

Family MUSTELIDAE

The Ratel

Mellivora

Mellivora Storr, 1780, Prod. Meth. Mamm., tab. A; genotype *M. capensis* Schreber, 1776, Säugthiere, Pl. CXXV, text 1777, III, p. 450. The Ratel from the Cape.

Honey Badger—Ratel

Mellivora capensis Schreber

MELLIVORA CAPENSIS CAPENSIS.

Viverra capensis Schreber, 1776, Säugthiere, Pl. CXXV, text 1777, III, p. 450.

Type (not in existence) from the Cape.

MELLIVORA CAPENSIS VERNAYI.

Mellivora capensis vernayi Roberts, 1932, Ann. Transvaal Mus., vol. XV (1), p. 7.

Type (in the Transvaal Museum) from Kwai, Mababe Flats, N. Bechuanaland.

NATIVE NAMES:

PERSONALLY COLLECTED

Herero: *Ondéthi*.

Ovambo: *Orshíshi*.

Bechuana: *Machüáni*, *Magwäókwě*.

Ovadirico, Ovacuangani: *'Mbúru*.

Mambakushu: *Shándah*, *Nshándah*.

Nama Hottentot, Berg Damara: *!Harebab*, *!Hareba*.

Naron Bushman: *!Garub*, *!Ga:rub*.

||K'au||en and !Kung Bushmen: *||Haob*.

Hei||kum Bushman: *‡Nĩ:sib*.

OTHER SOURCES

Sokololo: *Sikape*, *Sikatuli* (Lancaster).

Herero: *Ondezi* (Zukowsky).

Chinkoya: *Shiteshya* (Lancaster).

Chila: *Chibule* (Lancaster).

Tonga: *Chiwuli* (Lancaster).

Chilavale: *Sanda* (Lancaster).

Mashasha: *Lumwanga* (Lancaster).

Kaonde: *Kambole* (Lancaster).

Nama Hottentot: *!Oĩs* (Krönlein).

DISTRIBUTION IN SOUTH-WEST AFRICA.—The Ratel is evenly distributed and comparatively plentiful throughout the whole of South-West Africa and the Caprivi, except possibly along the coastal edge of the Namib Desert.

It also occurs in Little Namaqualand (Grant) and Angola.

GENERAL DISTRIBUTION OUTSIDE SOUTH-WEST AFRICA.—*Mellivora capensis* occurs practically all over Ethiopian Africa, from the Cape, northwards to Senegal on the west, and Abyssinia, Somaliland, and the Sudan—as far as Upper Nubia in the east.

“The Ratel may occur in some little-visited part of Egypt, but the only Egyptian-caught specimen that I know of had probably escaped from a ship passing through the Suez Canal. This was a young individual caught near Kantara in 1908.”—Flower.

Mellivora is also Asiatic, and ranges from Palestine and Transcaspia to Southern India.

Mellivora and the much commoner *Ictonyx* are among the most widely distributed mammals in Southern Africa, and there is probably no region south of the Equator where both do not occur.

HABITS.—Honey Badgers may be looked for in any kind of country; among rocky hills, in forests, bushveld, grassveld, dry swamps, or waterless sand-plains. They lie up by day in rock shelters, or in holes excavated by themselves or by ant-bears or porcupines.

In hill country their lairs are as a rule in the cool shelter of caves, or between crevices enlarged and deepened to suit their requirements. In open plains or level forest country they live in burrows.

Ratels are mainly nocturnal. They go about singly, or perhaps more frequently in couples, for it is not unusual for a pair to be trapped in the same spot on consecutive nights.

“They live in burrows excavated by themselves and hunt by night, although I have occasionally come upon them by day in dense thorn bushes.”—Wilhelm.

“The Ratel lives in forest or bush country, and at all levels—both in flat and hilly surroundings. It is partly diurnal by habit, but, being a solitary creature of comparatively small size and seldom having business in open country, it is not often met with, although possibly less rare than it is generally considered to be. It lies up in holes in the ground and among the roots of large trees.”—Stevenson-Hamilton.

“Although a nocturnal animal, the ratel is often seen abroad on cloudy days and just after sundown.”—FitzSimons.

“It lives in caves or crevices among rocks or in hollow trees, but is seldom seen owing to its nocturnal habits.”—Haagner.

