

Distribution and conservation status of Honey Badgers *Mellivora capensis* in Iran

Ali TURK QASHQAEI^{1*}, Paul JOSLIN² & Parham DIBADJ³

¹ Plan for the Land Society, Tehran, Iran.

² 5838 Romania Drive, Anchorage, AK, USA 99516.

³ Echo of Persia wildlife, Tehran, Iran.

Correspondence:

Ali Turk Qashqaei
a.t.qashqaei@gmail.com

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Emmanuel Do Linh San

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Abstract.

The Honey Badger or Ratel *Mellivora capensis*, which is distributed over much of Africa, the Middle East, Central and South Asia, is one of the rarest carnivores in Iran. This report reviews the historical records in Iran coupled with the inclusion of a number of more recent sightings in parts of the country where Honey Badgers had formerly not been documented – notably in around Khoramshahr, Ramhormoz, Shush, Dezful, Rafsanjan and Baft. Between 2008 and 2014, at least 14 individuals and a family group of Honey Badgers were recorded from 13 localities, of which four were killed outright by local people, two were camera-trapped, five were recorded by direct observation, two were live-trapped and released, one was killed in a road accident and a family group was captured by video. The Honey Badger is not adequately protected in Iran. Habitat destruction, poisoned baits, trapping and poaching are important threats to the species. In southwest and central Iran, the species is also sought after for its fat which is used in traditional medicine.

Keywords: conservation, Honey Badger, Iran, *Mellivora capensis*, poaching, Ratel, record, threat

براکندگی و وضعیت حفاظتی رودک عسلخوار در ایران چکیده.

رودک عسلخوار که یکی از کمیابترین گوشتخواران ایران محسوب می‌شود، در آفریقا، خاورمیانه و آسیای مرکزی پراکندگی وسیعی دارد. این گزارش، پیشینه تاریخی رودک عسلخوار را در بخش‌هایی از کشور بررسی کرده و مشاهدات جدید آن در خرمشهر، رامهرمز، اطراف شوش، دزفول، رفسنجان و بافت که پیشتر منتشر نشده را ارائه می‌دهد. بین سال‌های دوهزار و هشت تا دوهزار و چهارده میلادی، حداقل چهاره فرد و یک خانواده از رودک عسلخوار در سیزده محل مختلف مشاهده شده‌اند. چهار فرد از آنها به طور واضح توسط مردم محلی کشته، دو فرد با دوربین تله‌ای، پنج فرد هم به صورت مشاهده مستقیم و یک فرد در تصادف جاده‌ای ثبت شدند و دو فرد از آنها نیز زنده‌گیری و رهاسازی شده‌اند. علاوه بر این، یک خانواده رودک نیز به وسیله یک فیلم ثبت شد. رودک عسلخوار به اندازه کافی در ایران حمایت نمی‌شود. تخریب زیستگاه، طعمه‌های مسموم، زنده‌گیری و شکار غیرمجاز مهم‌ترین تهدیدهای این گونه است. همچنین چربی این گونه در جنوب غربی و مرکز ایران به عنوان داروی سنتی خواستار دارد.

واژگان کلیدی: ایران، تهدید، حفاظت، رکورد، رودک عسلخوار، شکار غیرمجاز

Introduction

The Honey Badger or Ratel *Mellivora capensis* (Schreber, 1776) is the only species of the genus *Mellivora* and has one of the largest distribution areas in the Mustelidae family (Heptner & Naumov 1967). The species is native to Africa from the Cape of Good Hope in the Western Cape Province of South Africa to Somalia, Ethiopia, and Sudan in the east and to Morocco in the west. Beyond Africa, its range extends through the Middle East from Israel to Iran, Central Asia from Turkmenistan to southwest Kazakhstan, Pakistan, India

and Nepal in South Asia (Harrison & Bates 1991, Vanderhaar & Hwang 2003, Mallon & Budd 2011). The Honey Badger is listed as Least Concern by IUCN (Begg *et al.* 2008) and in the Appendix III of the CITES.

Honey Badgers were recorded from some localities between the Amu-Darya River and the Caspian Sea in Turkmenistan. From these localities, a few records were found along the Atrek (Atrak) River, Kopet-Dag plains, and Tedzhen (Tedjen) River near the Iranian border (Heptner *et al.* 1967). Iran was included in the Honey Badger distribution range by Misonne (1959), who noted its presence in Khuzestan and Golestan provinces (Figure 1). Until 2008, it was recorded in Khuzestan Province to the northwest of Ramhormoz, between Ahwaz and Shush, and reported from Golestan Province around Gorgan and along the Atrak River (Misonne 1959). Ziaie (2008) contributed several new records for the species in Iran. One additional record was made by Joolae *et al.* (2012).

This short paper examines the current distribution and threat status of the Honey Badger in Iran by combining a literature review from 1959 to 2012 (Misonne 1959, Etemad 1985, Ziaie 2008, Joolae *et al.* 2012, Karami *et al.* In prep; Table 1) with several new records obtained by the first author from the Iranian Department of the Environment from 2012 to 2014. Some records of the species resulted from poaching in Khabr National Park and Dadin Area, while others were confirmed by photo and video materials from Boroeiyeh Wildlife Refuge (Ziaie 2008, Joolae *et al.* 2012) and other regions (Figure 2).

