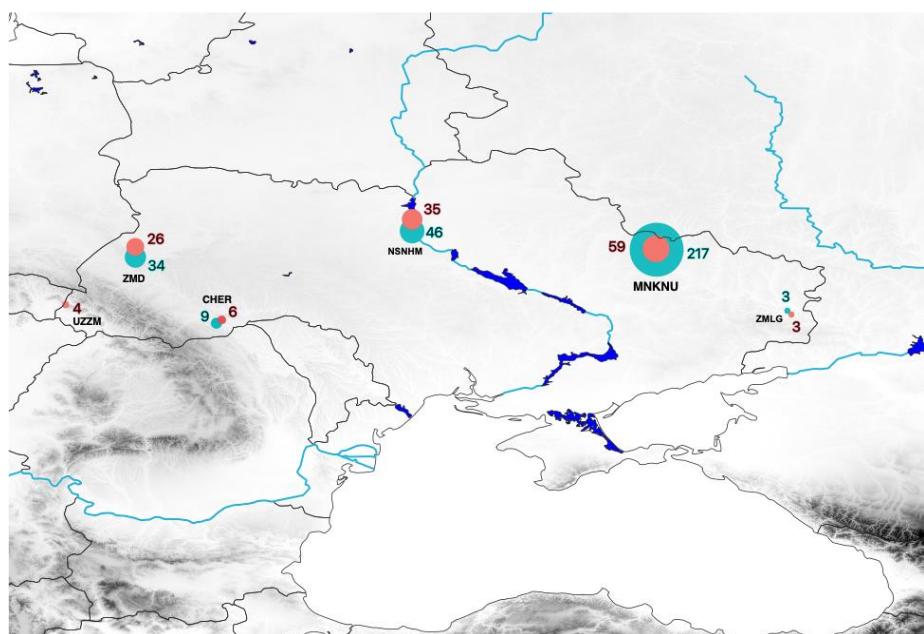


Fig. 4. Available data on the primates stored across Natural history collections of Ukraine: blue – number of vouchers, salmon – number of species, acronyms indicate the respective collections (see Tab. 2)

Table 2. Number of species and vouchers stored within primates collections across Ukrainian Natural history collections

№	Natural history collection	No of species	No of vouchers	Source
1.	Natural Museum of Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University (CHER)	6	9	Andryshchenko et al. (2002).
2.	Zoological Museum of the Uzhhorod National University (UZZM)	4	NA	Kron A. et al. (2019). Kron A., pers. comm. (2025)

No	Natural history collection	No of species	No of vouchers	Source
3.	Zoological Museum of Ivan Franko National University of Lviv (ZMD)	26	34	Zatushevskyi A.T., et al. (2010).
4.	National Museum of Natural History of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (NSNHM)	35	46	Ulyura E., pers. comm.
5.	Zoological Museum of the Luhansk Taras Shevchenko National University (ZMLG)	3	3	Litvinenko S., pers. comm.
6.	Museum of Nature of the V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University (MNKNU)	59	217	present work

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Оцифрування колекції приматів у Музеї природи Харківського національного університету імені В. Н. Каразіна Н. Перевозчикова, С. Єременко, Ю. Яценко

Музей природи Харківського національного університету імені В.Н. Каразіна володіє найбільшою в Україні колекцією приматів, що налічує 217 екземплярів 59 видів, враховуючи *Homo sapiens*. Види, що представлені у музеї, становлять 11% від загальної кількості приматів за даними MDD і розповсюджені у чотирьох з восьми біогеографічних царствах за системою Всесвітнього фонду природи. Історія формування колекції приматів починається на початку XIX сторіччя, найстаріше опудало колекції – левова ігрунка (*Leontopithecus rosalia* (L., 1766)) – датоване 1826 роком. Колекція представлена всіма групами збереження, до її складу входять 103 опудала 54 видів мавп, визначеніх до виду, сухі та вологі препарати – 87 та 27 одиниць відповідно. У цій статті наведені результати ревізії колекції приматів з перевізначенням видів, а також проведена цифровізація частини колекції (одиниці збереження, що представлені опудалами) та історичних джерел обліку музею (картки систематичної картотеки, сторінки інвентарних книг, друкованих каталогів). Подібні результати з цифровізації музейних колекцій в умовах війни є нагальною необхідністю для збереження та видкритості інформації.

Ключові слова: оцифрування, примати, колекції

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