

CURRENT STATUS AND DISTRIBUTION OF THE LARGE GREY MONGOOSE, *HERPESTES ICHNEUMON*, IN THE CAPE PROVINCE

By C.T. STUART

The Large Grey Mongoose, *Herpestes ichneumon*, is a conspicuous mongoose with a wide distribution. Its range extends from the Iberian Peninsula in the west to the north-western part of the Arabian Peninsula, and along the African Mediterranean seaboard to Morocco. From Egypt it extends southwards through the Sudan and Ethiopia and from Kenya westwards to Nigeria and throughout much of central Africa (excluding the Equatorial forest belt), and the eastern and southern coastal belt of South Africa. This carnivore is absent from the arid central and western region of Southern Africa.

Roberts (1951) considered the Large Grey Mongoose to be a comparatively rare animal in South Africa and Shortridge (1934) believed this mongoose to be one of the rarest viverrids in the Eastern Cape Province. Sclater (1900) stated that although fairly widespread it appeared to be nowhere common.

Until recently this species was believed to occur only as far west as Knysna in the Cape Province. Sclater (1900) records two specimens in the South African Museum collection that were collected in the Cape and Stellenbosch divisions. No trace has been found of this material. The only confirmed specimen record for the area west of Knysna is the skull of a very old animal collected as a road casualty between Hawston and Bot River (3419AC) and housed in the South African Museum (ZM 36184). Ten specimens, from the Eastern Cape, are lodged in the Kafferian Museum, King William's Town, and the Transvaal Museum, Pretoria, has three specimens from the Knysna forest.

During the course of a survey of the carnivores of the Cape Province (Stuart 1981) it became apparent that the Large Grey Mongoose is in fact widespread in the South West Cape and in at least one area it is a fairly common animal. Erwee (pers. comm. a professional problem animal hunter) considers this mongoose to be common in the southern sector of the Caledon district and he records that he had killed a total of seven Large Grey Mongooses on the farms "Uitvlugt" and "Outuin" (3419AB and BD respectively). No material was retained.

In the area between Kleinrivierlei (3419AD Stanford) and Haelkraal River to the east (3419 DA and DC Baardskeerdersbos) the Large Grey Mongoose appears to be common and it is considered by some residents to be a problem in that it is said to take chickens and eggs. Skins of this mongoose were seen in the possession of labourers on the farm "Springfontein", Stanford (3419AD Stanford).

Records from the Western Cape were not restricted to the coastal belt, but animals were also recorded from a number of localities in the eastern Robertson Karoo. Although Rautenbach (1982) notes that the Large Grey Mongoose appears to occur in areas receiving more than 500mm of rain annually, three specimens were collected, and a number of sightings made, in areas receiving less than 300mm.

References

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MONGOOSE OF THE GODS- HERPESTES ICHNEUMON

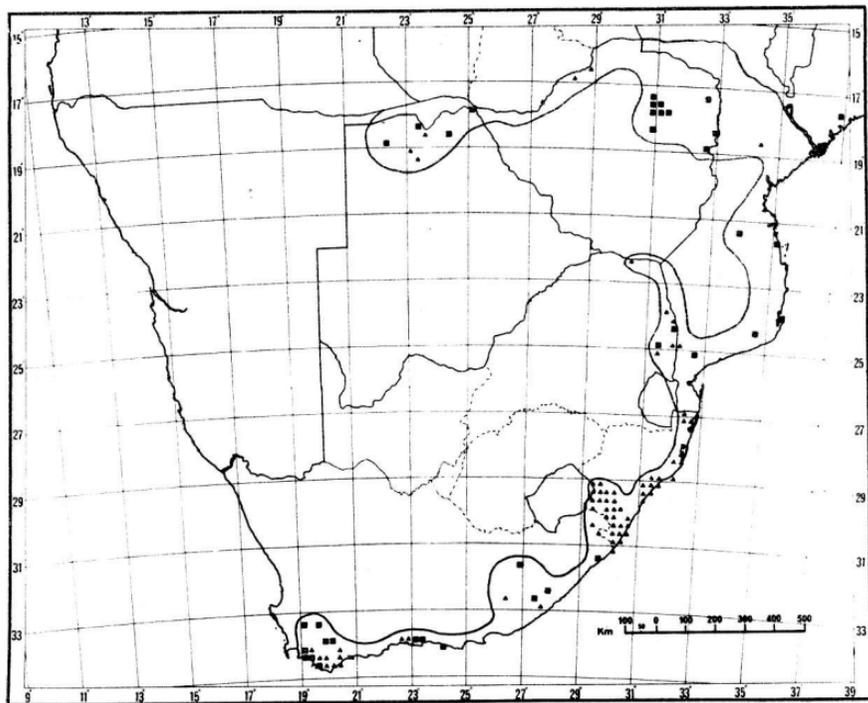
The Large Grey Mongoose or Ichneumon (a name of Greek origin meaning "tracker" or "pursuer") is the aristocrat of the mongoose world, having played an important role in a number of the ancient religions of the Middle East, particularly those of Egypt. Representations of this mongoose can be found on the walls of the tombs and temples of Thebes and Saqqara, the earliest of which date back to the Old Kingdom (2800-2150 BC).

The ancient Egyptians held many species of animals in high regard and they were frequently considered sacred. The Ichneumon was associated with several Gods, and archaeological discoveries link this beast with Atum, Re and Horus. It was sacred to Mafdet, the goddess who was supposed to protect against snake-bite. Aelian believed it to be connected with the worship of Buto, whom he identified with Latona, and Bubastis in whom he recognised Lucina. The most interesting religious ideas connected with the Ichneumon are related to the worship of Horus of Letopolis; the god of light and darkness, of sight and blindness, and in whom day and night are one. It was also credited with the ability to transform itself into a shrew under the cover of darkness. Certainly as late as the 9th Century A.D. it was believed that this mongoose could alter its size at will. The Arabian naturalist Al-Gahiz recorded that:

"In Egypt there is an animal called Nims. It is able to contract and to become smaller until it is like a mouse. If then a snake winds round it, it takes a deep breath, puffs itself up and so breaks the snake in pieces."

The ancients who worshipped Atum of Heliopolis credited the Ichneumon with the ability to change its length to such an extent that even the sun god who "sees all" could not see both its head and tail at the same time. This implied that this animal had the power to see, hear and smell out all that took place in the world.

The dangerous thunder-snake Apophis, who was fought by the god of Letopolis through his surrogate the Ichneumon, implies the often stated "natural role" of this mongoose as a killer of snakes. Mummified mongooses have been found inside bronze statues of the lion-headed goddess Uto.



The distribution of the Large Grey Mongoose, *Herpestes ichneumon*, in Southern Africa. Blocks are specimen records, triangles are sight and literature records.