Records of *M. capensis* in Iran

Old records: 2008–2012

- The one member of a family group of Honey Badgers was killed by local people in Khabr National Park, 37 km to the south of Baft town. It was the first record of Honey Badgers in Kerman Province (Ziaie 2008).
- The first evidence of the species in Yazd Province was recorded in Boroeiyeh Wildlife Refuge, which is located in Khatam County, when a family group of Honey Badgers was documented in a video (Ziaie 2008). The second sighting was made in Kalmand Protected Area and the third was around Tangchenar village, located at the edge of Aliabad Protected Area, westward of Kalmand Protected Area (Karami *et al.* In prep.).
- The first record in Fars Province was a Honey Badger killed by local people from Sar Mashhad village, Dadin area, located 120 km southwest of Shiraz city and 32 km to the south of Kazerun town (Joolae *et al.* 2012).

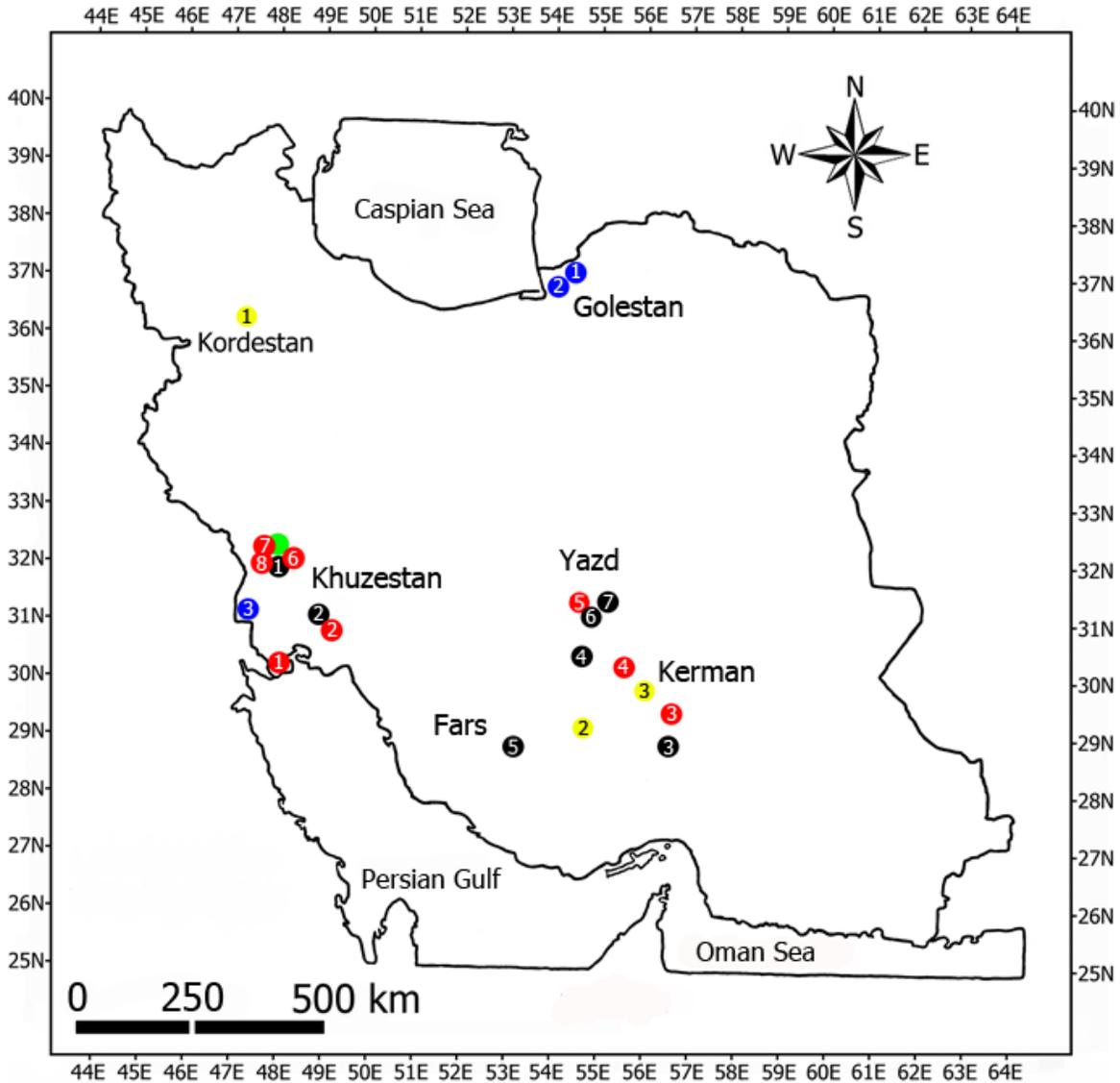


Figure 1. Current distribution of Honey Badger *Mellivora capensis* in Iran. Blue dots: old records by Misonne (1959) near Atrak River from Golestan in northeast (numbers 1 and 2) and near Iraq–Iran border in the southwest of Khuzestan (3). Green dot: unpublished record by Joslin in 1974 from Dez-Karkheh Area in Khuzestan (see Fig. 2). Black dots: recent records by Etemad (1985) between Ahwaz and Shush (1) and near Ramhormoz (2) in Khuzestan; Ziaie (2008) from Khabr National Park (3) in Kerman and Boroeiyeh Wildlife Refuge (4) in Yazd; Joolaei *et al.* (2012) from Dadin in Fars (5); Karami *et al.* (in press) from Aliabad Protected Area (6) and Kalmamd Protected Area (7). Red dots: Khoramshahr (1), Ramhormoz (2), Baft (3), Mansourabad near Rafsanjan (4), Mehriz (5), Mianroud (6), Naderi village (7) and Helveh village (8) were new records by the Iranian Department of the Environment from 2012 to 2014. Yellow dots: unconfirmed records in Bijar Protected Area (1), Bahram-e Gur Wildlife Refuge (2) and Gughar Area (3).



Figure 2. (A) A camera-trap set to record Honey Badgers in Dez-Karkheh Area in 1974 and (B) taxidermy of a dead Honey Badger killed in a road accident in Dez-Karkheh Area in 1974 (Photos: P. Joslin).

Recent records: 2012–2014

- The second and third records of the species in Yazd Province were camera-trap captures to the southeast and south of Mehriz town, during December 2012.
- In September 2013, a subadult Honey Badger was live-trapped near Khorramshahr city in Khuzestan Province. It was transferred to the Khorramshahr office of the Department of the Environment and was released a few days later in the area where it had been caught.
- In 2013, one adult Honey Badger was sighted around Helveh village near Karkheh National Park and another one was observed around Mianroud town near Dez National Park.
- In February 2014, two adult Honey Badgers were killed by local poachers in the vicinity of Baft (Figure 3). This was only the second time that the species had ever been recorded in Kerman Province.
- In March 2014, a rancher trapped a subadult Honey Badger near Ramhormoz town in Khuzestan Province. It was transferred to the Department of the Environment office in Ramhormoz and then returned to its den.