“Nocturnal and shy, living in rocky localities. They go about in pairs.”—Hewitt.

“In Northern Rhodesia it is ubiquitous, and equally common at the high and low levels.”—Pitman.

When cornered or in a trap a ratel becomes fearlessly aggressive, and utters

a series of savage growls and squeals. It can also eject an evil-smelling fluid from its anal glands. Ordinarily, however, it appears to possess little, if any, of the characteristic body-scent of a typical badger. Notwithstanding its comparatively small size, which is rather less than that of a European Badger, there is some risk in disturbing a Ratel in its lair—especially during the breeding season—as it has been known to rush out and furiously charge an intruder. There are records of wandering cattle and horses having been seriously injured by such attacks. Stevenson-Hamilton (Annual Report, Kruger Nat. Park, 1932) records the remarkable incident of a buffalo bull having been killed by a honey badger. No animal of its size can give so good an account of itself against dogs; in fact a ratel is often more than a match for a single dog.

“Mattenklodt once took some honey from a ratel he met near the Etosha Pan; the animal followed him back to camp growling protestingly, and there fought a hard battle with the dogs which were unable to injure it.”—Zukowsky.

During life the skin of a ratel surrounds the body like a loose coating of rubber.

“The skin is so tough and thick that it is impervious alike to the fangs of a snake or the stings of bees.”—FitzSimons.

Although somewhat bear-like in movements, it is fairly active, especially in rough country, and can clamber over rocks, tree stumps, or wire netting, with ease.

“Its normal pace is a steady jog-trot, the tail being carried slightly above the level of the back and the head held a little low. At bay, it utters a sound between a growl and a hiss. I do not believe that there exists a more absolutely courageous animal than the Ratel; he seems to fear nothing that runs, flies, or crawls. I have known cases when, after a protracted struggle with a pack of dogs, the ratel has picked himself up and jogged off, apparently little the worse from the encounter; leaving the assailants totally exhausted and all more or less damaged.”—Stevenson-Hamilton.

Pocock (P.Z.S., 1908, p. 949) quoted the Ratel as one of the best-known examples in the Mammalia of warning coloration; and, commenting on the well-known unpleasantness of the odour emitted by the anal glands, cited the case of a specimen, living in the Zoological Gardens, London, which when threatened or disturbed would emit a suffocating odour perceptible at a distance of from fifty to a hundred yards. He also remarked: “The very small size of the ear of the ratel is another feature bearing on the question of its immunity from attack. Animals which require sharp hearing either to escape enemies or capture prey usually at all events have large ears and the diminutive external ears of the ratel are in keeping with the theory that it has no enemies to fear.”

“A wounded ratel will charge at once, and can inflict severe wounds with its sharp teeth.”—Wilhelm.

“In flat country a Ratel can easily be overtaken by an average dog, or even by natives, although it is impossible to follow in broken country. Wherever there is a foothold, the Ratel will climb, even up the rough face of a precipice. It cannot ascend a tree with a smooth trunk, but if the trunk be rough, or there

are twigs or branches within reach, the animal finds no difficulty in ascending trees. It is quite indifferent to a fall which would seriously injure or kill most other animals. The Ratel is sharp and long-sighted, but never attempts to run down its prey by speed. What it cannot eat on the spot it carries off to its lair. The musky liquid that it emits from its anal glands is less powerful than that of the muishond. In captivity the Ratel becomes particularly tame, and, although at first inclined to sleep during the daytime, after a month or so changes its habits."—FitzSimons.

"The Ratel has great powers of digging. It is not a tree-climber."—Bryden.

"Young animals utter a plaintive little whining call."—Haagner.

There is some similarity between the spoor of ratel and porcupine, both being plantigrade and approximately equal in size: although, if the tracks are well-defined, those of a ratel may be distinguished by the long claw marks.

"A ratel lived in the London Zoo for over 23½ years."—Flower.

