

PRIMATE PROFILE



The tiny (200-gram) Somali Bushbaby, or Somali Galago (*Galago gallarum*), lives in drier habitats than any other African primate... in *Commiphora* and *Acacia* thornbush where annual rainfall is low (< 600 mm), where drinking water is seldom available, and where there are often fewer than five bush and tree species.

While the Vervet Monkey (*Chlorocebus pygerythrus*), Patas Monkey (*Erythrocebus patas*), and Yellow Baboon (*Papio cynocephalus*) often forage in dry habitats, they all depend on the year-around availability of surface water... which they drink every day or two. The Somali Bushbaby has no such requirement, as it has adopted a 'moisture-saving' nocturnal lifestyle... meeting its water needs from the food that it eats.

As mentioned in a recent article in *Swara* ('Leapers in the Dark', Vol 27:1, pp. 50-51, 2004), Bushbaby taxonomy has recently undergone some major changes... and more big changes are expected. As Bushbabies are nocturnal, natural selection for interspecific recognition has worked mainly on vocalisations and scent... rather than on visual external characters (for example, the colour pattern of the pelage). As such, species of Bushbabies often resemble one another in their external physical appearance. To the 'visually orientated' human, this means that distinguishing species of Bushbabies based on appearance has often been difficult.

Now, after more detailed studies of Bushbaby vocalisations, morphology and genetics, new 'cryptic' species have come to light. For example, detailed studies of the 'Senegal Bushbaby' (*Galago senegalensis*) have revealed that what was long thought to be one species with many subspecies is in fact at least seven species... one of which is the Somali Bushbaby. Our own recent, preliminary research has revealed that the Somali Bushbaby is a distinctive species with a vocal repertoire, aspects of behaviour, and habitat requirements that are different from any other Bushbaby species.

The Somali Bushbaby occurs in the species-poor thornbush habitats of north-eastern Kenya, southern Ethiopia, and Somalia, but the limits of its distribution remain poorly understood. In Kenya, the Somali Bushbaby is known from east and north of the Tana River. Within its range, the Somali Bushbaby is often the only

Life in the Thornbush – the Somali Bushbaby

by Yvonne de Jong and Tom Butynski

primate present. We have found this species to be especially common at some sites in Meru National Park and near Moyale on the Kenya/Ethiopia border.

In the field, the Somali Bushbaby is one of the easiest Bushbabies to distinguish. It has the following combination of characters, which make it unlike any other Bushbaby in Kenya: a whitish face, blackish-brown eye rings and tail, and black ears. The fur of the back is light buff. At night, in the light of a spot lamp, the dark eye rings, ears and tail contrast sharply with the pale face and body.

The Senegal Bushbaby sometimes occurs in the same places as the Somali Bushbaby, but can be distinguished by its greyish back and ears. In our experience, the single best character for distinguishing these two species is the colour of the ears... grey and pinkish in the case of the Senegal Bushbaby, jet black in the case of the Somali Bushbaby.

Somali Bushbabies move at speed through the thorniest vegetation, making leaps of up to 2.5 metres between branches. They also come to the ground, where they hop on their hind legs between bushes and trees. Little is known about the diet of the Somali Bushbaby. We have seen them feed on gum and insects, and strongly suspect that they seasonally eat fruits as well.

All our observations to date of the Somali Bushbaby have been of solitary animals, or of two or three animals within about five metres of one another. Like other Bushbabies, the Somali Bushbaby has its own distinctive advertisement call... which we have named the 'quack'. This call is most frequently given within an hour after dusk and during the hour prior to dawn. The 'quack' – probably an aid in long-distance spacing and territoriality – is audible to the human ear at distances as far away as 300 metres.

To date we have detected several behavioural differences between the Somali

Bushbaby and Senegal Bushbaby. We mention three of these behavioural differences here. First, the Somali Bushbaby is much more confiding and altogether less shy than the Senegal Bushbaby. On being located with a spot lamp, the Somali Bushbaby frequently moves towards the observer... often to within five metres and sometimes to one metre. We often saw the Somali Bushbaby 'using' the bright light from our spot lamp to forage on the insects the light attracted. The Senegal Bushbaby is generally shier, usually moving away from the observer once detected.

Second, we observed (once) a mother Somali Bushbaby carrying her young on the fur of her belly. Senegal Bushbabies (indeed all other Bushbabies) have been seen to carry young only in their mouths.

Third, unlike other species of Bushbabies, we have yet to observe the Somali Bushbaby making nests or entering holes to sleep. Instead, they sleep within very dense clumps of thorns or in abandoned bird nests located among dense thorns. It seems likely that none of the many potential predators (such as snakes, jackals, mongooses, genets, wild cats, and raptors) would have much success in capturing this highly mobile galago while it is within these thorny retreats.

The Somali Bushbaby remains one of Africa's least known primates. Given the extremely arid, species-poor habitats in which the Somali Bushbaby lives, it is expected to possess a number of unique (if not surprising) behavioural, ecological, and physiological adaptations.

As such, detailed, long-term studies of the Somali Bushbaby should be especially rewarding and enlightening... further expanding the already quite astonishing range of adaptations found among the Bushbabies.

