



Two observations of Pousargues's Mongoose *Dologale dybowskii* in Murchison Falls National Park, Uganda

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Abstract

Pousargues's Mongoose *Dologale dybowskii* is a little-known mongoose endemic to Central Africa. It is believed to be rare. This note describes observations, illustrated by photographs, of several individual animals that appear to be Pousargues's Mongooses, in July and August 2021, in Murchison Falls National Park, Uganda. The identification was made on the basis of size, colouring and behaviour.

Keywords: citizen science, mammalwatching

Pousargues's Mongoose *Dologale dybowskii* is a small carnivore, endemic to Central Africa. The species is little known and is often thought to be rare. By 2013 there were only 31 museum specimens and unconfirmed sightings (Hunter 2018). But since 2013 there have been several published records with photographs: "probable" records from Chinko in the Central African Republic between 2009 and 2012 (Aebischer et al. 2013) and a "confirmed" record from Semliki Nature Reserve in Uganda (Woolgar 2014).

An absence of records, however, does not necessarily equate to an absence of animals. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species assessment, which categorises the species as Data Deficient, recognises the possibility that the species is merely rarely detected, rather than genuinely rare, and that "past confusion by observers with Common Dwarf Mongoose *Helogale parvula* may be responsible for the apparent paucity of records" (Aebischer et al. 2015). Two new records from Murchison Falls National Park in Uganda, in 2021, detailed in this note, add further weight to this theory.

This is a difficult animal to identify in the field. One of the very few published records of Pousargues's Mongoose in recent years was from Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (D'haen 2016), but the observer has since confirmed that this was a misidentification of a Slender Mongoose *Herpestes sanguineus* (Mathias D'haen in litt.).

Relatively little is known about Pousargues's Mongoose. The IUCN Red List assessment (Aebischer et al. 2015) notes that the species is "apparently confined to a narrow belt of savanna-forest mosaic north of the equator", "is known to occupy the thicketed shores of Lake Albert, as well as montane forest grasslands" (Aebischer et al. cite Stuart & Stuart 2013 for this), is "probably essentially diurnal and lives in – possibly loose – groups" (citing Aebischer et al. 2013) and "perhaps uses termite mounds as nocturnal shelters" (citing Aebischer et al. 2013).

Observation of Pousargues's Mongoose, July 2021

Two new records of Pousargues's Mongoose, from July and August 2021, both occurred during separate "mammalwatching" safaris through Uganda, organised and guided by Harriet Kemigisha, the owner of Uganda-based Harrier Tours, which until recently has focused on birdwatching safaris.

In early 2021, a group of Harrier Tour's safari clients, aware of the record of Pousargues's Mongoose from Semliki Nature Reserve (Woolgar 2014), wanted to search for this species there. They visited the reserve for half a day and did not see any mongooses (Ben-Yehuda 2021). Kegimisha returned to the reserve later, in June 2021, and interviewed people working there. Though they reported seeing mongooses two to three times a week, it was not clear which species they were referring to. Kegimisha searched intensively for two days but did not see them.

It is important to remember that prior to her first mammalwatching trip, Kemigisha had specialised in birding tours and had not spent a great deal of time researching mammals. By July 2021, following the impetus from her first dedicated mammalwatching safari, the species was on Kemigisha's radar: she knew what it looked like and how it differed from the other Ugandan mongooses with which she was familiar.

On 28 July 2021, a party that included Kemigisha, Kevin Musanga, Jon Hall and driver Joel Bahati, left Pakuba Lodge, in Murchison Falls National Park, Uganda, setting out for Semuliki Forest National Park. At about 08h00, the group had driven south for about 9 km from Pakuba Lodge when a mongoose dashed across the dirt track in front of the vehicle and under a bush next to the road (Fig. 1).

