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NOTE

On the occurrence of Honey Badger *Mellivora capensis* (Mammalia: Carnivora: Mustelidae) in the northern Eastern Ghats of Andhra Pradesh, India

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The Honey Badger *Mellivora capensis* Schreber, 1776 popularly known as the Ratel, is a monotypic species of the small carnivore family Mustelidae, and is the sole member of its subfamily Mellivorinae. Although currently classified as Least Concern (LC) by the World Conservation Union (IUCN), its population is decreasing and sightings are extremely rare (Do Linh San et al. 2016).

The Honey Badger is widely distributed throughout Africa and western & southern Asia (Begg et al. 2005; Do Linh San et al. 2016), including most of India (Prater 1980; Menon & Daniel 2003). Although their status and distribution have been well documented in parts of Africa and western Asia (Kruuk & Mills 1983; Begg et al. 2003, 2005), there have been few studies on them from across different parts of India (Kumara & Singh 2007; Gupta et al. 2012; Gubbi et al. 2014; Krishnan et al. 2016), mainly from central India and the Western Ghats. There have been no published records of Honey Badgers from the Eastern Ghats of Andhra Pradesh. The current note presents the first record of the occurrence of Honey Badger from northern Eastern Ghats (NEG) of Andhra Pradesh State through camera trap images.

This record was obtained as part of a camera trapping study that is being undertaken currently by the authors to inventorise the mammal community and its diversity patterns across the NEG of Andhra Pradesh (Aditya & Ganesh 2017). The NEG is spread between 18.491–19.181 ^{0}N & 79.541–83.233 ^{0}E. The region is generally understood as the section of the Ghats stretching northwards between the Godavari River in Andhra Pradesh and the Mahanadi River in central Odisha. The NEG has an altitudinal range from 20m at the Godavari River to 1,690m at the Jindhagada Peak. The dominant forest type is moist deciduous, with some patches of semi-evergreen and dry deciduous forest (Champion & Seth 1968). There are no published studies on Honey Badgers in the NEG. Most of the forests in the NEG are administered as a cluster of reserved forests (RFs), and there is also one large protected area, the Papikonda National Park (Figure 1).

Passive digital infra red camera traps (Trail Cam and Bushnell 8mp, Scout Guard 20mp) were used in a stratified sampling framework across different elevation zones and habitat types across the NEG. Four cameras are being installed in selected grids, each measuring 5x5

