

Honey badger

The **honey badger** (*Mellivora capensis*), also known as the **ratel** (/ˈreɪtəl/ or /ˈrɑːtəl/), is a mammal widely distributed in Africa, Southwest Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. Because of its wide range and occurrence in a variety of habitats, it is listed as Least Concern on the IUCN Red List.

It is the only species in the genus ***Mellivora*** and in the mustelid subfamily **Mellivorinae**. Despite its name, the honey badger does not closely resemble other badger species; instead, it bears more anatomical similarities to weasels. It is primarily a carnivorous species and has few natural predators because of its thick skin, strength and ferocious defensive abilities.

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Taxonomy

Viverra capensis was the scientific name used by Johann Christian Daniel von Schreber in 1777 who described a honey badger skin from the Cape of Good Hope.^[3] *Mellivora* was proposed as name for the genus by Gottlieb Conrad Christian Storr in 1780.^[4] Mellivorina was proposed as a tribe name by John Edward Gray in 1865.^[2]

The honey badger is the only species of the genus *Mellivora*. Although in the 1860s it was assigned to the badger subfamily, the Melinae, it is now generally agreed that it bears very few similarities to the Melinae. It is

<div><div><div><div><div></div><div>Honey badger</div></div></div><div><div></div><div>Temporal range: middle Pliocene – Recent</div></div></div></div>	
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<div><div><div><div><div><div></div><div>Conservation status</div></div></div><div><div><div><div></div><div>Extinct</div></div><div><div><div></div><div>EW</div></div></div><div><div><div></div><div>CR</div></div></div><div><div><div></div><div>EN</div></div></div><div><div><div></div><div>VU</div></div></div><div><div><div></div><div>NT</div></div></div><div><div><div></div><div>LC</div></div></div></div><div><div><div><div></div><div>Least Concern</div></div></div></div></div><div>Least Concern (IUCN 3.1)^[1]</div></div></div></div>	
<div><div><div><div><div><div></div><div>Scientific classification</div></div></div><div><div></div></div></div></div></div>	
Domain:	Eukaryota
Kingdom:	Animalia
Phylum:	Chordata
Class:	Mammalia
Order:	Carnivora
Family:	Mustelidae
Subfamily:	Mellivorinae
	Gray, 1865 ^[2]
Genus:	<i>Mellivora</i>
	Storr, 1780
Species:	<i>M. capensis</i>
<div><div><div><div><div><div></div><div>Binomial name</div></div></div><div><div></div></div></div></div></div>	
<div><div><div><div><div><div></div><div><i>Mellivora capensis</i></div></div></div><div><div></div></div></div></div><div>(Schreber, 1776)</div></div>	

much more closely related to the marten subfamily, Guloninae, but furthermore is assigned its own subfamily, Mellivorinae.^[5] Differences between Mellivorinae and Guloninae include differences in their dentition formulae. Though not in the same subfamily as the wolverines, which are a genus of large-sized and atypical Guloninae, the honey badger can be regarded as another, analogous, form of outsized weasel or polecat.



Distribution

Evolution




The species first appeared during the middle Pliocene in Asia. Its closest relation was the extinct genus Eomellivora, which is known from the upper Miocene, and evolved into several different species throughout the whole Pliocene in both the Old and New World.^[6]



Skeleton from the Muséum national d'histoire naturelle

Subspecies

In the 19th and 20th centuries, 16 zoological specimens of the honey badger were described and proposed as subspecies.^[7] As of 2005, 12 subspecies are recognised as valid taxa.^[8] Points taken into consideration in assigning different subspecies include size and the extent of whiteness or greyness on the back.^[9]

