

Honey Badger *Mellivora capensis*



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Namibian conservation status	Least Concern
Global IUCN status	Least Concern
Namibian range	~789,700 km ²
Global range	Throughout Africa, the Middle East and south-west Asia, excluding hyper-arid dune deserts
Population estimate	15,900–31,800
Population trend	Stable. Uncommon but widespread
Habitat	As adaptable and versatile generalists, honey badgers occupy most habitats in Namibia except for the dunes of the Namib Sand Sea
Threats	Largely indiscriminate persecution by small-stock and poultry farmers

IDENTIFYING FEATURES

Honey badgers are low-slung, stocky carnivores which are jet-black below with a broad white-grey saddle running from above the eyes to the base of the tail. Although they are mostly unmistakable, the black-and-white markings may sometimes lead to confusion with striped polecats or striped weasels. Both of the latter are much smaller and have long tails.

DISTRIBUTION

Honey badgers are generalists and opportunists, occupying almost every habitat type in Namibia except for the Namib Sand Sea. Although previously thought to not occur along the Atlantic coast, there have been a number of recent sightings from the Skeleton Coast and coastal areas of Tsau ||Khaeb National Park.

POPULATION ESTIMATE AND TREND

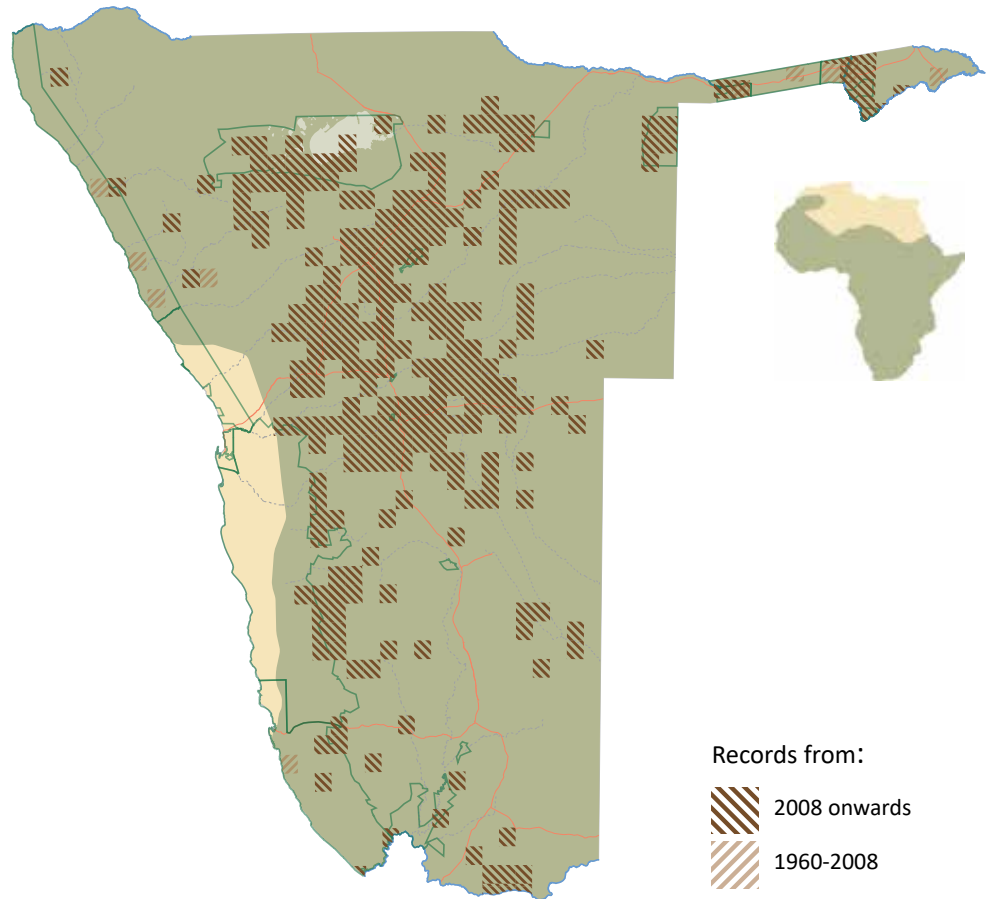
Density estimates for the species are limited to the Serengeti National Park (10 individuals/100 km²) and the Kalahari Transfrontier Park (3 individuals/100 km²) (Begg 2001a). Their home ranges are up to five times larger than any other carnivore of comparable body size (Begg *et al.* 2005a). In the only study on their movement ecology, in the Kalahari, males regularly occupied overlapping home ranges of up to 500 km², which would contain the home ranges of up to four females (Begg *et al.* 2005a).