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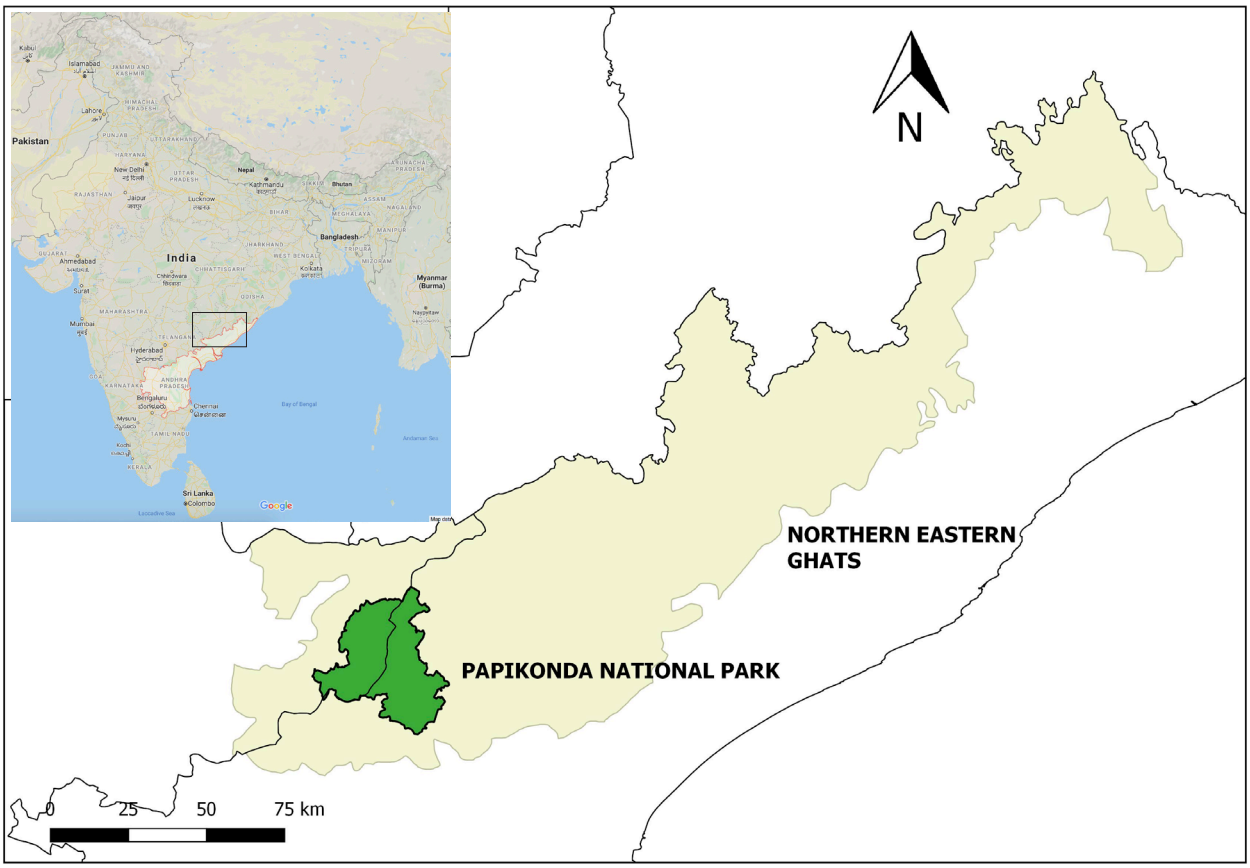

Figure 1. The northern Eastern Ghats of Andhra Pradesh, India.

km^2 for a period of seven trapping nights per camera trap (CT). A total of 30 grids representing various habitat types and elevation zones across the NEG were surveyed through CTs between October 2018 and February 2019. Therefore, the total trapping effort was 840 trap nights (=20,160 trap hours) which recorded one pic of Honey Badger.

The Honey Badger was previously recorded from sign surveys and community observations from the NEG (Aditya & Ganesh 2018), however, there were no photographic captures before this report. One CT recorded images of Honey Badger in the current study. The species was identified using a standard field identification guide for mammals (Menon & Daniel 2003). The species was recorded from a TrailCam IR camera trap located at 17.690 ^{0}N and 81.582 ^{0}E in the fairly dense moist deciduous forest at an elevation of 520m (Image 1). The image was captured at 00:18:00 on 18 October 2019. The location was in the East Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh, in the buffer of the Papikonda National Park. The location was about 15km south of the Sileru River separating Andhra Pradesh and Odisha states.

Image 1. Camera trap image of Honey Badger.

The CT captures of the Honey Badger confirms its presence in the NEG landscape (Aditya & Ganesh 2018). This record adds to the biological diversity and the conservation importance of the NEG in particular and the larger Eastern Ghats landscape in general (Goswami et al. 2018; Agarwal et al. 2012; Balaji & Satyanarayana 2016). Their presence in dense moist deciduous forest

indicates their suitability and adaptability to a wide variety of habitats, and could highlight their preference for this habitat in the NEG. Given that the Eastern Ghats is home to several rare and threatened species but is also among the least protected forest landscapes globally with only 3.53% of its area protected (Cardillo et al. 2006). This report underscores the need to implement stronger conservation measures, particularly in the face of rapid land-cover changes from development activities in the region such as the upcoming Polavaram Dam (Mohan 2006; Aditya & Ganesh 2018).

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