The Mount Kenya Potto is a Subspecies of the Eastern Potto

Perodicticus ibeanus

Thomas M. Butynski and Yvonne A. de Jong

Eastern Africa Primate Diversity and Conservation Program, Lolldaiga Hills Research Programme, Nanyuki, Kenya

Abstract: The Mount Kenya potto is currently considered a subspecies of the western potto (i.e., Perodicticus potto stockleyi). We argue that the Mount Kenya potto is a subspecies of the eastern potto (i.e., Perodicticus ibeanus stockleyi). This subspecies has not been observed alive for 79 years, and is assessed on the 2017 Red List as Critically Endangered (Possibly Extinct). We indicate priority field sites in which to search for P. i. stockleyi.


Keywords: Aberdare, biogeography, conservation, primates, taxonomy

Potto Taxonomy

The pottos, genus Perodicticus Bennett, 1831, are small (c. 1.5 kg), arboreal, quiet (no loud call), highly cryptic, nocturnal primates, endemic to the moist forests of tropical Africa, from southeast Senegal (perhaps The Gambia) eastwards to central Kenya (Fig. 1). The taxonomic arrangement of Perodicticus is not yet resolved. For many years, the genus was regarded as monotypic (for example, Jenkins 1987; Groves 2001, 2005; Grubb et al. 2003; Butynski and De Jong 2007; Butynski 2013; Pimley and Bearder 2013). Several authors (for example, Groves 2001; Grubb et al. 2003), however, suggested that further study might show that Perodicticus contains several species. Subsequent detailed morphological study (dentition, cranium, post-cranium, body size, and pelage) by Stump (2005) and Ravosa (2007), together with mtDNA data provided by Roos et al. (2004) and Pozzi et al. (2015), yield convincing evidence for at least three species of Perodicticus: the western potto P. potto (Müller, 1776), the eastern potto P. ibeanus Thomas, 1910, and the central potto P. edwardsi Bouvier, 1879. Oates (2011), Nekaris (2013), Oates et al. (2016), De Jong et al. (2017), Svensson and Pimley (2017), and Svensson et al. (2017) all follow the three-species concept for Perodicticus.

Taxonomic Position of the Mount Kenya Potto

Butynski and De Jong (2007), who treated Perodicticus as a monotypic genus, reviewed the taxonomy and biogeography of the potto Perodicticus potto, and described a new subspecies—the Mount Kenya potto Perodicticus potto stockleyi Butynski and De Jong, 2007 (Fig. 2). This subspecies is known from only one specimen, collected by Lt.-Col. Charles Hugh Stockley in 1938, at 1,830 m above sea level (asl) on Mount Kenya, central Kenya. The holotype (MK-24) resides at the National Museums of Kenya, Nairobi, Kenya.

The elevation of ibeanus to species level means that the taxonomic position of stockleyi needs to be reassessed. Nekaris (2013) and Oates et al. (2016) accepted the three-species concept for Perodicticus, but retained stockleyi as a subspecies of P. potto. Geographically, however, stockleyi is much closer to P. ibeanus (c. 195 km) than to P. potto (c. 3,450 km) (Fig. 1). The large geographic range (i.e., extent of occurrence) of P. edwardsi (c. 2,430,000 km²) lies between that of P. potto and P. ibeanus. In addition, like P. ibeanus, but unlike most P. potto and most P. edwardsi, the pelage of stockleyi is very woolly and rippled, and has a dark russet ‘saddle’ over the shoulders with guard hairs that are heavily frosted silver-grey, although the saddle is not as obvious as for P. i. ibeanus.
Butynski and De Jong

(see Figs. 4–7 in Butynski and De Jong 2007). It appears, therefore, that stockleyi is a subspecies of P. ibeanus, not of P. potto. As such, there are two subspecies for P. ibeanus: eastern potto P. i. ibeanus and Mount Kenya potto P. i. stockleyi. With this taxonomic change, the geographic distribution of P. ibeanus (Fig. 1) is as follows:

P. i. ibeanus – Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) from the left (east) bank of the Ubangi River south to the right (north) bank of the Congo River, south along the right (east) bank of the Lualaba River to the Lulindi River, east to the Itombwe Mountains (Baraka) and northwest corner of Lake Tanganyika, then northeast through northwest Burundi, Rwanda, southwest and south Uganda, to the Kakamega, Nandi, and Mau Forests of southwest Kenya. The geographic range (i.e., ‘extent of occurrence’) is c. 850,000 km² (Butynski and De Jong 2007).

P. i. stockleyi – Known only from one site at 1,830 m asl on Mount Kenya, central Kenya.

Should stockleyi be Elevated to Species Status?

