

THE RATEL

By J. D. L. FLEETWOOD, *Mammalogist, Coryndon Museum, Nairobi*

The following extract from a letter sent to the Coryndon Museum by T. Rawson-Shaw, of Songhor, describing the depredations and final destruction of a ratel, opens up a new field of investigation and it would be interesting to have readers' views and experiences on this subject. There is no reason why the ratel, a powerful carnivore, should not have a following of weaker species.

"For some weeks our poultry were being attacked almost nightly. During this reign of terror six strongly-built hutches (6" × 1" cedar timber) were broken into by pulling off a board from the wall, floor, or door, and twice a larger house was entered by digging under stone foundations.

"I guessed it must be a ratel, but imagined a whole family party, as the first raid accounted for seventeen large Muscovy ducks, almost completely consumed, and the second for thirty-six half-grown pullets—leaving only a few feathers. I started poisoning baits and the damage done got less and less and all the baits were taken, but the raids did not stop and I only picked up two civets. More civets and probably jackals and possibly ratels may have died of poison and were never found in the long grass and bush.

"Anyhow on the last two occasions the intruder broke in he only ate one duck and chopped the heads off a couple more, so he was probably alone by now. The final drama occurred a few nights ago.

"We set a wire snare in the hole just made the night before under stone foundations, and my Turkhana headboy kept watch. About 9 p.m. he reported that an animal had gone through the snare and was killing more ducks. Armed with a sharp panga and a .22 rifle, we entered the duck house and located something hiding in an upturned half-drum. I fired point-blank into the grass and out came an old male ratel. Blows from the panga which would have cut any other animal of that size in half merely bounced off, leaving a shallow gash on his hide, and it took about ten of these and four .22 bullets to kill it. I think now there may never have been more than one ratel, but that he had a following of civets and jackals.

"There have been no more raids since we killed him. How was it that he himself never took the poison?"

The RATEL or HONEY-BADGER.

Classification and Distribution:

Order: *Carnivora*
Family: *Mustelidae*
Genus: *Mellivora*
Species: (2).

- (1) *capensis*—confined to the Ethiopian Region of Africa.
- (2) *indicus*—outside Africa, eastwards to India.

Mellivora capensis has 10 sub-species of which four occur in the East African Area (including Abyssinia and Somaliland).

- (1) *Mellivora capensis abyssinica*.
- (2) " " *brockmani*.
- (3) " " *maxwelli*.
- (4) " " *sagulata*.

Origin

Fossil remains of the Pliocene period, obtained in India, suggest that India was their original home and that they migrated to Africa.

Skull and Dentition

Skull broad and massive with a well-developed occipital crest.

The teeth are large and powerful and less in number than other members of the family. There is no 1st premolar. The upper molar is small and has a characteristic dumb-bell shape, with the inner lobe wider. The lower molar is larger.

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Description

A large adult may measure over three feet in length, including the short tail, with a shoulder height of about one foot. The build is best described as 'stocky', there is no suggestion of the lithe, sinuous movement of the other members of the family. This is amplified by the plantigrade, bear-like method of walking. Despite this seeming clumsiness, the ratel is an excellent climber and can move quickly in rough country. Powerful claws, especially on the fore-feet, enable it to burrow and tear open bee-hives. There are five toes on each foot.

Like its near relative the zorilla, the ratel has distinctive 'warning colouration'. The general colour is brown to black, with a conspicuous light-coloured mantle running back from the front of the head and covering the top half of the body. A paler stripe runs along the lower edge of the mantle, on either side. The short tail is coloured like the mantle at the top. The dorsal colour varies from grey to near-white, but is usually stained by contact with the earth.

The ratel has two methods of protection. There are anal glands producing a pungent odour, like the zorilla, but in a milder form; and a thick loosely fitting skin, like a sheet of tough rubber. This, coupled with the possession of extremely powerful jaws, makes the ratel a tough opponent for the strongest foe, consequently it has no enemies to fear, apart from man. Ratels have been known fearlessly to attack humans and there is a case on record of a buffalo bull being killed by one.

There are two pairs of mammae.

Feeding Habits

Being nocturnal, feeding takes place after dark, or occasionally in daylight on very dull days.

Although possessing the dentition of a carnivore like the other members of its family, it is really omnivorous and will eat small mammals, birds and their eggs, reptiles, insects, fruits, berries and other vegetable matter. It is especially partial to honey (hence its alternative name) and devours honey and larvae, oblivious of attacks from the bees, which are unable to penetrate the thick rubbery skin. The impenetrable skin also helps in its attacks on porcupines and snakes. Tortoises are included in its diet, their shells being easily broken by the powerful teeth. There have been recent cases of ratels raiding flocks of sheep.

Reproduction

Only two young are produced at a time normally, in a hole underground or in a rock crevice. There is some doubt about the period of gestation, but one authority puts it at six months.

The ratel is quite common but, like that other ubiquitous and successful carnivore, the leopard, it is seldom encountered.