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PARENTAL CARE BY A HONEYBADGER *MELLIVORA CAPENSIS* IN KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA

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BEHAVIOUR

PARENTAL CARE BY A HONEY BADGER *MELLIVORA CAPENSIS* IN KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA

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The honey badger or ratel *Mellivora capensis* is one of the most widely spread species of small carnivores with a distribution extending into Africa, Asia and parts of India (Skinner & Chimimba 2005). It occurs in all habitats throughout sub-Saharan Africa except in desert but is sparsely distributed throughout its range (Skinner & Chimimba 2005). It is a member of the Mustelid family, which includes five species in southern Africa that belong to three subfamilies: the spotted and cape clawless otter of the Lutrinae subfamily, the striped weasel and striped polecat of the Mustilenae subfamily and then the honey badger of the Mellivorinae family (Skinner & Chimimba 2005).

Smithers (1986) described the honey badger's appearance as jet black in colour with a broad white or grey mantle extending from just past the eyes to its tail. It has short stocky limbs and long powerful knife-like claws on the front feet. It is known for its aggression and fearlessness; it will defend itself against most animals – even lions.

The honey badger is considered a generalist, opportunistic predator that consumes a wide range of prey, including fruit, insects, reptiles, rodents, birds and other small, often young, mammals (Smithers 1986, Begg et al. 2003a, b; 2005) with a single official record of amphibian prey in the form of rain frogs *Breviceps mossambicus* recorded by Smithers & Tello (1976) in Zinave, Mozambique. They have an acute sense of smell, which they use predominantly to locate their prey, which is acquired mostly through digging (Begg et al. 2003a, b). Up to 50 holes may be dug in a single foraging period, which may cover about 10 km per day (Skinner & Chimimba 2005). They are also strong climbers and will climb up into the uppermost branches of trees to raid bird nests, or bee hives in order to consume bee larvae (Begg et al. 2003), hence their association with honey as their name reflects.

In the Kalahari, honey badgers do not have a breeding season; cubs are born throughout the year. After a gestation period of six to eight weeks, not more than two cubs are born, both naked and blind with their eyes only opening at two months old (Begg 2001, Begg et al. 2005). They remain in a hole until the mother carries them in her mouth to a new den, which she does every two to five days (Begg 2001, Begg et al. 2005). At three months old, they acquire their black and white colouration and begin to accompany their mother on short foraging bouts (Begg 2001, Begg et al. 2005). They stay with their mother for a minimum of 14 months (Kruuk 1995), during which time they learn new skills, such as digging and climbing, as well as techniques for killing venomous snakes and catching burrow-dwelling rodents, by watching and mimicking their mother (Begg 2001, Begg et al. 2005). Honey badgers are generally solitary with no male involvement in parental care (Begg et al. 2005). They are sexually dimorphic in size; however, when one sees two badgers foraging together in the wild, with one badger substantially larger than the other, these are usually a mother and her cub, rather than a "pair" (Begg 2001, Begg et al. 2005).

Despite the honey badger being widespread, in-depth information is only available from the southern Kalahari (Begg 2001). In addition, there are a few observations of honey badger behaviour outside of the Kalahari for the rest of South Africa.

In September 2015, I visited the Kruger National Park in northern South Africa. In central Kruger, east of Satara Rest Camp, the tar road known as the S100, runs parallel to the N'wanetsi River, which dries up during the winter months (June to August). In this riverbed, I made an interesting observation of parental care between a honey badger and her foraging cub. This interaction was recorded on video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZI8aaNO3NWM and four frames have been included in this paper as a visual record of the behaviour (Figures 1–4).

At 07h39 on 3 September 2015, two honey badgers were spotted from a dirt road loop off the S100 in the then dry N'wanetsi River. One honey badger was digging in the sand and a slightly smaller honey badger was lying down next to it (Figure 1). We assumed that it was a female honey badger with her foraging cub – a foraging cub is 3–16 months old, has been weaned but is still dependent on its mother for food (reaching adult dimensions aged about eight months) and has a grey to white mantle much lighter than that of its mother (Figure 1) (Begg et al. 2005). After a few minutes of digging, the mother found a frog in her digging pit and brought it over to feed it to her cub (Figure 2). The mother watched her cub for a few seconds before returning to dig in the same hole. The mother honey badger continued to sniff the sand and dig in many different spots stopping regularly to be vigilant. The cub continued to lie down until its mother moved off down the riverbed. It proceeded to follow its mother while she foraged (Figure 3) where shortly after, it started to scratch around in the sand and dig superficially (Figure 4). This foraging period lasted for about 20 minutes, until at least 07h58, when both honey badgers walked down the riverbed and disappeared out of our view.

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Figures 1 to 4 follow, one to a page.

Figure 1. A young honey badger cub watches its mother digging for food in a riverbed. *Photograph by Dominique Prinsloo*

Figure 2. The mother feeds her cub a frog that she dug up. *Photograph by Dominique Prinsloo*

Figure 3. The honey badger cub follows its mother up the riverbed. *Photograph by Dominique Prinsloo*

Figure 4. Both honey badgers dig in the sand before eventually moving up the riverbed out of view. *Photograph by Dominique Prinsloo*