

Honey badgers in and around Table Mountain National Park, Cape Town

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Two independent images of a honey badger (*Mellivora capensis*) were captured in May 2024 as part of a survey of wildlife on the University of Cape Town campus and in adjacent parts of Table Mountain National Park (TMNP). The images included one of a honey badger emerging from a culvert (Figure 1a).

Media reports about the honey badger (e.g. Phekelela 2024) attracted attention (we even saw one pinned to a noticeboard at a local fish and chip shop) and publicised our request to learn about any other honey badger sightings in the area. Several people wrote to say they had seen a honey badger in the Silvermine section of TMNP. This complemented reports earlier in 2024 on *iNaturalist*¹ of a possible honey badger den site in Silvermine (see Figure 1-A1). We obtained further information about the Silvermine sightings and placed a camera trap in the vicinity from 17 May 2024 to 05 June 2024. The information was good, and our camera trap obtained multiple images of a honey badger entering and leaving a cavity (Figure 1b). We were able to identify a clear diel activity pattern with the honey badger using the presumed den during the daytime and leaving it at night (Figure 1c). An image of the honey badger was taken in the morning (08:23) on the same date as a further image of a honey badger captured at the University of Cape Town at night (23:59). These sites are 16 km apart in one of the most heavily utilised sections of the park for recreational activity (i.e. hiking and mountain biking), and separated by major roads. It seems unlikely that the honey badger would travel a distance of more than 16 km, and in heavily utilised areas including during daylight hours. We thus suggest that these are two different individuals.

This is an exciting discovery. A century ago, honey badgers were reported to be in 'great profusion at the Cape of Good Hope' (Somerville 2023:231) but by the 21st century were regarded as near threatened and locally extinct in the TMNP (Rebelo et al. 2011). Honey badgers had been sighted in camera trap surveys elsewhere in the Western Cape (e.g. Ross et al. 2022; Woodgate et al. 2023) including in peripheral parts of the wider Cape Town municipality, notably Witzands and Blaauwberg on the West Coast and in Tygerberg and Steenbras to the east and adjacent to agricultural areas (Schnetler, Radloff & O'Riain 2021), but not – until recently – in TMNP. A camera trap survey in 2013–2014 of the central and northern sections of TMNP (Meyer 2014) did not detect any honey badgers, nor did a 2022 survey that extended from TMNP through the city to the ocean (Oladimeji 2023). Extensive camera trapping in the southern TMNP also did not obtain any images of honey badgers (Colyn, Radloff & O'Riain 2018). The first image of a honey badger recorded by a camera trap survey on Table Mountain was from a multi-year survey (2019–2023) by SANParks (as yet unpublished), which recoded a single image of a honey badger in November 2021 in the Eagles Nest area above Hout Bay (information provided by Deborah Winterton).

Honey badgers are difficult to detect even in large camera trap surveys because they occur at low densities and in fragmented contexts (Begg et al. 2016; Somerville 2023:202–204). Researchers thus call for more information from the public to help estimate honey badger abundance and distribution (Begg et al. 2005, 2016; Carter et al. 2017). We offer this short communication – which collates citizen science reports and camera trap sightings – in support of such efforts.

Honey badger ecology and conflict with humans

Honey badgers, also known as ratels, are stocky, powerfully built, opportunistic predators with a reputation for intelligence, fearlessness and tenacity (Somerville 2023). They have a wide distribution (occurring across Africa, the Middle East and India) but are vulnerable to extirpation because they are slow breeders, persecuted by beekeepers and small livestock farmers, and

¹*iNaturalist* is a website for naturalists and available at: <https://www.inaturalist.org/>.

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Source: Photographs (a) and (b) were taken from camera traps set by B.S. Wittenberg, Cape Town, South Africa, 2024; (c) Activity map was created by B.S. Wittenberg; used with permission.

FIGURE 1: (a) Honey badger at the University of Cape Town; (b) Honey badger at a den site in Silvermine; (c) Diel activity map for that site (grey area shows presence in the cavity).

hunted for the traditional medicine trade (Begg & Begg 2002; Begg et al. 2005, 2016; Somerville 2023).

Honey badgers have a generalist diet. A study from the southern Kalahari found that their diet comprised of at least 59 species (mostly vertebrates such as rodents, reptiles, birds and snakes), eggs, invertebrates (mostly bee larvae), berries, fruit, honey and carrion (Begg et al. 2003). They have thick, loose skin to protect against animal attacks and have evolved to survive venomous snake bites and bee stings (Drabeck, Dean & Jansa 2015). Honey badgers in the Serengeti do not avoid large carnivores, suggesting that they can occupy a similar niche to them (Allen, Peterson & Krofel 2018).