Subspecies and authority	Description	Range	Synonyms
Cape ratel (<i>M. c. capensis</i>) (Schreber, 1776)  <p>16.—Cape Ratel.</p>		South and southwestern Africa	<i>mellivorus</i> (Cuvier, 1798) <i>ratel</i> (Sparrman, 1777) <i>typicus</i> (Smith, 1833) <i>vernayi</i> (Roberts, 1932)
Indian ratel (<i>M. c. indica</i>) (Kerr, 1792)  <p>17.—Indian Ratel.</p>	Distinguished from <i>capensis</i> by its smaller size, paler fur and having a less distinct lateral white band separating the upper white and lower black areas of the body ^[10]	Western Middle Asia northward to the Ustyurt Plateau and eastward to Amu Darya. Outside the former Soviet Union, its range includes Afghanistan, Iran (except the southwestern part), western Pakistan and western India	<i>mellivorus</i> (Bennett, 1830) <i>ratel</i> (Horsfield, 1851) <i>ratelus</i> (Fraser, 1862)
Nepalese ratel (<i>M. c. inaurita</i>) (Hodgson, 1836)	Distinguished from <i>indica</i> by its longer, much woollier coat and having overgrown hair on its heels ^[11]	Nepal and contiguous areas east of it	
White-backed ratel (<i>M. c. leuconota</i>) (Sclater, 1867)	The entire upper side from the face to half-way along the tail is pure creamy white with little admixture of black hairs ^[12]	West Africa, southern Morocco, former French Congo	
Black ratel (<i>M. c. cottoni</i>) (Lydekker, 1906) 	The fur is typically entirely black, with thin and harsh hairs. ^[12]	Ghana, northeastern Congo	<i>sagulata</i> (Hollister, 1910)

Subspecies and authority	Description	Range	Synonyms
Lake Chad ratel (<i>M. c. concisa</i>) (Thomas and Wroughton, 1907)	The coat on the back consists largely of very long, pure white bristle-hairs amongst long, fine, black underfur. Its distinguishing feature from other subspecies is the lack of the usual white bristle-hairs in the lumbar area ^[12]	Sahel and Sudan zones, as far as Somaliland	<i>brockmani</i> (Wroughton and Cheesman, 1920) <i>buchanani</i> (Thomas, 1925)
Speckled ratel (<i>M. c. signata</i>) (Pocock, 1909)	Although its pelage is the normal dense white over the crown, this pale colour starts to thin out over the neck and shoulders, continuing to the rump where it fades into black. It possesses an extra lower molar on the left side of the jaw ^[12]	Sierra Leone	
Ethiopian ratel (<i>M. c. abyssinica</i>) (Hollister, 1910)		Ethiopia	
Persian ratel (<i>M. c. wilsoni</i>) (Cheesman, 1920)		Southwestern Iran and Iraq	
Kenyan ratel (<i>M. c. maxwelli</i>) (Thomas, 1923)		Kenya	
Arabian ratel (<i>M. c. pumilio</i>) Pocock, 1946 ^[13]		Hadhramaut, southern Arabia	
Turkmenian ratel (<i>M. c. buechneri</i>) Baryshnikov, 2000	Similar to the subspecies <i>indica</i> and <i>inaurita</i> , but is distinguished by its larger size and narrower postorbital constriction ^[14]	Turkmenistan	

Description

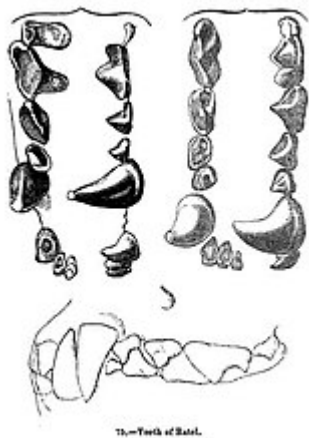
The honey badger has a fairly long body, but is distinctly thick-set and broad across the back. Its skin is remarkably loose, and allows it to turn and twist freely within it.^[15] The skin around the neck is 6 millimetres (0.24 in) thick, an adaptation to fighting conspecifics.^[16] The head is small and flat, with a short muzzle. The eyes are small, and the ears are little more than ridges on the skin,^[15] another possible adaptation to avoiding damage while fighting.^[16]

The honey badger has short and sturdy legs, with five toes on each foot. The feet are armed with very strong claws, which are short on the hind legs and remarkably long on the forelimbs. It is a partially plantigrade animal whose soles are thickly padded and naked up to the wrists. The tail is short and is covered in long hairs, save for below the base.

