

Conservation Research Africa’s Carnivore Advice document for the public



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Wildlife Assistance Helpline

Conservation Research Africa have started a **Freephone Wildlife Assistance Helpline** offering advice and site visits to Malawian residents who are having problems with wildlife around their homes; specifically bats and carnivores.

If you can't find the solution you're looking for below, or you want more information or a site visit, please call our free Helpline number: **5152**

General carnivore biology

WHAT IS A CARNIVORE?

- Carnivores are mammals like humans - they have hair or fur on their bodies and are warm-blooded.
- There are over 280 species of carnivores across the world.
- Nearly all carnivores primarily eat flesh, although some will eat more vegetation than meat.
- Carnivores have teeth, claws, and binocular vision adapted for catching and eating other animals.
- Most carnivores are terrestrial.

CARNIVORES IN AFRICA

In Africa there are 6 families of carnivores:

- *Dogs and allies (Canidae)*
- *Mustelids (Mustelidae)*
- *Mongoose (Herpestidae)*
- *Hyaenids (Hyaenidae)*
- *Genets and civets (Viverridae)*
- *Cats (Felidae)*

The number and diversity of carnivores is one of the surest signs of ecological richness because each species sits at the top of a different food chain, so and changes lower in the food chain can be seen in the carnivore.

CARNIVORES IN MALAWI

The carnivores in italics are those most likely to come into conflict with people

Mustilids

- Honey badger
- Cape clawless otter
- Spot-necked otter

Mongoose

- Slender mongoose
- Dwarf mongoose
- Selous' mongoose
- Banded mongoose
- White-tailed mongoose
- Meller's mongoose
- Water mongoose

Dogs and allies

- **Side-striped jackal**
- African wild dog

Hyaenids

- **Spotted hyaena**

Cats and civets

- **Small-spotted genet**
- Large-spotted genet
- **African civet**
- African palm civet
- Wild cat
- **Serval**
- Caracal
- Leopard

Myths about carnivores

“Carnivores can be tamed as pets” - Wild animals can rarely be tamed as pets, even if they are taken from very young. Carnivores make especially bad pets as a lot of them live solitary once they've reached adulthood, and have a strong instinct for holding a territory, showing dominance and hunting.

“Witches can take the form of carnivores to harm people” or “Body parts from carnivores can give you special powers or help you achieve your goals” - Traditional folklore teaches that hyaenas have magical powers or were originally people. No animals have magical powers nor can people turn into animals, this is merely superstition stemmed from a lack of understanding of this nocturnal animal. Using

carnivore animal body parts does not give any powers, and could put you at risk of contracting diseases. Many carnivores are protected by international law and using their body parts is illegal and could result in a jail sentence.

“Hyaenas do not hunt, they steal food from other animals” - In many parts of Africa it is more common for a pride of lions to steal food from a clan of hyaenas than the other way round. Hyaenas are opportunistic and will chase predators like cheetahs off a kill or eat a found dead animal, but they are also efficient hunters.

“Hyaenas will take children from the house” - Humans are the main predator of hyaenas, and more than often if a hyaena encounters a human it will run away or avoid it. Hyaenas are more interested in wild prey like impala and warthogs, or livestock or feral dogs. But as hyaenas are opportunist, especially if they haven't found food for a while, and so there is a risk from hyeanas especially at night when alone or sleeping. Children should be accompanied if out after dark and houses should be fully secured when sleeping. Keeping lights on will discourage hyaenas from getting anywhere near a residence, and keeping dogs will also deter them.

Common carnivore enquiries

1.A. HYAENAS NEAR HOUSE/ON STREET AT NIGHT

There is estimated to be between 20 and 40 spotted hyaenas that live around Lilongwe and the surrounding areas. However they are rarely seen because they prefer to avoid humans. Hyaenas are generally nocturnal, but will venture out in early morning or late afternoon.

Hyaenas are social carnivores that live in clans – feeding and denning together. In large savannah locations, up to 70 individuals have been seen hunting together but in Lilongwe the clans comprise of between 7 and 12 individuals. Typically the spotted hyaena hunts solitarily or in small groups of two to five.

The stable core of a clan consists of a dominant female and successive generations of her daughters and their offspring. Clans also contain resident males and satellite males (that move from clan to clan).

In Lilongwe, the hyaenas roam the city and Sanctuary at night looking for food - scavenging thrown out waste, hunting feral dogs and the occasional antelope. They have been known to take livestock like chickens and goats.

Hyaenas will try to avoid humans on account of being persecuted by them, but they have a very curious nature (especially younger hyaenas) and will investigate gaps in fences or gardens where livestock are kept.

There have been very few cases of hyaenas attacking humans, but sleeping outside and walking alone in high risk areas (especially under the influence of alcohol) increases the risk of an attack. Feral dog attacks have a much higher prevalence in the city than attacks from hyaenas.

Hyaenas are not man-hunters and the most likely reason for following you is curiosity or if you are carrying food.