Honey badgers are a solitary species with a polygynous mating system (male home ranges can encompass the home ranges of several females) and no distinct breeding season (Begg 2001; Begg et al. 2016). Home ranges vary in size depending on food availability, terrain and presence of other honey badgers. In the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, male home ranges span from 229 km² to 844 km² while in other parts of Africa they average 500 km² (reviewed in Somerville 2023:204). It is unknown how many honey badger home ranges could be supported in TMNP or in the surrounding suburbs.

Although they generally avoid human dominated landscapes, honey badgers can become habituated to humans, even get tamed (FitzSimons 1919; Rosevear 1974). In the first 'natural history' of South Africa, William FitzSimons (then Director of the Port Elizabeth Museum) wrote in almost besotted tones about honey badgers. He reported that the museum's tame honey badger was a huge drawcard for visitors, and that she was 'amusing and lovable' – but also capable of wreaking havoc on other live museum exhibits (1919:152–161). The *LiveScience* entry on honey badgers (Panesar 2020) strikes a similar chord in its title: 'Honey badgers: Adorable but Fierce little mammals' (Panesar 2020). Admiring internet memes celebrate their toughness and ferocity, suggesting ongoing human fascination with honey badgers (Fordahl 2024).

Honey badgers may be engaging and entertaining, but this has clear costs. Honey badgers can be consummate raiders,

employing a range of techniques, including using objects as tools, to break glass and dismember (even destroy) structures such as cages and bins (Begg et al. 2016; Carter et al. 2017; FitzSimons 1919; Rosevear 1974; Somerville 2023). During the 1980s, 40 honey badgers were killed or removed from Satara rest camp (Kruger National Park) after raiding dustbins and fridges. If honey badgers are establishing more of a presence in and around TMNP, it is important that waste bins are better protected, and that the public learn more about them and not to feed them.

Recent sightings of honey badgers on Table Mountain

The earliest reported sightings we learned of were from the 1990s: a honey badger was reported to be runover on the highway below Table Mountain (and its body donated to the natural history museum), a hiker also reported having been chased off Devil's Peak by a honey badger in 1998. Reports on *iNaturalist* in 2014 (see Figure 2-A1). speculated that a honey badger might have been present in the Silvermine area and the ensuing discussion prompted a comment that a honey badger had been killed that year on Baden Powel drive (running east-west along Cape Town's southern coastline). In 2015, a honey badger was detected as by-catch on a camera trap deployed as part of a caracal study in the Silvermine region of TMNP. The associated *Facebook* post of the photograph generated some public commentary, including a comment that a cyclist had, also in 2015, been pursued by a honey badger on the Constantiaberg section of TMNP (see Figure 3-A1). We also obtained video footage from a security camera in November 2023 showing a honey badger entering a residential property (along a green belt in Constantia near TMNP) at night and leaving with a chicken. Figure 2 collates the various reported sightings (and year) of citizen science reports and camera trap images.

Such sightings suggest that honey badgers have been present (possibly sporadically) in TMNP over the past 30 years. Recent sightings may be a product of technological