Using information from the southern Kalahari study site of Begg (2001b), and assuming average ecosystem productivity in Namibia is comparable, we roughly estimate that the density of honey badgers in Namibia at 2–4 individuals/100 km². On this basis, the population estimate for the country would be 15,900 to 31,800 honey badgers.

Distribution records of honey badger, and present estimated area of distribution in Namibia.

Inset: African distribution of honey badger according to IUCN (Do Linh San *et al.* 2016).

The Namibian distribution in the main map is more up to date and does not necessarily agree with the distribution shown in the inset.



There are insufficient data to assess a population trend, but ongoing and low-frequency records from camera traps and occasional sightings suggest that the population is stable. The species is not considered by communal or freehold farmers as a major economic threat.

ECOLOGY

Honey badgers are cryptic carnivores with largely nocturnal activity patterns (Begg *et al.* 2016a). They are however not uncommonly observed during daytime, especially in the wet season when cover of grass and shrub foliage is sufficient (Allen *et al.* 2018), or where human activity is minimal (Begg *et al.* 2016a).

Honey badgers are the largest terrestrial African species of the family Mustelidae (Skinner & Chimimba 2005). This family also includes otters and weasels. They are solitary and do not move in pairs as was historically believed (Shortridge 1934). Females give birth to a single cub which remains with its mother for between 12 and 22 months (Begg *et al.* 2005b, Skinner & Chimimba 2005), a factor which probably led to the myth of them occurring in pairs.

They have only been studied intensively in the Kalahari biome (Begg 2001a, Begg *et al.* 2003a, 2003b, Begg *et al.*

2016b) and more recently in the mesic savannas of South Africa (Ramesh *et al.* 2017a, Kheswa *et al.* 2018). Honey badgers have always occupied a wide variety of habitats within all of Namibia's biomes (Shortridge 1934, Skinner & Chimimba 2005). The recorded sightings of the species in the Atlas in Namibia Carnivore Records database (Environmental Information Service Namibia 2021) are distributed equally among privately owned farmland, communal rangeland and protected areas within all habitat types. They have been encountered in the peri-urban surroundings of Windhoek as well as the townlands of Oranjemund. This explains their highly variable diet which ranges from invertebrates to any bird, reptile or mammal smaller in size than themselves (Skinner & Chimimba 2005). In the Kalahari Transfrontier Park (Botswana and South Africa) reptiles and small mammals were found to dominate the diet, which was variable between sexes and seasons (Begg *et al.* 2003a). As their name suggests they actively seek out above- and below-ground beehives, consuming bee larvae and honey.

Honey badgers are prolific burrowers, digging for food, shelter and to escape climatic extremes. They will readily use the burrows of other animals such as aardvark, porcupine and springhare (Skinner & Chimimba 2005). Bioturbating mammals such as honey badgers are thought

to provide important ecosystem services for the productivity of rangelands in Namibia. Their burrowing activity aerates the soil and results in increased moisture infiltration and retention. Burrows are also found to trap seeds and detritus, resulting in better grass seed germination and growth (Rodgers *et al.* 2017).

THREATS

There are currently no serious threats to the species in Namibia. Conflict with apiculture is a common problem with honey badgers (Begg 2001b, Carter *et al.* 2017) but with low numbers of beekeepers in Namibia, this threat is minimal. Targeted and indiscriminate killings by poultry and small-stock owners with poisons and gin traps present a minor threat.

Honey badger paws, organs and skin are used in traditional medicine in neighbouring Zambia to harness the tenacious character of the animal (Do Linh San *et al.* 2016). An overall increase in illegal trade of wildlife products globally (Cooney *et al.* 2017) requires careful monitoring for increased demand in honey badger parts.

Rabies is regularly reported in honey badgers (Hassel 1982, Thomson & Meredith 1993) but the low population density of individuals probably keeps rabies incidents localised and number of incidents low.

CONSERVATION STATUS

Least Concern. Honey badgers were listed in the 2016 international IUCN Red List as Least Concern (Do Linh San *et al.* 2016), which is unchanged from the 2008 and 1996 assessments (IUCN 1998, Begg *et al.* 2008). They were also listed as Least Concern in South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland (Begg *et al.* 2016c).

ACTIONS

There have been no studies on the ecology of the species in Namibia. Research should be encouraged to provide a more comprehensive account of the role honey badgers play in Namibian ecosystems. Honey badgers were listed as vermin in Namibia (Gordon *et al.* 2018) until an amendment to the Nature Conservation Ordinance (4 of 1975) in 2017 prohibited their persecution. This amendment is however not widely known, proving that awareness on this aspect and the need for their protection is required.



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