

The Palawan Stink Badger



Ian Grimwood writes: The fauna of Palawan Island, the most south-westerly of the Philippines, is very different from that of the other islands. Probably it was colonised from Borneo at a different time and by a different land bridge from that used by the fauna in the other islands of the archipelago. Because of long isolation many endemic forms of both mammals and birds have evolved there, including the Palawan stink badger *Suillotaxus marchei*, which has been given full generic status. This note is based on observations made during a short visit to Palawan in 1974 and two months spent in 1975 in the Calamian Islands where this stink badger occurs on Busuanga although not on Culian, the only other large island in the group.

Active by both day and night the stink badger appears to be surprisingly common wherever it is found – on Busuanga its distinctive tracks are to be seen in the dust of most roads and paths. Where it has been it leaves behind a persistent smell, suggesting that the discharge from its anal glands is not only for defensive purposes, as is commonly thought.

In appearance it verges on the ludicrous – a small 5–6 lb. animal of a generally chocolate brown colour (lighter coloured specimens are not uncommon), with a yellowish cap and streak down the back of the neck that fades out about the shoulders, and dirty white and almost bald muzzle and feet, which give it an anaemic appearance. An enormous, hairless and pale-skinned anal region comprises (at least when the animal is alarmed) approximately one-third of its total bulk, and stuck vertically on the extreme end of that anal bulge is a 1½-inch stump of a tail, almost devoid of hair and cut square across the top, exactly like the funnel of a toy boat. It moves with a rather ponderous, fussy walk, but when alarmed can sustain a steady trot for up to 100 yards; even then its speed is no more than that of a man walking.

One individual we heard snuffling in a clump of grass rolled over and shammed dead when first touched, but spoiled the act by continually swivelling its anal region to point in whatever direction its aggressor moved. It discharged nothing when picked up, or while being carried a mile back to camp, but confronted with a camera it sent a jet of a few cubic centimetres of yellowish oily fluid straight onto the lens and the photographer's hands, at a range of about three feet. Although pungent, the smell was not particularly offensive, suggesting a compound of sweet almonds and stink ants, and it had completely disappeared within half an hour. The badger drew back its lips in a snarl, showing its remarkably heavy teeth, but it was most reluctant to bite, and would not even seize a stick held against its lips. It assumed a threatening attitude when a hand was extended, and demonstrated by raising each front foot in turn about two inches off the ground and bringing it smartly down with an audible smack, rather in the manner of a playful but puzzled puppy. When released it moved off at the trot already described, but it did not bother to go further than the nearest bush, some twenty yards away, where it tried to conceal itself, although there was a line of covered retreat beyond.

The stink badger is eaten by many people and may also be preyed upon by the Malayan civet *Viverra zangalunga*, common palm civet *Paradoxurus hermaphroditus*, and leopard cat *Felis bengalensis*, all of which occur throughout its range, although no evidence of this was found. However, it appears to be in need of no special protection.