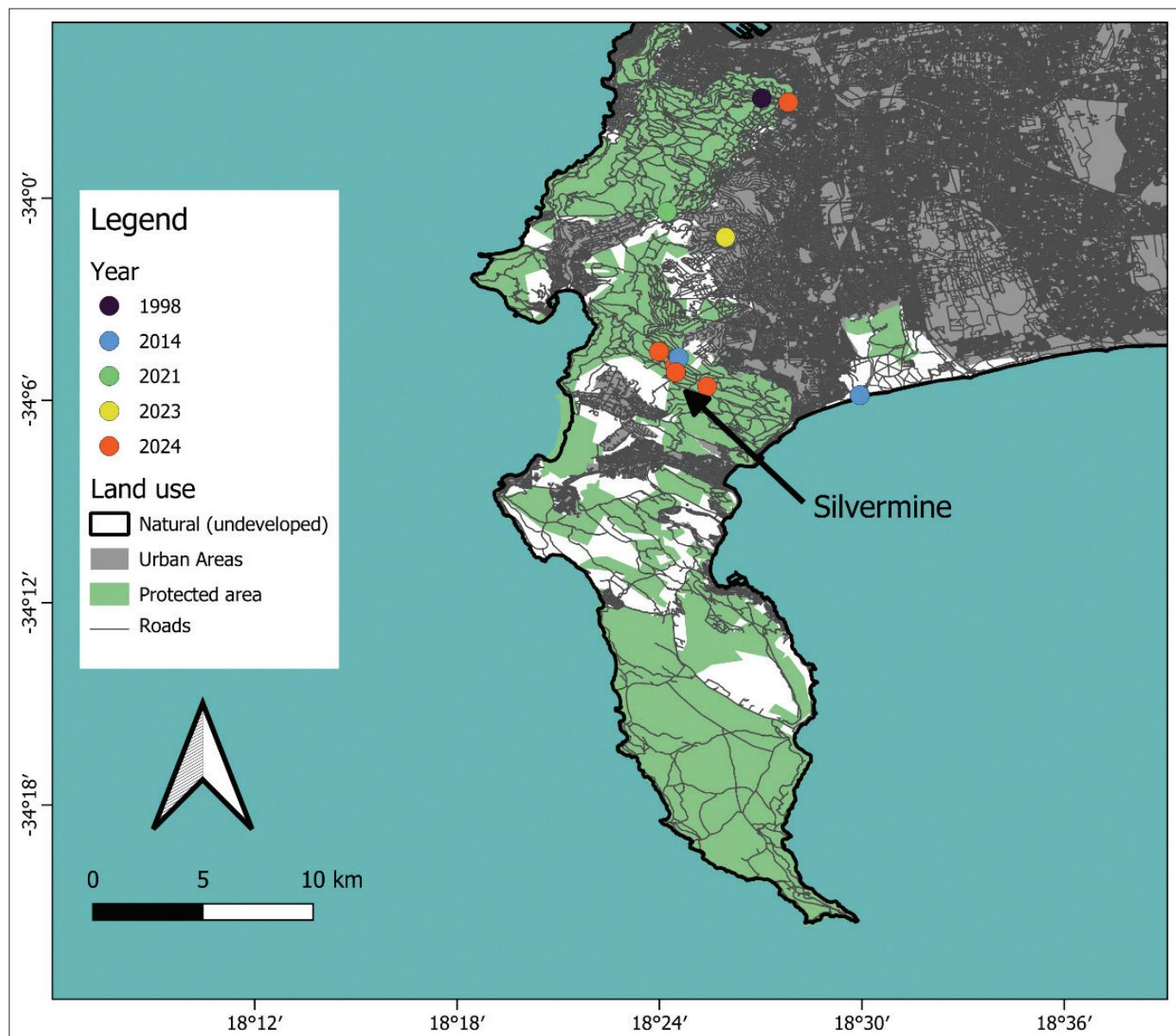


FIGURE 2: Honey badger sightings on and in the vicinity of Table Mountain National Park, with dates.

development (more and better detection), but it is also possible that TMNP has been recolonised by honey badgers or that their numbers are growing. Honey badgers are present in nature reserves in the greater Cape Town area, notably Blouberg Nature Reserve to the north-west and Helderberg Nature Reserve to the east (Schnettler et al. 2019). It is possible that honey badgers may have found a way through the urban sprawl to Table Mountain, perhaps during the 2020 coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) lockdown when traffic volumes were low. That a honey badger was killed on Baden Powell drive is suggestive of a potential wildlife corridor along the coast connecting the Helderberg with the Southern Peninsula, although this corridor is increasingly thin in places. Honey badgers will find it difficult to traverse the sections where informal settlements in Khayelitsha township have encroached towards the sea, and to cross the N2 between Helderberg and the coast.

It is as yet unclear how many honey badgers exist on Table Mountain or whether their population on Table Mountain is viable. Even with some potential immigration, the risk of genetic isolation is great – as has happened to caracals on Table Mountain (Kyriazis et al. 2024).

An uncertain future and need for more research

More citizen science and opportunistic research is needed. Extensive and systematic camera-trapping, although useful and important, did not detect any honey badgers in the southern TMNP (Colyn et al. 2018; Meyer 2014) and only one image of a honey badger was obtained from SANPark's long-running camera trap effort. Large scale, systematic camera trap surveys are unlikely to reveal information about rare and cryptic species such as honey badgers. Rather, as honey badger researchers acknowledge, it is important to

obtain information about honey badgers from various sources and engage in more directed research where possible.

