

Honey Badger *Mellivora capensis* predation on an African Sharptooth Catfish in the Okavango Delta, Botswana

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Abstract

Honey Badgers *Mellivora capensis* are generalist opportunist carnivores with a wide geographic distribution range. References to fish as a Honey Badger food item are rare, but we observed a Honey Badger capturing and carrying off a large African Sharptooth Catfish *Clarias gariepinus* in a drying lagoon of the Okavango Delta in Botswana. Such fishing by Honey Badgers likely occurs somewhat regularly where opportunities present themselves through their geographic range.

Keywords: Botswana, catfish, diet, fishing, food habits, Honey Badger, *Mellivora capensis*, Okavango, predation, Ratel

**Matshwane *Mellivora capensis* seji sa Tlhapi ya Toni mo
Lecheng la Okavango**

Bomatshwane *Mellivora capensis* ke dingwe tsa dibatana tse di tsomang ka tshono mme ebile ba fitlhelwa mo mafelong a a farologanyeng. Go ja tlhapi ga Matshwane ke sengwe se se sa tlwaelesegang, mme re bonye Matshwane a tsoma a bo a tshwara Tlhapi ya Toni *Clarias gariepinus* mo ledibeng le le kgadileng mo lecheng la Okavango mo Botswana. Letsomo la go nna jalo di diragala ka dinako dingwe fa tshono e letla mo mafelong a Matshwane a fitlhelwang mo go one.

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Introduction

Honey Badgers (or Ratels) *Mellivora capensis* have a wide geographic distribution in Africa, south-west Asia, and India and occur in all habitats (except dune deserts) up to altitudes exceeding 4000 m (Vanderhaar & Hwang 2003, Skinner & Chimimba 2005, Begg *et al.* 2013). They have been described as generalist opportunist carnivores that often prey on ants, bees, beetles, grasshoppers, scorpions, spiders, centipedes, freshwater crabs, mollusks, venomous snakes, skinks and other lizards, young crocodiles, sea turtle eggs, tortoises, frogs, toads, small rodents, hedgehogs, porcupines, Springhares *Pedetes capensis*, young small carnivores, young ungulates, bird chicks and domestic chickens, goats and sheep, as well as consuming wild fruits, roots and honey (Sweeney 1960, Marlow 1983, Neal & Cheeseman 1996, Lloyd & Stadler 1998, Pati *et al.* 2001, Vanderhaar & Hwang 2003, Skinner & Chimimba 2005, Begg *et al.* 2013, Lee & Simmons 2014, Estienne *et al.* 2017, Arbon 2019).

Honey Badgers also pirate food from carnivores (Kruuk & Mills 1983) and scavenge kills from other predators (Kingdon 1977).

Honey Badgers are reputed to be good swimmers and to chase turtles under water (Kingdon 1977), but references to fish as a honey badger food item are rare. Kingdon (1977:98) indicated that Honey Badgers peel away “the clay capsules of aestivating lungfish”. Pocock (1909) reported that “according to native reports the species ... lives to a great extent upon fish, which it catches with its paws at the edge of streams”, and Pati *et al.* (2001) noted fish scales in Honey Badger scats collected along riverbanks in India. Especially pertinent to our observation (below) is Ivy’s (1970) report that “in the Limpopo region ... [Honey Badgers] would feed on the fish as the pans began to dry up. Before completely drying up these pans were teeming with fish and provided food for many birds and several animals ...” Here we document an observation of a Honey Badger capturing and carrying off a large African Sharptooth Catfish *Clarias gariepinus* in a drying lagoon of the Okavango Delta in Botswana.

Observation

We made our observation during a wildlife safari in the Moremi Game Reserve (Fig. 1). The dry season of 2019 was one of the driest on record (Charles 2019), and the floodwaters that typically would have arrived from Angola had not yet reached the area. On the afternoon of 18 July 2019, we slowly drove west along the south side of Xini Lagoon (19°23'37"S, 23°29'51"E), a wetland usually covered with 2–3 m of water at that time, but then nearly dry with the ground surface covered by mud and some Giant Salvinia *Salvinia molesta*.

At about 16h30 at a distance of about 125 m from the vehicle we espied African Fish Eagles *Haliaeetus vocifer*, a Hamerkop *Scopus umbretta* and a Blacksmith Lapwing *Vanellus armatus*, all on the ground at the nearly dry channel bottom of the lagoon. Through binoculars and telephoto camera lenses we saw, near the birds, some sun-lit water splashes and a Honey Badger pacing back and forth over a 10-m area (Fig. 2). The Honey Badger sometimes stopped and lowered its head as if grabbing something, and we noticed splashing by the Badger and also after the Badger moved away; we then realized that the Badger was trying to catch a fish that also caused splashes. The Honey Badger made four or five brief attempts to grab the fish in its mouth, then spent 5–10 seconds in a more intense effort and succeeded in grabbing the fish mid-body. It then turned and walked up the lagoon bank (Fig. 3) and into the grass and forest edge without changing its grip on the fish, an African Sharptooth Catfish which, given the size of a Honey Badger (75–115 cm total length; Proulx *et al.* 2016), likely measured about 70–80 cm (Fig. 3).

