



There are times when we forget that predators often become prey themselves. According to ornithologist Rob Simmons, some eagles capture and eat mongooses, and this is indeed true for the black mongoose.

One morning I watched through my binoculars a black mongoose confidently trotting across an open 100-metre-wide flat granite dome from a vegetated gully to a small rock pile. Suddenly, the mongoose started to bound frantically towards the rocks, so I dropped my binoculars to get a wider field of view. Above me I spotted a blur of motion – a large stooping African hawk eagle. A fraction of a second before the raptor would have had a meal, the mongoose slipped under a boulder. The eagle made an abrupt landing some distance away, took a few seconds to shake its feathers into place and then flew off. The mongoose seemed to be more ruffled by the near miss and remained under its rock for another five minutes. The encounter was a lesson in why black mongooses generally avoid wide-open spaces.

Namibia is a country of harsh light – bright sun and deep shadows. Photographers are familiar with the problem of taking pictures in a landscape of high contrast. Adjust your camera settings for a sand dune in the sun and everything in the shade comes out black. Wildlife watchers know the problem too. Search a boulder-strewn granite ridge in the bright sun for klipspringers and your

eyes do not readily adjust to the shaded sides of the boulders, which appear black – black as a black mongoose.

I could always find the radio-collared black mongoose, yet it still proved elusive. Not only was it constantly on the move hunting, it was exceedingly difficult to see. Many times I watched it through my binoculars as it weaved in and out and around the crevices and cracks among granite boulders. One minute I would have the mongoose in view, then it would disappear like a phantom, only to reappear in a nearby dark crevice. The ghostly sequence would continue nearly all day, as the black mongoose periodically appeared and then just as quickly melted into the shadows of the boulders.

African hawk eagles and black eagles are relatively common in the vicinity of the Erongo Mountains and I suspect a soaring bird, or one perched above a boulder-strewn valley, would find it as difficult as I did to focus on black mongooses. Unless, of course, they were out in the open, which they rarely are.

The radio-collar gave me the opportunity to observe the black mongoose closely. Without that opportunity I would never have known that black could be such an effective camouflage, particularly for an animal that is active during broad daylight. Sometimes it is necessary to look further than conventional wisdom to put the pieces of a puzzle together correctly. ■

the shadow hunter

It was while conducting research on small mammals at the Erongo Wilderness Lodge in the foothills of the Erongo Mountains near Omaruru, Namibia, that Galen Rathbun found a black mongoose in one of his live traps. Because so little is known about this species, he attached a radio-collar to the animal and gathered information on its behaviour. What he discovered came as something of a surprise...

Did you see that mongoose cross the road?' 'No. What colour was it?' Nearly everyone interested in birds and mammals is aware of the importance of coloration in distinguishing one species from another. A yellow mongoose *Cynictis penicillata* is yellow and a black mongoose *Galerella nigrata* is black, but sometimes it is not so straightforward.

You might think that a mongoose that is black, active during the day and nearly a metre long from nose to tip of tail would be easy to find and identify, but this is not so. The black mongoose occurs in a relatively small area between the Erongo Mountains in northern Namibia and the Angolan border – normally in habitats with large rocks and

boulders. It is solitary, making it more difficult to see than mongooses that run in packs, such as the suricate *Suricata suricatta*. To make matters worse, most identification guides do not even include the black mongoose as a species. This is probably because it was only described as different from the slender mongoose *Galerella sanguinea* in 1928. In northern Namibia the slender mongoose is only about two-thirds the size of the black mongoose and usually brown with only the tip of the tail being black. So, we are back to the importance of colour.

Why would a mongoose living in hot and arid Namibia be entirely black? Conventional wisdom suggests that black is not the expected colour for an animal that is active during the day in a region where summer temperatures often exceed 35 °C. But when something doesn't make sense, often the problem is that we are missing a piece of the biological puzzle.

The black mongoose appears to be an opportunistic predator feeding on a wide range of items including invertebrates, reptiles, birds and mammals. It even eats fleshy seeds when these are available.

The harsh light of Namibia renders the coloration of the black mongoose surprisingly effective as camouflage.

ROGER FUSSELL

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Eye-witness accounts by CC Africa naturalist-guides

Serval thwarted by banded mongooses

'We were following a serval one morning in May. Suddenly the slender cat stopped and peered forward. The grass was rustling up ahead. We edged forward and saw a troop of about 20 banded mongooses with several infants. The serval stalked silently towards them, but its movements were detected by an adult mongoose. Chaos ensued as the mongooses chirped and whistled, then launched an attack on the serval. The whole troop went on the offensive trying to nip and bite the much larger predator, which was swinging at them with extended claws. The spat continued for several minutes before the serval decided to retreat. No sooner had it turned tail than it was pursued by the noisy mob of brave mongooses.'

James Morinte, Kichwa Tembo, Masai Mara, Kenya

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