Honey badgers are the largest terrestrial mustelids in Africa. Adults measure 23 to 28 cm (9.1 to 11.0 in) in shoulder height and 55–77 cm (22–30 in) in body length, with the tail adding another 12–30 cm (4.7–11.8 in). Females are smaller than males.^{[15][17]} In Africa, males weigh 9 to 16 kg (20 to 35 lb) while females weigh 5 to 10 kg (11 to 22 lb) on average. The mean weight of adult honey badgers from different areas has been reported at anywhere between 6.4 to 12 kg (14 to 26 lb), with a median of roughly 9 kg (20 lb), per various studies. This positions it as the third largest known badger, after the European badger and hog badger, and fourth largest extant terrestrial mustelid after additionally the wolverine.^{[7][18][19][20][21]} However, the average weight of three wild females from Iraq was reported as 18 kg (40 lb), about the typical size of the males from largest-bodied populations of wolverines or from male European badgers in late autumn, indicating that they can attain much larger than typical sizes in favorable conditions.^{[22][23]} However, an adult female and two males in India were relatively small, at the respective weights of 6.4 kg (14 lb) and a median of 8.4 kg (19 lb).^[7] Skull length is 13.9–14.5 cm (5.5–5.7 in) in males and 13 cm (5.1 in) for females.^{[24][25]}

There are two pairs of mammæ.^[26] The honey badger possesses an anal pouch which, unusual among mustelids, is eversible,^[27] a trait shared with hyenas and mongooses. The smell of the pouch is reportedly "suffocating", and may assist in calming bees when raiding beehives.^[28]

The skull bears little similarity to that of the European badger, and greatly resembles a larger version of that of a marbled polecat.^[29] The skull is very solidly built, with that of adults having no trace of an independent bone structure. The braincase is broader than that of dogs.



Dentition

The dental formula is: $\frac{3.1.3.1}{3.1.3.1}$. The teeth often display signs of irregular development, with some teeth being exceptionally small, set at unusual angles or absent altogether. Honey badgers of the subspecies *signata* have a second lower molar on the left side of their jaws, but not the right. Although it feeds predominantly on soft foods, the honey badger's cheek teeth are often extensively worn. The canine teeth are exceptionally short for carnivores.^[30] The tongue has sharp, backward-pointing papillae which assist it in processing tough foods.^[31]

The winter fur is long, (being 40–50 mm (1.6–2.0 in) long on the lower back), and consists of sparse, coarse, bristle-like hairs, with minimal underfur. Hairs are even sparser on the flanks, belly and groin. The summer fur is shorter (being only 15 mm (0.59 in) long on the back) and even sparser, with the belly being half bare. The sides of the head and lower body are pure black. A large white band covers the upper body, from the top of the head to the base of the tail.^[32] Honey badgers of the *cottoni* subspecies are unique in being completely black.^[12]



Skull, as illustrated by N. N. Kondakov

Behaviour and ecology

The honey badger is mostly solitary, but has also been sighted in Africa to hunt in pairs during the breeding season in May. It also uses old burrows of aardvark, warthog and termite mounds.^[31] It is a skilled digger, able to dig tunnels into hard ground in 10 minutes. These burrows usually have only one entry, are usually only 1–3 m (3.3–9.8 ft) long with a nesting chamber that is not lined with any bedding.^[33]

The honey badger is notorious for its strength, ferocity and toughness. It is known to savagely and fearlessly attack almost any other species when escape is impossible, reportedly even repelling much larger predators such as lion and hyena.^[34] Bee stings, porcupine quills, and animal bites rarely penetrate their skin. If horses, cattle, or Cape buffalos intrude upon a honey badger's burrow, it will attack them.^[30] In Kalahari Gemsbok National Park, a honey badger was killed by a lion.^{[35][36]} In the Cape Province it is a potential prey species of the African leopard.^{[37][38]} African rock pythons,^{[7][39]} Nile crocodiles and spotted hyenas also prey on honey badgers occasionally.