- In March 2014, a Honey Badger was sighted by a group of environmentalists near Mansurabad, 46 km to the west of Rafsanjan town. This record was the first evidence of the species in Rafsanjan County and only the third record from Kerman Province.
- In 2014, one road kill of an adult *M. capensis* was recorded from Mianroud town by the last author. Also, game wardens of Khuzestan Province sighted a Honey Badger around Naderi village, 20 km west of Dezful and 21 km north of Shush.
- Three unconfirmed records occurred in Bijar Protected Area (Kordestan Province), Bahram-e Gur Wildlife Refuge (Fars Province) and Gughar Area (Kerman Province; Table 1).

Table 1. Records (1959–2014) and poaching risk of Honey Badger *Mellivora capensis* in different provinces of Iran.

Records	Khuzestan	Kordestan	Fars	Kerman	Yazd	Golestan
Number of poached individuals	2 live-trapped	0	1 killed	3 killed	0	0
Number of records outside protected areas	7	0	1	4 ^c	0	2
Number of records from protected areas	3	1 ^a	1 ^b	1	3	0
Number of road kills	2	0	0	0	0	0
Risk of poaching	High	Unknown	High	High	Low	Low

^a An unconfirmed record in Bijar Protected Area from Kordestan Province (Fig. 1); ^b an unconfirmed record in Bahram-e Gur Wildlife Refuge from Fars Province (Figure 1); ^c three individuals in two records, and an unconfirmed record in Gughar Area northwest of Baft (Figure 1).

**Figure 3.** Two poached Honey Badgers in Baft town (Photo: Iran Environment and Wildlife Watch).

Current status, threats and conservation

Honey Badgers were documented in 20 localities during 1959–2014 (Figure 1; Table 1). The sample of old and recent records indicates that the Honey Badger is distributed in southwestern, southern, central and northeast parts of Iran within the provinces of

Khuzestan, Fars, Kerman, Yazd and Golestan. Poaching of this species has been documented in recent years in some protected and unprotected areas (Ziaie 2008, Joolaei *et al.* 2012). While not assessed in this study, poisoned baits and habitat destruction by overgrazing, mining and extension of farmlands and human communities (Figure 4) are also considered as threats. Some level of conflict between gardeners and Honey Badgers has been reported. There is no information on the population status or biology of this species in Iran. The Honey Badger is one of the rarest mammals in Iran, but it is not protected by the Iranian Department of the Environment, and its fat is used in traditional medicine (Ziaie 2008, Karami *et al.* In prep.). Looking at Iran as a whole, while this mustelid may be secure in Yazd and Golestan provinces, poaching and other threats need to be taken into account in Khuzestan, Fars and Kerman provinces. The Honey Badger is a vulnerable species outside of the Iranian protected areas (Table 1).



Figure 4. A view of extension of croplands around Dez and Karkheh National Parks; one of the most important areas for Honey Badgers in Iran (Source: Google Earth 2015).

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