

Hamadryas baboons (*Papio hamadryas*) holding dead kittens as pets/ornaments

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Abstract

This note reports for the first time the habit of a male hamadryas baboon (*Papio hamadryas*), part of a small introduced colony released into an urban environment in Riyadh, central Saudi Arabia, of continuing to carry dead kittens (*Felis catus*) for about two days after dead, previously they had apparently been kept as pets. The only partially similar case reported is that of several wild chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*) playing with a western tree hyrax (*Dendrohyrax dorsalis*), which a female had kept with her for almost a day after its death, before abandoning it.

Key words: Behavior, commensalism, cross-species interactions, thanatology, urbanization, welfare

Protection and caring for kittens (ie young of the domestic cat *Felis catus*) as pets were recorded in captive apes and baboons (see Coelho, 1980). However, the first controlled report of this kind in baboons was by Coelho (1980), who reported the spontaneous adoption as pets of kittens that accidentally entered into a captive enclosure of baboons (*Papio anubis* and *Papio cynocephalus*) in Texas, USA.

Furthermore, other wild monkey species, such as the long-tailed macaque (*Macaca fascicularis*), adopt cats as pets (<https://www.petsfoto.com/miracle-nature-macaque-monkey-adopts-kitten>), as do some captive apes (*Gorilla gorilla*, *Pongo pygmaeus*) (e.g., Patterson, 1985). On the other hand, baboons (*Papio* spp., usually *Papio ursinus*) in the wild are known to occasionally steal lion or leopard cubs to keep as pets (<https://www.explorationjunkie.com/why-do-baboon-s-steal-lion-cubs/>), but the cubs are also mistreated, and there have even been documented cases of them being eaten after their death. The motive for the kidnappings is unclear, but hypotheses include opportunistic motivations to limit predation—in this case, lions, which often prey on baboons.

This note reports for the first time the habit of some hamadryas baboons (*Papio hamadryas*), released into an urban environment in Riyadh, central Saudi Arabia, of continuing to carry dead kittens after they had apparently been kept as companion animals. The only similar case reported is that of some wild chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*) playing with a western tree hyrax (*Dendrohyrax dorsalis*), which a female had kept with her for almost a day after its death, before abandoning it (Hirata et al., 2001).

The hamadryas is naturally present in the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and parts of Sudan and Somalia) and the adjacent Arabian Peninsula (Yemen and southwestern Saudi Arabia, along the hilly and mountainous areas) (Harrison and Bates, 1991) (Fig. 1), showing a steady trend of northwestward expansion. There are also significant problems of interaction and conflict between baboons and humans in Saudi Arabia, as the monkeys have become overly confident and practically commensal in many parts of their Saudi range, resulting in theft and damage to crops and livestock, or even attacks and displays of aggression towards humans (see Angelici et al., 2025; Boug et al., 2017; 2025).

Unfortunately, despite being illegal, it is still possible to find baby hamadryas baboons displayed for sale by individuals online or at the weekend pet and livestock auctions that takes place at the Riyadh Animal Market. Some adult baboons have been carelessly released into certain areas of the capital, Riyadh, where for several years they formed a stray urban colony (see Figure 1) of approximately 8–9 individuals (observed group consisting of 2 adult males, 2 subadult males, 3–4 adult females, 1 subadult female). We cannot rule out the possibility that other small colonies of hamadryas baboons exist in other areas outside Riyadh. However, the National Center for Wildlife (NCW) is working to capture all wild baboons in Riyadh. Some small colonies have already been eradicated and the operation will be completed shortly, and almost certainly by 2026 all feral colonies should have been eradicated from the urban environment.

From 7 to 9 September 2023, in a completely casual and opportunistic manner, several short videos were filmed of a group of baboons in the present-day Riyadh colony, in the As Sulay district (24°37'26.688" N; 46°51'2.484" E). The observations, carried out by one of the authors (OA) at a reasonable distance, were very discreet and non-invasive, designed not to disturb or alter in any way the normal behavior of the monkeys. From one video, a significant photo was extracted showing a male hamadryas baboon walking while carrying two dead kittens on his back (Fig. 2). The carcasses of the kittens were rather precariously balanced, and if they fell to the ground, they were picked up and repositioned on his neck or back.