1.B. HYAENAS TAKING LIVESTOCK

In wild areas where there is abundant prey, hyaenas generally hunt medium to large sized prey such as warthogs, impala and zebra. They will also take smaller mammals, birds, eggs, invertebrates and reptiles; this is especially true of the younger hyaenas learning how to hunt and hyaenas in small clans.

Although capable hunters, spotted hyaenas are efficient scavengers as well. Like other carnivores including lions, they will eat carcasses of animals that have either been hunted by another carnivore, or died of natural or other causes.

Spotted hyaenas are very important to the health of the ecosystem, as scavengers, they clean up a huge amount of organic matter which would otherwise attract high numbers of rodents and flies, as well as diseases.

In Lilongwe, the clans are hunting street dogs and wild prey that lives in and around the Sanctuary, as well as relying somewhat on waste thrown out. But they will also take chickens, cows and goats.

1.C. SERVALS TAKING LIVESTOCK

Servals are a solitary species except when they are paired up in the breeding season. They have exclusive core territories with larger home ranges which are shared with other individuals, allowing for a mate to be found.

Most of their diet is made up of rodents like rats, but they'll also feed on reptiles, amphibians, insects and small birds – this includes chickens in locations where their range overlaps human habitation.

Servals are extremely shy, do not hunt large animals and will avoid any interactions with humans. Most servals living in and around Lilongwe will use the Sanctuary for denning but a high number of rodents in the city and surrounding areas attracts them in to the urban environment.

Studies looking at where carnivores like servals and jackals have been eradicated from areas have found an increase in the number of small mammals, especially rodents. So these predators play an important role in keeping rodent numbers low in urban areas where they are prolific.

1.D. JACKALS IN THE GARDEN

Jackals can occupy a range of habitats including game areas, farmland and towns within the broadleaved savannah zone.

The side-striped jackal is quite omnivorous – it has a varied diet that includes mice, rats, hares, birds as large as guinea fowl, reptiles and carrion as well as invertebrates, fruit and seeds. They may also eat small quantities of green grass to aid digestion. Jackals are opportunistic and in urban environments like Lilongwe they are known to feed on rubbish, from bins, and occasionally take chickens. Like servals, jackals are attracted into urban environments because of the waste food and high number of rodents. They have even been known to enter livestock pens and just eat the feed, ignoring the animals.

This species is known to occur in pairs and in family units of up to 6 individuals. Around a feeding site, gatherings of several jackals can occur.

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1.E. ANIMAL LIVING IN MY ROOF/ATTIC/OUT-BUILDING

The most common animals to make a nest in a building in Lilongwe will be rats, mice, genets or bats.

Genets, mice and rats will all bring nesting material into the space, whereas bats do not use any nesting material.

Identifying the animal:

Looking at the animal's droppings is the easiest way to check what is living in your building.

- **Rats and mice** will have droppings that will have a paste-like texture when crushed (always use gloves when touching animal droppings)
- **Bat** droppings will crumble like sand and may contain insect casings (if you suspect bats, refer to the Bat Protocol document).
- **Genets** droppings will be like a cat – larger than all rodents and more similar to a small dog. This will smell the strongest.

Common Problems with carnivores and how to resolve them

Problem

“I FEEL THREATENED BY HYAENAS WHILST WALKING HOME, WILL THEY ATTACK ME?”

Resolution

Walking home at night should always be done with care, and people in Lilongwe are at a higher risk from other people and feral dogs than from hyaenas. Curious hyaenas may show interest in or follow lone walkers in dark quiet locations. Lone walkers under the influence of alcohol are also at a higher risk and walking home alone after drinking should be avoided. If you believe you are being followed at night by a hyaena, take the following actions.

Try to avoid coming across wild animals by keeping to well-lit, busy and noisy spaces and walking with companions after dark.

If you do meet a hyaena and it doesn't show interest in you, ignore it, carry on walking away slowly. Make a detour around it and **DO NOT RUN**. Running may trigger the hyaena to chase. Keep your eye out for other hyaenas nearby.

If the hyaena shows interests in you then;

- Keep yourself calm and try not to show fear
- Stop, don't run away. As a hunter, the hyaena will instinctively chase, even out of curiosity.
- Don't lie down - this will increase its curiosity
- If you are carrying food throw it away and if the hyaena shows interest in it, move away slowly.
- Hyaenas are good hunters but also scavenge so avoid carrying food at night as a precaution.
- See if you are standing near rubbish or a dead animal. The hyaena is likely to be more interested in it than you. Slowly move away, but keep facing the hyaena.
- If the hyaena shows interest in you and moves towards you, suddenly move a few steps towards it, to surprise it and make it think you are a predator. Wave your arms about, make yourself as big as possible. Make a loud noise - shout or scream and look aggressive and frightening. Most likely the hyaena will run away.
- If not, vary your tactics - be still for a moment then make a sudden threatening movement or noise. If it growls or giggles, this is a sign that it is challenging your attack. In this case, stand your ground - never run away - but don't move any closer.
- If you are carrying a bag, swing it around your head or make a loud noise e.g. hitting a metal bin or fence. Carrying a torch and whistle is a good precaution - flash the torch in its eyes. If it moves closer, stamp your feet or throw something at it.
- Don't move away until after the hyaena does. When you do, move slowly, continuing to face the hyena.