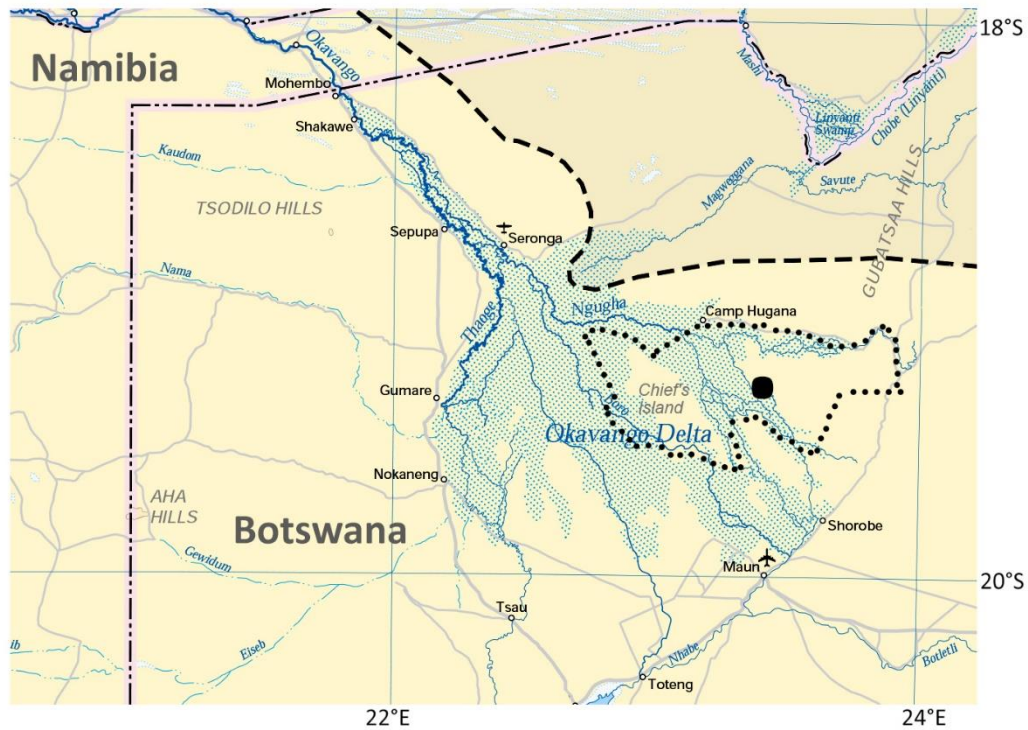


Fig. 1. Map of north-western Botswana; a large black dot shows the approximate location of Xini Lagoon, in Moremi Game Reserve (approximate boundary indicated by a dotted line). The dashed black line represents the boundary of the Okavango catchment area. (Modified from United Nations map of the Okavango River Basin, map no. 4032, January 2000.)



Fig. 2. Honey Badger *Mellivora capensis* just after capturing an African Sharptooth Catfish *Clarias gariepinus* in the nearly dry Xini Lagoon, Moremi Game Reserve, Botswana, as an African Fish Eagle *Haliaeetus vocifer* looks on. The birds in the background are Helmeted Guinea Fowl *Numida meleagris*.



Fig. 3. Honey Badger *Mellivora capensis* carrying African Sharptooth Catfish *Clarias gariepinus* in Xini Lagoon, Moremi Game Reserve, Botswana.

Discussion

African Sharptooth Catfish are the largest of six species of catfish in the Okavango region that can survive desiccation using air-breathing organs located in chambers above their gills (Brunton *et al.* 2018). It is common in almost all habitats and migrates into floodplains or into the shallows of backwater lagoons with the onset of rising floodwaters. When water levels recede, they are often the last species to survive, largely by using their air-breathing organs and by crawling overland using their locked pectoral fins. They are recorded as having been preyed on extensively by Crocodiles *Crocodylus niloticus*, and also Marabou Storks *Leptoptilos crumenifer*, Baboons *Papio ursinus*, African Fish Eagles and hyaenas (Brunton *et al.* 2018), as well as otters and cats (Ivy 1970). Mitchell *et al.* (1965) wrote that “the record of a catfish *Clarius* sp. being taken by a Leopard *Panthera pardus* may refer to a particular animal which was liberated in the Kafue National Park after having been rescued on one of the temporary islands in the Kariba lake. When trapped on the island, it was apparently entirely on a diet of fish to which it had become adapted living under unusual conditions”. Notably, Harvey (2016) compiled data from the footage of a wildlife film unit (Natural History Film Unit, Botswana) working in the Savute portion of Chobe National Park in Botswana and reported that African Sharptooth Catfish were the main prey species of Leopards, specifically in the dry season (37 of 98 predation events overall, and 94% of events in the dry season).

Honey Badger predation on African Sharptooth Catfish in drying lagoons likely occurs somewhat regularly where the ranges of the two species overlap, and videos of similar behaviour are available (e.g. <https://www.shutterstock.com/video/clip-4014460-honey-badger-catching-fish-pond>, 25 July 2015; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qcgBw8ethLs>, 23 February 2018). The most extensive investigation of the food habits of Honey Badgers (Begg *et al.*

2003) did not record catfish as prey probably because the study area was a dune area of the semi-desert region of the Kalahari thornveld in southern Africa, where no catfish occur.

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