Adult carrying a pup in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, South Africa

Diet

The honey badger has the least specialised diet of the weasel family next to the wolverine.^[16] It accesses a large part of its food by digging it out of burrows.^[7] It often raids beehives in search of both bee larvae and honey.^[40] It also feeds on insects, frogs, tortoises, turtles, lizards, rodents, snakes, birds and eggs. It also eats berries, roots and bulbs.^[7] When foraging for vegetables, it lifts stones or tears bark from trees. Some individuals have even been observed to chase away lion cubs from kills.^[31] It devours all parts of its prey, including skin, hair, feathers, flesh and bones, holding its food down with its forepaws.^[41] It feeds on a wide range of vertebrates and seems to subsist primarily on small vertebrates. Honey badgers studied in Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park preyed largely on geckos and skinks (47.9% of prey species), gerbils and mice (39.7% of prey). The bulk of its prey comprised species weighing more than 100 g (3.5 oz) such as cobras, young African rock python and South African springhare.^[42] In the Kalahari, honey badgers were also observed to attack domestic sheep and goats, as well as kill and eat black mambas.^{[39][43]} A honey badger was suspected to have broken up the shells of tent tortoises in the Nama Karoo.^[44] In India, honey badgers are said to dig up human corpses.^[45]



Indian honey badger drinks from a natural stream

Despite popular belief, there is no evidence that honeyguides guide the honey badger.^[46]

Reproduction

Little is known of the honey badger's breeding habits. Its gestation period is thought to last six months, usually resulting in two cubs, which are born blind. They vocalise through plaintive whines. Its lifespan in the wild is unknown, though captive individuals have been known to live for approximately 24 years.^[9] The voice of the honey badger is a hoarse "khrya-ya-ya-ya" sound. When mating, males emit loud grunting sounds.^[47] Cubs vocalise through plaintive whines.^[9] When confronting dogs, honey badgers scream like bear cubs.^[48]

Distribution and habitat

The honey badger ranges through most of sub-Saharan Africa, from the Western Cape, South Africa, to southern Morocco and southwestern Algeria and outside Africa through Arabia, Iran and western Asia to Turkmenistan and the Indian Peninsula. It is known to range from sea level to as much as 2,600 m above sea level in the Moroccan High Atlas and 4,000 m in Ethiopia's Bale Mountains.^[1]

Relationships with humans

Honey badgers often become serious poultry predators. Because of their strength and persistence, they are difficult to deter. They are known to rip thick planks from hen-houses or burrow underneath stone foundations. Surplus killing is common during these events, with one incident resulting in the death of 17 Muscovy ducks and 36 chickens.^[31]

Because of the toughness and looseness of their skin, honey badgers are very difficult to kill with dogs. Their skin is hard to penetrate, and its looseness allows them to twist and turn on their attackers when held. The only safe grip on a honey badger is on the back of the neck. The skin is also tough enough to resist several machete blows. The only sure way of killing them quickly is through a blow to the skull with a club or a shot to the head with a gun, as their skin is almost impervious to arrows and spears.^[49]

During the British occupation of Basra in 2007, rumours of "man-eating badgers" emerged from the local population, including allegations that these beasts were released by the British troops, something that the British categorically denied.^{[50][51]} A British army spokesperson said that the badgers were "native to the region but rare in Iraq" and "are usually only dangerous to humans if provoked".^[52] The director of Basra's veterinary hospital, Mushtaq Abdul-Mahdi, confirmed that honey badgers had been seen in the area as early as 1986. The deputy dean of Basra's veterinary college, Ghazi Yaqub Azzam, speculated that "the badgers were being driven towards the city because of flooding in marshland north of Basra."^[51] The event received coverage in the Western press during the 2007 silly season.^[53]

In many parts of North India, honey badgers are reported to have been living in the close vicinity of human dwellings, leading to many instances of attacks on poultry, small livestock animals and, sometimes, even children. They retaliate fiercely when attacked. According to a 1941 volume of *The Fauna of British India*, the honey badger has also been reported to dig up human corpses in the country.^[54]

In Kenya, the honey badger is a major reservoir of rabies^{[55][56]} and suspected to be a significant contributor to the sylvatic cycle of the disease.^[57]



Honey badger in the Jerusalem Biblical Zoo

Notes

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