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Cover: Himalayan Gray Langur *Semnopithecus ajax* (adult female) © Rupali Thakur.



## A coastal population of Honey Badger *Mellivora capensis* at Chilika Lagoon in the Indian east coast

Tiasa Adhya<sup>1</sup> & Partha Dey<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Centre for Conservation of Natural Resources, The University of Trans-disciplinary Health Sciences and Technology, 74/2, Post Attur via Yelahanka, Jarakabande Kaval, Bengaluru, Karnataka 560064, India.

<sup>2</sup> Fishing Cat Conservation Alliance, PO Box 1488, Navasota, Texas 77868, USA.

<sup>1</sup> adhyatiasa@yahoo.com (corresponding author), <sup>2</sup> parthamarsh2@gmail.com

The Honey Badger or Ratel *Mellivora capensis* (family Mustelidae) is the only species in its genus. It is distributed widely all across Africa and southwestern Asia with the easternmost distribution being the Indian subcontinent (Prater 1980; Harrison & Bates 1991; Neal & Cheeseman 1996). It has a very wide habitat tolerance, occurring from sea-level to >2,500 m and from desert steppes to rainforests but prefers drier arid landscapes and avoids regions with very heavy rainfall (Proulx et al. 2016). Its status and distribution in Africa and western Asia are well documented (Proulx et al. 2016). However, it remains one of the least studied small carnivores in India with a majority of occurrences reported from central and western India but barely from the northeastern states (Kumara & Singh 2007; Gupta et al. 2012; Gubbi et al. 2014; Krishnan et al. 2016). Only recently has its presence been documented from the Papikonda National Park situated in the Eastern Ghats (Aditya et al. 2020).

We report the Honey Badger, for the first time, from human-dominated landscapes of the Chilika lagoon, Odisha, roughly 500 km to the north-east of the recent record from the northern Eastern Ghats in the state of Andhra Pradesh (Aditya et al. 2020). There are no previous reports of the Honey Badger from the landscape in literature.

Chilika is Asia's largest brackish water lagoon and one of India's oldest Ramsar sites. It is partially encompassed by the Eastern Ghats in the north, is drained by tributaries of the Mahanadi River in the north-east and is connected to the Bay of Bengal in the south. The lagoon is situated in a human-dominated multi-use landscape. We got three independent reports of Honey Badgers from the northern sector of Chilika (drained by Mahanadi's tributaries and partially encompassed by the Eastern Ghats fringes) and the lower central sector (islands separating Chilika from the Bay of Bengal).

These reports were collected during interview

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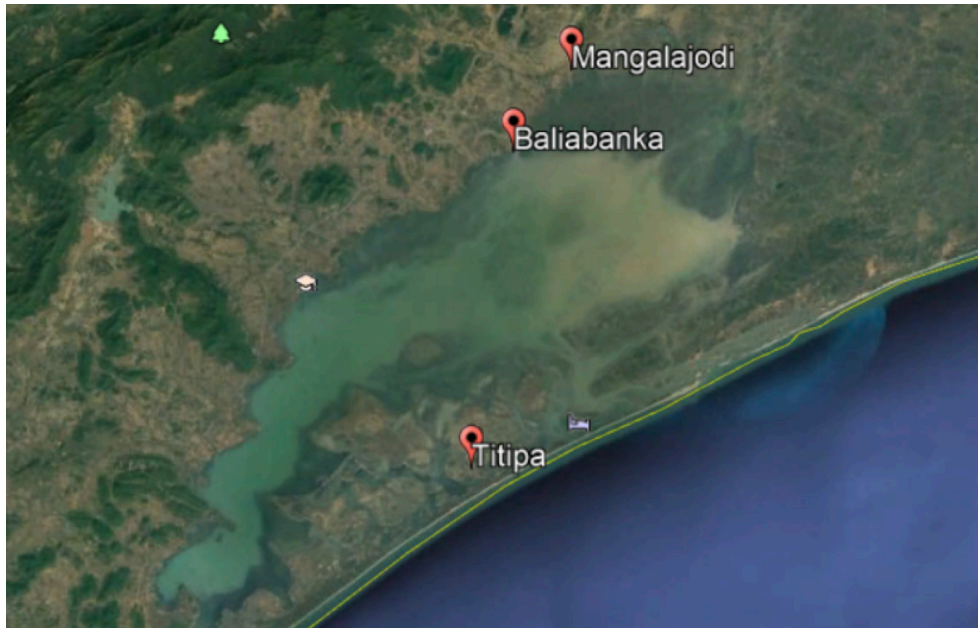


Image 1. Locations of Honey Badger sightings in Chilika, India.



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Image 2. Dead Honey Badger *Mellivora capensis* from near Chilika Lake, Mangalajodi, Odisha, India, in November 2019.

#### Location details of Honey Badger occurrences in Chilika.

Name of village	Latitude	Longitude
Mangalajodi (Northern sector)	19.909°N	85.445°E
Baliabanka (Northern sector)	19.846°N	85.379°E
Titipa (Central sector)	19.625°N	85.327°E

surveys conducted by us to understand Fishing Cat *Prionailurus viverrinus* distribution in Chilika. The Honey Badger at Mangalajodi on November 2019 was found by villagers who upon seeing such an animal that they had never seen before, reportedly beat it to death (Image 2). The Honey Badger in Baliabanka fell into a well in January 2020 and was rescued and released by the fire department. We identified the species from videos that villagers took. The one at Titipa was from June 2018 when a juvenile fell into a dry well but escaped during the night. We confirmed the identity of the species from video records taken by villagers.

In all three cases local villagers could not identify the badger and thought it was a bear (Ursidae), and in one case, a panda *Ailuropoda melanoleuca*. Our findings highlight the need to conduct awareness campaigns on the species among local communities to dissipate fear of the species and promote acceptance and tolerance.

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