Hall was sitting in the back of the vehicle and only had a glimpse. But Kemigisha, sitting in the front, had a better view and was interested enough in the ani-



Fig. 1. Location of Pousargues's Mongoose *Dologale dybowskii* sighting on 28 July 2021, Murchison Falls National Park, Uganda, about 300 m from the Lake Albert shoreline. (Photo: Jon Hall.)

mal to stop the car. She felt it was too small to be a Banded Mongoose *Mungos mungo*, too dark to be a Dwarf Mongoose and looked “wrong” for both species. They left the vehicle and waited by the bush under which the mongoose had disappeared, presumably running down the termite nest hole at its base. A few minutes later Bahati saw another mongoose dash across the road and go under the same bush.

We scoured the immediate area. During an hour we had glimpses of at least three individuals dashing, low to the ground, from bush to bush towards the lake shore, and back again towards the road. They were fast and difficult to photograph.

Kemigisha was in no doubt that they were Pousargues's Mongoose, despite the fleeting observations. It was evident that the mongooses lacked the prominent black tail tip of the Slender Mongoose and also lacked the stripes of the Banded Mongoose. They appeared too dark to be Dwarf Mongoose. (The location is outside the Dwarf Mongoose's known range;

however, given the existing knowledge levels, Dwarf Mongoose ought not to be excluded solely on this basis.) The mongooses had black legs, a black cape over their head and shoulders and otherwise a reddish-brown colour (Fig. 2).

The animals' behaviour was also different from the Dwarf, Banded and Slender Mongooses, which the authors have observed before (the latter two species are confirmed to occur in the national park and could potentially be confused with Pousargues's Mongoose). Dwarf Mongooses tend to be seen in groups in the open and use termite mounds for shelter. Banded Mongooses usually travel in a large group and will generally stop, look back and sit up to examine a potential threat. Slender Mongooses are usually solitary.

The three (or more) mongooses that we observed were presumably associated with one another.

On the basis of our photographs and notes, African mammalogists Chris and Tilde Stuart confirmed our identification of the mongooses: “We have looked again at your images and doubt if they could be anything else but Pousargues's!” (C. & T. Stuart in litt. 2021).

This is the first known record of the mongoose from this popular national park.

Brief sightings on 20 and 21 August 2021

At about 11h00 on 20 August 2021, as Stuart Chapman, Kemigisha and others approached the area where the Pousargues's Mongooses had been seen the previous month, a small, dark, mongoose-shaped animal ran across the road about 5 m in front of the vehicle and disappeared into a drainage pipe near some scrub. It was a single animal and was observed by Kevin Musanga. Although the party waited for it to reappear for the next 20 minutes, no further sighting was recorded that day.

The next day they saw another mongoose at the



Fig. 2. Pousargues's Mongoose *Dologale dybowskii*, 28 July 2021, Murchison Falls National Park, Uganda. (Photos: Jon Hall, except bottom left: Kevin Musanga.)



same location, moving between the bushes on the side of the road as they were driving by. They stopped; it stuck its head up (dark and small) and took cover before it could be photographed. The mongoose's colouration and small size ruled out Banded Mongoose. It was about the size of a Dwarf Mongoose, but its colour was notably darker.

Discussion

It is perhaps premature to class these sightings as a confirmed Pousargues's Mongoose locality record. While we have no personal doubt that the identification is correct, for such an apparently rare species it would be prudent to consider these records provisional, at least until a high-quality photograph is taken. This note has been written, in part, to motivate effort towards obtaining such a photograph.

If one accepts that these are Pousargues's Mongooses, it is reasonable to ask whether Pousargues's Mongoose is indeed rare in Murchison Falls National Park.

Murchison Falls National Park receives as many as 100,000 visitors each year. Most visitors and guides have likely never heard of the species. Kegimisha had been visiting the park for 13 years and had not knowingly encountered it before 2021, but she had not been aware of the species until very recently.

These sightings are another example of citizen science in action and of the cascading benefits of mammalwatching ecotourism for conservation and science. Harrier Tours will continue to search for Pousargues's Mongoose in Murchison Falls National Park and elsewhere.

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