The opportunistic placement of camera traps can provide useful site-specific information. As shown in Figure 1c, we learned from the Silvermine camera that the honey badger had a clear diel activity pattern. We also learned more about burrow use. In the Kalahari, where most studies of honey badger behaviour have been conducted, honey badgers rarely sleep in the same place, although females will use the same den when they are breeding (Begg 2005). During the 61 days that our camera trap was operational in Silvermine, there were two periods of three weeks when the honey badger was absent from the presumed den. This suggests that it was not a breeding den and that the honey badger was probably cycling through various dens in its range. This appears to be a different pattern to honey badgers in the Kalahari.

The photograph of the honey badger emerging from a culvert on the upper campus of the University of Cape Town also provided more information than the mere presence of a honey badger: it showed that the extensive drainage network running under a major highway was being navigated by wildlife including a honey badger. Porcupine and water mongoose were also using this channel, presumably to commute to green belts below the highway. Furthermore, by comparing sightings of honey badger on the same day at two different locations we were able to conclude that these were likely different individuals.

Clearly more camera traps, placed at sites where honey badger have been opportunistically detected, including by members of the public, could help us understand this rare species in TMNP and how it is moving within the park and onto urban areas.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

All authors, N.N., B.S.W., Z.W. and M.J.O., contributed equally to this article.

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Ethical consideration

This article followed all ethical standards for a research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Data availability

All relevant data are in the article. Information deriving from personal communication is available on reasonable request from the corresponding author, N.N.

Disclaimer

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Appendix 1 starts on the next page →

Appendix 1

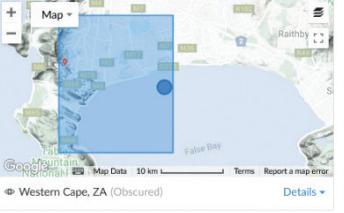
iNaturalist  Explore Community More  Log In or Sign Up

Ratei (*Mellivora capensis*) 



 **cmerry**

Observed:  January 2023 Submitted:  January 2023



Map Data 10 km  Details 



Notes

I met a man on Friday who had just seen the Honey Badger - it ran past him and fortunately his dog was on a lead at that time. He said he could smell the animal as it ran past. This evidently is its den.

Community Taxon 

The Community ID requires at least two identifications.

Activity

 cmerry suggested an ID   Jan '23

 **Ratei**  *Mellivora capensis*

 alicia_k commented  Jan '24

Is this on the Peninsula?

 cmerry commented  Jan '24

You can see that it is on the Peninsula.

 alicia_k commented  Jan '24

obscured

 ben_wittenberg commented  Apr '24

Hi there, I am doing a study on honey badgers in the Cape region, would it be possible to get the exact location for this? If you are interested you can contact me on WTTBEN001@myuct.ac.za

 Comment Suggest an Identification

[Log in or sign up](#) to add comments.

Community Taxon 

The Community ID requires at least two identifications.

Projects (1) 

Top Identifiers of Ratei

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Source: <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/10958998> (Accessed: 5 October 2024)

Note: All names were redacted for privacy purposes.

FIGURE 1-A1: Possible honey badger den site in Silvermine.

iNaturalist  Explore Community More Log In or Sign Up

Cape Ratel (*Mellivora capensis* ssp. *capensis*) 



 294,805 observations 

Observed: Jun 21, 2014 Submitted: Jun 29, 2014 - 5:27 AM SAST



Map Data 30 Km Terms Report a map error Details

▼ Silvermine quarry's of tenter ca... Show

Notes

Whodunnit?

If people: surely they would have taken the combs. Obvious choice is Ratel - but surely none on Peninsula? So Porcupine - not heard of this, but why not?

At base of rotting pine stump from before 2000 when there were still pine plantations here. (almost lost in the recesses of distant history and lets hope the lesson is never forgotten! Fynbos is not good economically for agriculture/silviculture!)

Community Taxon 

Cape Ratel (*Mellivora capensis* ssp. *capensis*) Cumulative IDs: 3 of 3 

0 2/3rds 3

 Agree  About

Activity

 commented 10y

Interaction:

Interaction: <http://www.ispot.org.za/node/267067> stealing honey and raiding nests

 commented 10y

Ratel

Actually, I unfortunately have a rat in my freezer this moment, which was gifted by a well meaning member of the public to my wife... about from Baden Powell Drive near to Capetown Park. I had to give her words about it today, went down to the freezer to get a Sunday chicken to find the freezer still rather well occupied by this obnoxious fellow, which has been residing there some weeks now. I had to add that it was an insult to my masculinity to have to ask her to remove something from the freezer as normal gender roles suggest that it is usually the other way around.