- In the rare scenario that the hyena actually attacks you, stand your ground and fight back - use a stick or kick and hit its head. Never run.

Problem

"I FEEL THREATENED BY HYAENAS/JACKALS NEAR MY HOUSE AT NIGHT"

Resolution

Are the hyaenas regularly visiting your house or is it a one-off? Hyaenas are curious carnivores that take opportunities when they arise, particular the clans that live in the city as they are feeding less on wild antelope and more on feral dogs and waste food. If you keep livestock like chickens or goats they are probably interested in these. If they are visiting a property regularly, take the following actions.

Ensure that you are not leaving waste food (especially meat) out in the open and that any livestock you own are well secured at night.

Closing gaps in fencing will prevent hyaenas from entering most properties.

Always sleep inside a building at night, which is secured by a good door.

Ensure children do not go outdoors alone at night.

Keeping guard dogs will help deter carnivores from getting too close to your home.

If you have taken the actions above to discourage them but feel that hyaenas are still regularly visiting your property, call the CRA Wildlife Assistance Helpline - our team can arrange a visit to see why they might be choosing to come to your land and if there are any further measures that can be taken to dissuade them.

Problem

"HYAENAS ARE TAKING MY LIVESTOCK"

Resolution

Hyaenas will take advantage of easy prey, and livestock, especially livestock that is not well secured at night, is a very easy meal.

1. *"Is the predator definitely a hyaena – has the hyaena been seen or could it be feral dogs?"* Feral dogs are usually more a problem in Malawi than hyaenas with livestock, especially smaller livestock like chickens. Hyaenas are often the first to be blamed but the problem could just as easily be dogs, or even serval, jackal or leopard.

How to protect your livestock from carnivores:

1. Intensifying Human Vigilance

The presence of humans is normally very effective in discouraging hyaenas from attacking livestock. Having herdsman present reduces the rate of attack compared to free-ranging herds.

2. Using guard dogs

Guard dogs, or Guardian dogs, provide alternatives to herdsman especially during the night when livestock is in kraals.

Guard dogs are trained to alert people not to chase down hyaenas.

Guard dogs should be raised from puppyhood together with the livestock so that the dog and livestock can bond.

3. Fencing

If properly designed, constructed and maintained, fences can be almost completely effective in keeping out wild animals.

4. Traditional barriers

Planting hedges of tree species such as euphorbia is low-cost and effective against carnivores. Although less permanent, fences made from of dead thorny branches can be used in kraals for cattle.

5. Waste management

Good waste handling systems – collection, transportation and disposal that restrict wildlife access to garbage are important to avoid attracting wild animals to settlements. Ensure that food waste is buried in a deep (minimum 1.5m) and steep-sided (90 degrees) pit. Throwing ashes on the waste each day minimises smell, reducing the attraction to hyaenas.

6. Good husbandry practices

Livestock raids can be minimised through good husbandry practices:

- Herding during the day
- Keeping livestock in a predator-proof enclosure at night (with good fencing, or raised off the ground e.g. chickens)
- Remove any thick cover from near animal holding areas

7. Non-lethal control

Use of deterrents that are effective at repelling animals from a site.

Acoustic deterrents. Acoustic deterrents shock wildlife away by emitting an unexpected loud noise or a sound known to scare wildlife. Traditional methods may include beating drums, tins and trees; using whips in addition to shouting, yelling and whistling.

Visual deterrents: Brightly coloured cloths and plastic may be hung from a fence at the edge of fields to distract predators like hyaenas. Fires lit on the boundaries of fields or burning sticks carried by farmers can deter wildlife if you see them coming.

If you have done all they can to protect your livestock, call the CRA Wildlife Assistance Helpline to get advice and a site visit from trained staff.

Problem

“THERE ARE ANIMALS LIVING IN MY LOFT/ROOF/WALLS CAUSING SMELL AND NOISE AND I WANT TO REMOVE THEM”

Resolution

CRA advocates reducing the impact wild animals have on the house owners rather than removing nests, and in the case of nesting genets, to allow the female to finish raising her kittens before moving the nest and preventing a return. However we also want to encourage people to call the Helpline rather than pest control, so we will also carry out removals, ethically.

All genuine reports of a nest that can be identified as a carnivore or bat will receive a visit from CRA staff.

This could involve:

- Blocking off inside entrances so the animal can only enter from the outside
- Placing netting to prevent droppings reaching the floor
- Blocking or closing gaps on the inside of the building to reduce the level of noise
- Having CRA staff visitations to clean up any mess periodically, and keep an eye on the nest
- CRA can arrange for ethical removal of the animals and assist in blocking up the gaps to ensure they do not re-enter.