

A confirmed sighting of Pousargues's Mongoose *Dologale dybowskii*

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Fig. 1. Pousargues's Mongoose *Dologale dybowskii* at Semliki Wildlife Reserve, Uganda, 8 July 2013.

Abstract

I watched at length and photographed a group of Pousargues's Mongoose *Dologale dybowskii* on 7 and 8 July 2013 at Semliki Safari Lodge (on the eastern border of Semliki Wildlife Reserve), Uganda. The animals were distinctive in appearance, given my long experience with the main potential confusion species, Common Dwarf Mongoose *Helogale parvula*. Although the species's presence was well-known to lodge staff, this is the first published confirmed record of this extremely poorly known species from anywhere in its range for several decades.

Keywords: foraging, locality record, reaction to people, Semliki Safari Lodge, sociality, Uganda

Une observation confirmée de la Mangouste des savanes *Dologale dybowskii*

Résumé

J'ai longuement observé et photographié un groupe de Mangoustes des savanes *Dologale dybowskii* les 7 et 8 juillet 2013 à Semliki Safari Lodge (sur la frontière orientale de la réserve faunique de Semliki), en Ouganda. Les animaux étaient d'apparence distinctive (compte tenu de ma longue expérience avec la principale espèce qui pourrait potentiellement créer confusion, c'est à dire la Mangouste naine commune *Helogale parvula*). Bien que la présence de l'espèce était bien connue du personnel de la loge, cet article rapporte la première observation confirmée et publiée depuis plusieurs décennies, effectuée de quelque endroit à travers l'ensemble de l'aire de répartition de cette espèce extrêmement mal connue.

Pousargues's Mongoose *Dologale dybowskii* is known from just 31 museum specimens, with no confirmed sightings of this animal for more than three decades (Aebsicher *et al.* 2013, Stuart & Stuart 2013). As far as I am aware, this, the only species in the genus *Dologale*, has never previously been photographed in the wild and has only ever been recorded in one protected area, Garamba National Park in northeastern DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo), directly on the border with South Sudan (Verschuren 1958, Stuart & Stuart 2013). The sightings took place over two days, on Sunday 7 and Monday 8 July 2013, at Semliki Safari Lodge (0°54'15"N, 30°21'13"E; about 620 m asl), Uganda, a small lodge on the eastern border of Semliki Wildlife Reserve, less than 5 km south of Lake Albert. To the west, separated by no more than 6 km, the Fort Portal road and the northern extremes of Rwenzori National Park, lies Semliki National Park and the Semliki River, which acts as a natural border between Uganda and DRC. Formerly

known as the Toro Game Reserve, Semliki Wildlife Reserve is one of the oldest protected, or at least partly protected, areas in Uganda and occupies the majority of the western Great Rift Valley floor. Whilst the steep eastern slopes of the rift escarpment, which reach an elevation of around 1,900 m and protect a healthy population of Chimpanzees *Pan troglodytes*, form part of the reserve, most of Semliki sits at an elevation of between 600 m and 900 m and largely comprises open savannah and riverine forest along the Wasa River. The road from Fort Portal, the nearest major urban settlement, runs directly through the reserve to the southern extreme of Lake Albert, the most northerly of the great rift lakes and one of the few remaining localities holding Shoebill *Balaeniceps rex* in Uganda.

My first encounter with this little-known mongoose took place within a few minutes of returning from a boat trip on Lake Albert to photograph these distinctive birds, as I waited for lunch in the main dining area of the lodge. This overlooks



Fig. 2. Pousargues's Mongoose *Dologale dybowskii* at Semliki Wildlife Reserve, Uganda, 8 July 2013.

a section of forest. A small troop of Guerezas *Colobus guereza* had approached to within a reasonable distance for photographs and, as I turned to change the lens on my camera, I noticed that a single mongoose had entered the open dining room (roofed, but with one open side overlooking the forest, and several large doorways in the other walls, through one of which the mongoose entered). I was immediately aware that this was not a mongoose I had previously encountered, for although it bore a cursory resemblance to Common Dwarf Mongoose *Helogale parvula*, it was approximately 20–30% larger, with a far more substantial build and a longer tail than any Dwarf Mongoose I had observed in almost 25 years of travel in Africa. It was instantly recognisable as a distinct species. It was also far darker than any Dwarf Mongoose I had encountered, although of course major colour variations can occur within species across regions. Its underparts and lower limbs were conspicuously darker than the rest of the body. In addition, although Dwarf Mongoose has a wide distribution, from as far south as eastern South Africa to the northern extremes of Ethiopia, it is not thought to occur in much of Uganda and certainly not as far west as Lake Albert (Kingdon 1997). Given that small carnivores are one of my main areas of interest among mammals, I was already aware of the mongoose species that occur in Uganda and that there were only two that I had not previously seen, Jackson's Mongoose *Bdeogale jack-*



Fig. 3. Pousargues's Mongoose *Dologale dybowskii* at Semliki Wildlife Reserve, Uganda, 8 July 2013.

soni and Pousargues's Mongoose or Savannah Mongoose, as it is also commonly known. I ruled out Jackson's Mongoose on both appearance and range and when I checked my field guides later, the only one that offered any real assistance was Jonathan Kingdon's (1997) *the Kingdon field guide to African mammals*, which appeared to confirm that I had indeed seen my first Pousargues's Mongoose. Although the mongoose I had observed was darker than Kingdon's illustration, and the "undivided upper lip" that Kingdon described was not apparent to me, the rest of the description did match the animal that I had seen, particularly the size and distinctive ruff around the neck, which Kingdon described as a "prominent reverse 'cowlick' of fur" (p. 244).