So, there are more than likely Honey Badger resident on the Peninsula...

 commented 10y

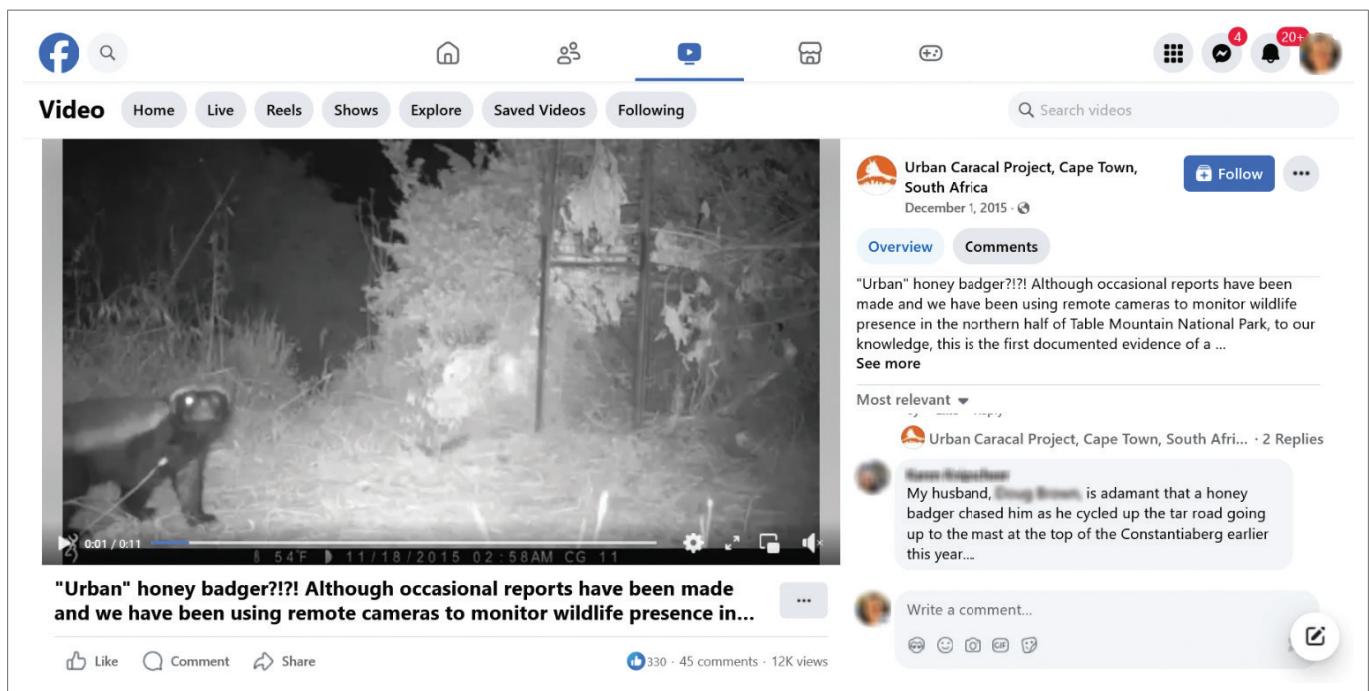
Projects (22) 

- African Biogeographic Regions
- Biodiversity of Africa
- Biodiversity of Cape Town
- Biodiversity of Greater southern Africa and surrounds
- Biodiversity of South Africa
- Biodiversity of southern Africa
- Cape Floristic Region Biodiversity
- Flora and Fauna of the Cape Floristic Region (s Afr)
- Greater Cape Floristic Region
- Habitats (s Afr) 
- Mammals of Southern Africa

Source: <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/10958998> (Accessed: 5 October 2024)

Note: All names were redacted for privacy purposes.

FIGURE 2-A1: Speculating that a honey badger might have been present in the Silvermine area.



Urban Caracal Project, Cape Town, South Africa
December 1, 2015 · 4 replies

Overview **Comments**

"Urban" honey badger?!? Although occasional reports have been made and we have been using remote cameras to monitor wildlife presence in the northern half of Table Mountain National Park, to our knowledge, this is the first documented evidence of a ... [See more](#)

Most relevant ▾

Urban Caracal Project, Cape Town, South Afr... · 2 Replies

Renee Hooper My husband, [Greg Brown](#), is adamant that a honey badger chased him as he cycled up the tar road going up to the mast at the top of the Constantiaberg earlier this year...

Write a comment...

Like Comment Share

330 · 45 comments · 12K views

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=988876754491648> (Accessed: 05 October 2024)

Note: All names were redacted for privacy purposes.

FIGURE 3-A1: Further encounters with honey badgers.