Notes on Chimpanzee Interactions with Small Carnivores in Gombe National Park, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT. Although interspecific interactions between chimpanzees and various mammals have been reported from several field studies, relatively few encounters with carnivores of any size have been observed in natural conditions. The previously documented examples are here supplemented by three events describing wild chimpanzee responses to small carnivores. The observations now available suggest that chimpanzee responses are flexible rather than strictly patterned.

Several investigators of the naturalistic behavior and ecology of Pan troglodytes have reported on relations between these apes and other mammals. The relations of chimpanzees and other primate species—notably the baboon (Papio anubis and P. cynocephalus), and the redtail (Cercopithecus nictitans), blue (C. mitis), and colobus (Colobus badius and C. polykomos)—are known to include agonistic, displacement, avoidance, tolerant, and sociable interactions (REYNOLDS, 1963; REYNOLDS & REYNOLDS, 1965; LAWICK-GOODALL, 1968; TELEKI, 1973 a, b). Predatory interactions in which many of these same primate species are eaten by chimpanzees have also been observed (GOODALL, 1963; KAWABE, 1966; LAWICK-GOODALL, 1968; SUZUKI, 1971; TELEKI, 1973 a, b). Similarly variable relations between chimpanzees and certain ungulates—notably the bush pig (Potamochoerus porcus), and the bushbuck (Tragelaphus scriptus) and suni (Nesotragus moschatus)—have also been recorded during some field studies (NISHIDA, 1968; LAWICK-GOODALL, 1968; TELEKI, 1973 a). And finally, incidental observations have been made on chimpanzee encounters with the leopard (IZAWA & ITANI, 1966; NISHIDA, 1968; LAWICK-GOODALL, 1968) and the lion (KANO, 1972). Episodes of predation by large carnivores upon chimpanzees have, however, not yet been witnessed.

Considerable interest about interspecific relations has been generated in recent years by the proposed “dehumanization hypothesis” of behavioral evolution in African apes (KORTLANDT, 1962, 1965, 1967, 1968; KORTLANDT & KOUI, 1963; ZON & ORSHOVEN, 1967; KORTLANDT & ZON, 1969; ALBRECHT & DUNNETT, 1971). An important field experiment applied by these investigators to test the concept was the observation of wild and captive chimpanzee responses to a mechanized dummy leopard. KORTLANDT (1967) also conducted a series of other tests to elicit responses to numerous items, including live mammals.

Because natural encounters between chimpanzees and leopards, or in fact any other species of carnivore, have been rarely seen in undisturbed ecological communities, three special events documented during recent field research with the eastern chimpanzees (P. t. schweinfurthii) living in the Gombe National Park of
western Tanzania merit attention. Two episodes in which these chimpanzees responded to leopards (*Felis pardus*) have already been described by Lawick-Goodall (1968). The three additional observations made by the Gombe research team, of which the author was a member for 20 months between 1968 and 1971, concern interactions between chimpanzees and small carnivores—namely the serval (*F. serval*), the genet (*Genetta tigrina*), and the domestic cat (*F. domesticus*). Although these carnivores are too small to be considered as dangerous predators of chimpanzees, and the events are thus not fully comparable to incidents involving leopards and lions, the Gombe observations do serve to expand the currently limited range of responses. Unlike the severe attack responses produced in the experiments with dummy leopards (Kortlandt, 1965, 1967), the information on natural interactions with live felines was previously known to elicit only neutral or alarm responses from chimpanzees (Izawa & Itani, 1966; Lawick-Goodall, 1968; Kano, 1972).

The first event to be described, involving several chimpanzees, many olive baboons, and an adult female serval, was observed near the main station on December 19, 1968:

A mixed group of chimpanzees has been in the vicinity of the station in lower Kakombe Valley (one of 14 major valleys in Gombe National Park) for several hours. One of the two baboon troops which commonly range throughout this area is traveling slowly down the valley late in the afternoon.

When the baboons begin to move up the ridge opposite the station, about 200 yards across the valley floor, there is a sudden outburst of sound and activity from many members of the troop, and baboons mill about on the grassy hillside. Many chimpanzees near the station stare intently across the valley floor, and a few adult males begin to show excitement by hair erection, vocalization, and by tensed postures and rapid display movements. One adult male breaks off a large branch and drags this across the clearing.

The initial baboon outburst soon dies down, then flares up again after a brief interlude; the pattern is repeated several times during the next few minutes. A few chimpanzees grow increasingly attentive and excited, and some eventually begin to move across the valley floor toward the activity, walking in dispersed and straggling formation through the valleybottom woodland. One mature male walks slightly ahead of the others. Human observers follow.

Many baboons have already departed from the site when chimpanzees and humans arrive there a few minutes later. The leading male chimpanzee stops and visually scans the site, then hurries toward a serval which lies on her side in the trampled grass. (Perhaps as a result of having attempted predation upon a young baboon, the serval has been attacked and largely immobilized by the baboons: her hindquarters are severely lacerated.) A few remaining baboons watch from a distance as the male chimpanzee slaps and stamps with hands and feet upon the wounded cat, which responds feebly by hissing and swiping a forepaw at its assailant. After a series of rapid attacks, the chimpanzee displays away from the site and disappears into the undergrowth of a nearby ravine. Though badly injured, the serval manages to withdraw into the shelter of a large grass clump. The last baboons finally depart, and the troop continues on its way down the valley.

About a dozen chimpanzees have in the meantime collected in the vicinity of the serval, but most stay more than a dozen yards away. Some vocalized and moved about excitedly during and just after the attacks of the first male, while others climbed nearby trees and watched. Other chimpanzees who came from the station passed by the site without pause, climbing up the nearby ravine.

Two adult female chimpanzees approach the hidden serval shortly after the male departed, both advancing with apparent caution, and they peer intently into the grass clump from a few yards distance. One female then walks closer and pokes a hand into the grass; the cat hisses and perhaps swipes at the outstretched arm, as the chimpanzee quickly withdraws.