Like typical Badgers the Ratel is omnivorous, feeding on rats, mice, and whatever small mammals it can capture or dig out of the ground, eggs and young birds, reptiles, locusts, beetles, fruits, berries, and other vegetable matter. Honey and the grubs of wild bees appear to be its favourite food, and bees'-nests that have been broken into by these animals are quite frequently met with. One torn out nest, which had evidently been recently raided, having bees still flying round it, was found near the Augrabies Falls (Orange River). Ratels are believed to destroy a large number of snakes. They sometimes raid poultry yards, and they will come to traps baited with fresh meat, but are only rarely attracted by carrion. Stevenson-Hamilton notes that ratel are occasionally carrion eaters, but does not consider them to be meat eaters in the ordinary sense of the term. FitzSimons asserts that they devour burrowing animals up to the size of ground-squirrels, mierkats, spring-haas, and even porcupines; and that they occasionally dig out and decimate a whole colony of suricates; and also at times destroy ostrich chicks, lambs, and kids.

"The Ratel is carnivorous, and nothing of an edible nature comes amiss with it. Flesh food in some form is its mainstay, supplemented by the honey and larvæ of wild bees. If hard pressed for food it devours roots, bulbs, and various other vegetable substances."—FitzSimons.

"Food, honey, and all kinds of small animals."—Wilhelm.

"The Ratel is very fond of tortoises, the shells of which it smashes with its teeth."—Steinhardt.

BREEDING HABITS.—The young are born and reared in holes in the ground or in deep crevices between rocks. The usual number in a litter appears to be two. Wilhelm records the period of gestation to be 'about six months'—an unusually long period in comparison with that of otters and other small *Carnivora*.

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES.—"As the Ratel gets older the white patch on the back becomes gradually darker, until in some very old males it is only just distinguishable."—Pitman.

"In immature animals the upper parts are rusty brown and the dividing stripe is absent."—S. Hamilton.

"*Mellivora c. cottoni* from the Congo is apparently quite similar to the ordinary race except for being entirely black, and may be melanistic."—Lydekker.

Allen records three specimens from the Congo (not far from the type locality of *cottoni*) which represent a dark form of the *capensis* group, although far from being wholly black.

There is an albino specimen in the Port Elizabeth Museum from Hankey, Cape Province.

Mammæ, 4. Shoulder height, about 30 cm. (Wilhelm).

The African Polecats

Ictonyx

Ictonyx Kaup, 1835, Das Thierreich, vol. I, p. 352; genotype *I. striatus* Perry, 1810, Arcana (Mus. Nat. Hist.), pt. II, pl. (41) and text.¹

The Striped Muishond from the Cape.

Striped Polecat—Stinkmuishond

Ictonyx striatus Perry

ICTONYX STRIATUS STRIATUS.

Bradypus striatus Perry, 1810, Arcana (Mus. Nat. Hist.), Signature Y T, Fig. 41.

Type (not in existence?)² from the Cape.

ICTONYX STRIATUS LIMPOPOENSIS.³

Ictonyx capensis limpopoensis Roberts, 1917, Ann. Transvaal Mus., vol. V (4), pp. 265–266.

Type (in the Transvaal Museum) from Mooivlei, Rustenburg Dist., Transvaal.

ICTONYX STRIATUS SHORTRIDGEL.

Ictonyx striatus shortridgei Roberts, 1932, Ann. Transvaal Mus., vol. XV (1), p. 8.

Type (in the Kaffrarian Museum) from the Maschi River, E. Caprivi.

Orange River Polecat—Oranjie Rivier Stinkmuishond

Ictonyx orangiae Roberts⁴

ICTONYX ORANGIÆ ARENARIUS.⁵

Ictonyx orangiae arenarius Roberts, 1924, Ann. Transvaal Mus., vol. X (2), pp. 67–68.

Type (in the Transvaal Museum) from Lamberts Bay, S.W. Cape.

¹ Cf. Hollister, Proc. Biol. Soc. Washington, vol. 28, p. 184. Nov. 26th, 1915.

² Exhibited alive in London by Kendrick, but no record of its having been preserved afterwards.

³ A specimen from Quickborn (Okahandja) has been referred by Roberts to this race (Ann. Transvaal Mus., Vol. XII (IV), p. 322).

⁴ Ann. Transvaal Mus., Vol. X (2), p. 67. Type (in the Transvaal Museum) from Angra Pequina, Bothaville, Orange Free State.

⁵ Roberts refers specimens from the lower Orange River Valley to this species and race.