There is no evidence that the kittens are intentionally killed by baboons. These kittens, as has been observed, appeared to be captured and maintained by the baboons for several days before their death, due to lack of adequate food and mistreatment. For logistical and technical reasons, it was not possible to observe the behavior of the baboons during the entire period in which the baboon was carrying the two kittens, but the male was observed occasionally several times with the cubs still alive on 4–6 September 2023. Once decomposition became advanced, usually two or three days after death (in this case on September 10), the carcasses were abandoned.

The functional significance of this behavior remains uncertain. In this specific case, in fact, it is not possible to hypothesize that it results from maternal behavior as the individual displaying this behavioral pattern was male.

Hamadryas baboons were already known to keep puppies as pets, and certainly also kittens (Herzog, 2011). However, in the case reported here, the keeping of kittens as pets after their death is reported for the first time, suggesting an initial rejection of their altered status, allowing the baboon to continue their caregiving relationship at least until the condition of the decomposing body prevents it.

There were no births in the hamadryas group during the observation period and therefore the reported behavior could also be interpreted as replacement behavior.

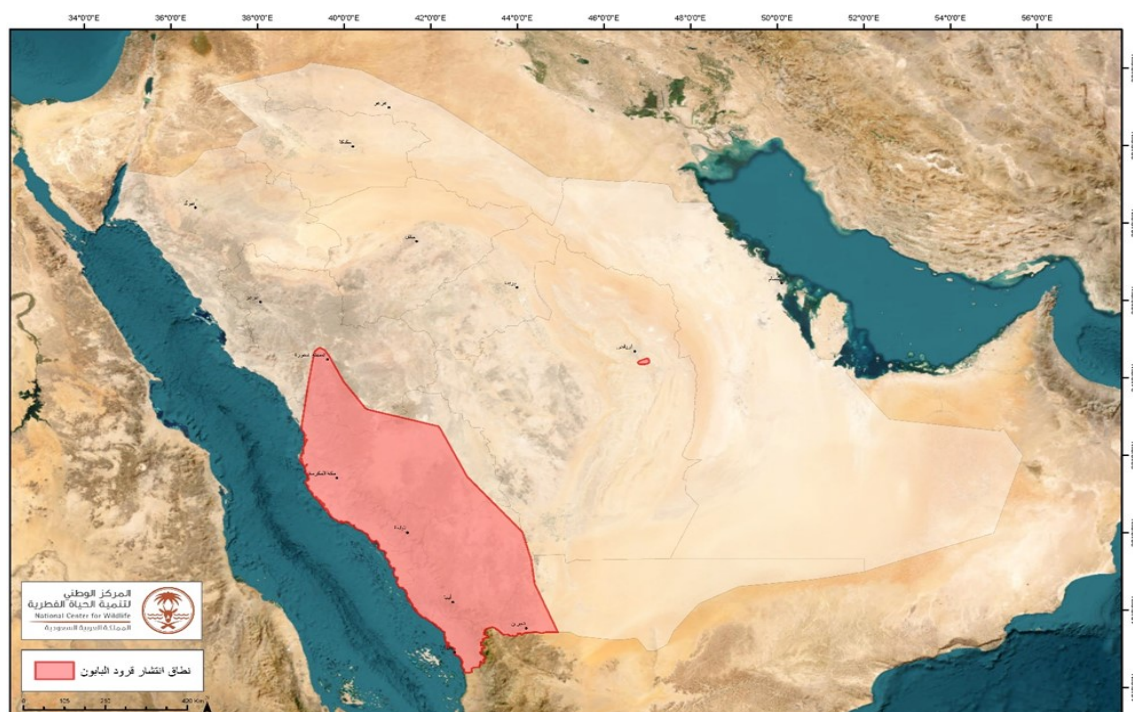


Figure 1: In pink, range of *Papio hamadryas* in Saudi Arabia. The small area at the right is the population introduced to Riyadh.



Figure 2: Male hamadryas baboon walking with two now dead kittens on his back. Riyadh, September 2023.

For a more in-depth analysis of the perception of death in primates, see Anderson (2011, 2020); Carter et al. (2020); and Fernández-Fueyo et al. (2021). For an objective and impartial evaluation of the anguish experienced by animals, including primates, see King (2013).

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicting issues related to this short communication.

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