

## SHORT NOTE

### Hybridization between a Hartmann's Mountain Zebra and a Donkey

by

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Burchell's zebras *Equus burchelli* are known to mate freely with donkeys *Equus asinus*. The resulting hybrids (known as zebdonks) retain the zebra striping on the anterior and outer sides of their legs, sometimes extending to the rump. They have upstanding manes but the remaining pelage is usually brownish-grey, resembling a donkey, although indistinct striping on the midback may occur (Smithers 1983).

Reports of mountain zebras *Equus zebra* interbreeding with donkeys have been received, particularly from the Grootberg area of Damaraland (1014DA), South West Africa/Namibia, where a small feral population of donkeys occur, but this has never been substantiated (Griffin & Panagis 1985).

On 20 July 1985 a small family group of five Hartmann's mountain zebras was seen just west of Volstruishoogte in the Namib-Naukluft Park, (23° 02' S; 15° 27' E). The group consisted of one male, two females and two foals (Figure 1). At first sight one of the foals appeared to be a normal donkey, but on closer investigation it was seen to have zebra stripes on the lower section of each leg (Figure 2).

The hybrid foal was closely attended by one of the female zebras who showed the same degree of concern for its safety as did the other female zebra for its normal foal. Both females placed themselves between their foals and us. On three occasions the hybrid foal was seen to suckle from the zebra, and when we pursued the group to obtain photographs of the hybrid,



FIGURE 1: Family group of Hartmann's mountain zebra in the Namib-Naukluft Park, including a donkey-zebra hybrid foal.



FIGURE 2: Close view of the foal showing striped legs but otherwise grey-brown pelage, resembling a donkey.

it ran directly behind this female. These observations would suggest that the hybrid foal was sired by a donkey, the mother being the Hartmann's mountain zebra in attendance. The donkey could have originated from one of two localities. Groups of subsistence farmers (Topnaars) live in the Kuiseb River within the Namib-Naukluft Park together with their livestock. Zebras, however, are reported to only rarely enter this area (M Griffin pers. comm.). It is more likely that the donkey was from adjacent farmlands to the east of the park. Donkeys are kept on most farms to pull donkey carts, and when not in use are left to range freely. Hartmann's mountain zebras are known to move from the Namib-Naukluft Park onto farmlands in the mountainous escarpment zone (V. du Plessis pers. comm.), particularly when the park has received little rain. It is most probable that mating took place during an encounter on farmlands.

The Hartmann's mountain zebra is considered to be endangered (Joubert 1973) and is afforded "specially

protected" status (Nature Conservation Ordinance no. 4 of 1975) in South West Africa/Namibia. As about 80% of the population exists on farmlands (Joubert 1973), the fact that interbreeding with donkeys can occur may be viewed with some concern. Although hybrids are unlikely to be fertile, if interbreeding were to become a common occurrence, this would have a detrimental affect on the Hartmann's mountain zebra population. Joubert (1974) has shown, however, that the social organisation of this species is composed of one dominant male over a number of females and that the male exhibits strong herding tendencies to prevent the advances of other males. As a result, interbreeding with donkeys must be an extremely unusual event and be of little significance in the conservation of the Hartmann's mountain zebra.

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