Although stockleyi is here designated as a subspecies, it should be noted that the single specimen available is not only phenotypically (i.e., diagnosably) distinct from the large number of Perodicticus specimens available, it is also (almost certainly) geographically (i.e., reproductively) isolated from other Perodicticus (both by the Eastern Rift Valley and by a distance thought to be at least 175 km). As such, under the ‘Phylogenetic Species Concept’ (Cracraft 1983; Groves 2001, 2004, 2012; Cotterill et al. 2014; Rylands and Mittermeier 2014), this taxon should be considered a species, Perodicticus stockleyi. We believe, however, that species designation at this time is premature given (1) that only one specimen is available and, therefore, we do not know anything about the extent of variation of phenotypic characters present in the population of Perodicticus on Mount Kenya (and, apparently, also on the Aberdares Range), and (2) the need for additional field time in support of our contention that this population of Perodicticus is indeed isolated.

Conservation Status of Perodicticus ibeanus stockleyi

It appears that P. i. stockleyi occurs at low density and/or has a highly localized distribution—or is extinct. Several primate surveys since 2001 in forests >1,050 m asl on and in the vicinity of Mount Kenya and the Aberdare Range have failed to reveal evidence of this subspecies (Butynski 1999; Butynski and De Jong 2007). As such, 10 years after being described, P. i. stockleyi appears on the 2017 IUCN Red List as Critically Endangered (Possibly Extinct) (Butynski and De Jong 2017).

The main threats to the long-term survival of P. i. stockleyi include habitat degradation, fragmentation, and loss, particularly from expanding, intensive, agriculture and settlement (Butynski and De Jong 2007, 2017). The cause of these threats is the rapidly growing human population (doubling every 20–25 years) in the region of Mount Kenya and the Aberdare Range. These two large blocks of forest are under great pressure. There, most of the mid-altitude (transition) and much of the montane forest has already been destroyed (Butynski and De Jong 2014).

Where to Search for Perodicticus ibeanus stockleyi

Many areas of highland moist forest (>1,300 mm mean annual rainfall) east of the Eastern (Gregory) Rift Valley have not been surveyed for P. i. stockleyi. Most forest lies within Mount Kenya National Park and Aberdare National Park, and...
in the many contiguous or nearby forest reserves. The degree of protection received by these forests, however, varies greatly—as does the level of past exploitation and damage. Since *P. ibeanus* can persist in successional and secondary forest, and is often found on forest edge close to human habitation, chances are that *P. i. stockleyi* occurs in this region. Future surveys to locate *P. i. stockleyi* should be conducted in the wettest forest of the Mount Kenya and the Aberdare Range region up to 2,300 m asl (the known altitudinal range for *P. ibeanus* is 600–2,300 m asl and the range of mean annual rainfall is 1,300–1,900 mm; Butynski and De Jong 2007), with a focus on moist forest at 1,500–2,100 m asl (the *P. i. stockleyi* holotype was collected at 1,830 m asl).

More specifically, on Mount Kenya, there are small areas of moist forest to as low as 1,800 m asl on the southwest slope along the lower reaches of the Thego River and Sagana River, and to as low as 1,500 m asl on the southeast slope, west of the villages of Kirege, Chuka, Kiini, and Mutindwa. Off the northeast flank of Mount Kenya, moist forest is present at 1,400 m asl in Meru Forest and as low as 1,050 m asl in Ngaia Forest at the north end of the Nyambeni Range.

On the Aberdare Range, only small areas of moist forest remain, confined to the extreme south end of the range at about 1,800–2,100 m asl. Forty-eight years ago, on 29 April 1969, Peirce (1972, 1975, pers. comm.) obtained one potto collected in Ndiya Village, Muguga Estate, about 30 km northwest of Nairobi (c. 2,100 m asl; c. 1,300 mm mean annual rainfall) on the south end of the Aberdares Range. This is the only other record (and first published record) for potto east of the Eastern Rift Valley. This specimen no longer exists; obtained for a parasitological study, it was neither described nor photographed. It is likely that this was *P. i. stockleyi* Butynski and De Jong 2007. Today, the forests nearest to Muguga are Gacuthi Forest, Bama Forest, and Gatamaibo Forest Reserve. These forests should be searched for potto.

Being small, nocturnal, cryptic, and lacking a loud call, *P. ibeanus* is a difficult primate to detect, particularly if at low density. At some sites, the encounter rate with *P. ibeanus* during nocturnal primate surveys (using torchlight to elicit tapetal reflection) is as low as 0.02/h. It is recommended, therefore, that sites of a few square kilometers be searched at night for >50 h before concluding, with some confidence, that *P. ibeanus* is not present (Butynski and De Jong 2007).

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*Figure 2*. The Mount Kenya potto *Perodicticus ibeanus stockleyi*. Drawing by Stephen D. Nash from photographs and detailed written descriptions of the holotype. Reproduced from Butynski and De Jong (2007).
Muguga Estate in 1969, Jean-Pierre d’Huart for the French version of the abstract, and Stephen D. Nash for the drawing of *P. i. stockleyi*.

**Literature Cited**


**Authors’ address:**

**Thomas M. Butynski and Yvonne A. de Jong**, Eastern Africa Primate Diversity and Conservation Program, Lollidaiga Hills Research Programme, P.O. Box 149, Nanyuki 10400, Kenya. E-mail: <tbutynski@aol.com> and <yvonne@wildsolutions.nl>.

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