The real surprise was that the mongoose that emerged in the dining room was not alone and whilst I understand that there is some suggestion that this species is believed to be solitary (see Stuart & Stuart 2013), if my encounters are anything to go by, that is not the case, as I discovered an additional seven animals as soon as I followed the first mongoose out into the largely manicured grounds of the lodge. Unfortunately all eight animals were departing when I saw them and although I followed for as long as possible and took a few initial pictures, they quickly disappeared into the undergrowth. However, they were not at all nervous or uncomfortable in my presence and I determined that they were almost certainly regular visitors to the lodge and that I would probably have another opportunity to see them the following day. This was confirmed when I spoke to the local guides, who were all familiar with the species and immediately referred to them as 'savannah mongoose'. Happily, as I waited on the lawn in order to avoid moving and disturbing them, the next day I was able to spend around 40 minutes with what I presume were the same eight animals (Figs 1–4). They again arrived around lunchtime and on this occasion I was able to watch them interact at close quarters. My initial observation was that their foraging far more resembled the feeding patterns of Banded Mongoose *Mungos mungo*, which generally forages in fairly loose and apparently independent formations, as opposed to the slightly tighter more controlled feeding groups of Dwarf Mongoose. I subsequently discovered that this preliminary observation appears to be supported by Kingdon (1997), who noted that "Dwarf Mongooses forage as a group, with a spread of some 50–60 m" (p. 243), while "Banded Mongooses forage in a loose formation" (p. 248). Generally they pounced on insects on the ground, but at various times they all dug in the loose soil and also turned over light stones along the paths. No obvious young or sub-adults were present and although they largely fed alone, they remained in contact with a series of vocalisations reminiscent of other communal mongoose species. They did not appear to travel as a group, at least not within close proximity of each other, as two continued to feed around the lawn at least ten minutes after the first six had departed. As I followed the final two animals, I encountered another two around 50 m away, but there was no sign of the other four, perhaps again suggesting that their behaviour more resembles that of Banded Mongoose than Dwarf Mongoose. They were certainly extremely tolerant of my presence and, judging from the evidence supplied by the guides that I spoke to, at least two of whom confirmed they had been seen around the lodge for several years, these animals are likely to be common in the



Fig. 4. Pousargues's Mongoose *Dologale dybowskii* at Semliki Wildlife Reserve, Uganda, 8 July 2013.

area and have undoubtedly been observed by other visitors, albeit unwittingly.

The relatively remote location aside, the most likely explanation regarding the lack of recorded sightings almost certainly relates to their passing resemblance to Dwarf Mongoose (despite the fact that it does not occur in the area), as well as the fact that many tourists do not take a great deal of interest in most smaller animals. Mongooses are of course territorial and it is therefore possible that these animals are an isolated group that have lived around the lodge for a number of years. However, the guides, all of whom had a sound knowledge of the local wildlife, indicated that they are also seen within other areas of the reserve. Consequently it is far more likely that they are comparatively common there and that this is yet another example of a visitor 'discovering' an animal that local people have always known and lived with.

Acknowledgements

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Chris and Mathilde STUART have commented:

"Two recent records have emerged, and have been published in *Small Carnivore Conservation*, of Pousargues's Mongoose *Dologale dybowskii*. This is one of Africa's least known mongoose species and these constitute the first photographic records of living individuals.

"This mongoose was previously known from just 31 museum specimens and a number of possible but unconfirmed sightings. Aebischer *et al.* (2013) documented probable records of this mongoose from the Chinko/Mbari drainage basin in the Central African Republic (CAR), with photographs. Now, most recently, Woolgar (above) has published details of sightings with photographs taken in the Toro-Semliki Wildlife Reserve, southwest Uganda.

"Both records fall within the known range of Pousargues's Mongoose and outside the known range of the similar Common Dwarf Mongoose *Helogale parvula*. Having looked at all available photographs there is no doubt in our mind that these are Pousargues's Mongoose in both localities. One image from the CAR clearly shows the long, robust claws on the front feet, overall grizzled appearance and what could be called a "cowlick" on the lower neck. Likewise the image from Toro-Semliki is clearly not of Dwarf Mongoose. Jonathon Kingdon has also confirmed the Toro-Semliki mongoose from the images as Pousargues's.

"What is of interest is that the animals at Toro-Semliki were observed in a 'troop' but only in loose association and Woolgar was able to observe them for some time. This would seem to be the perfect location for somebody to study this population. We wish we had the time!"