

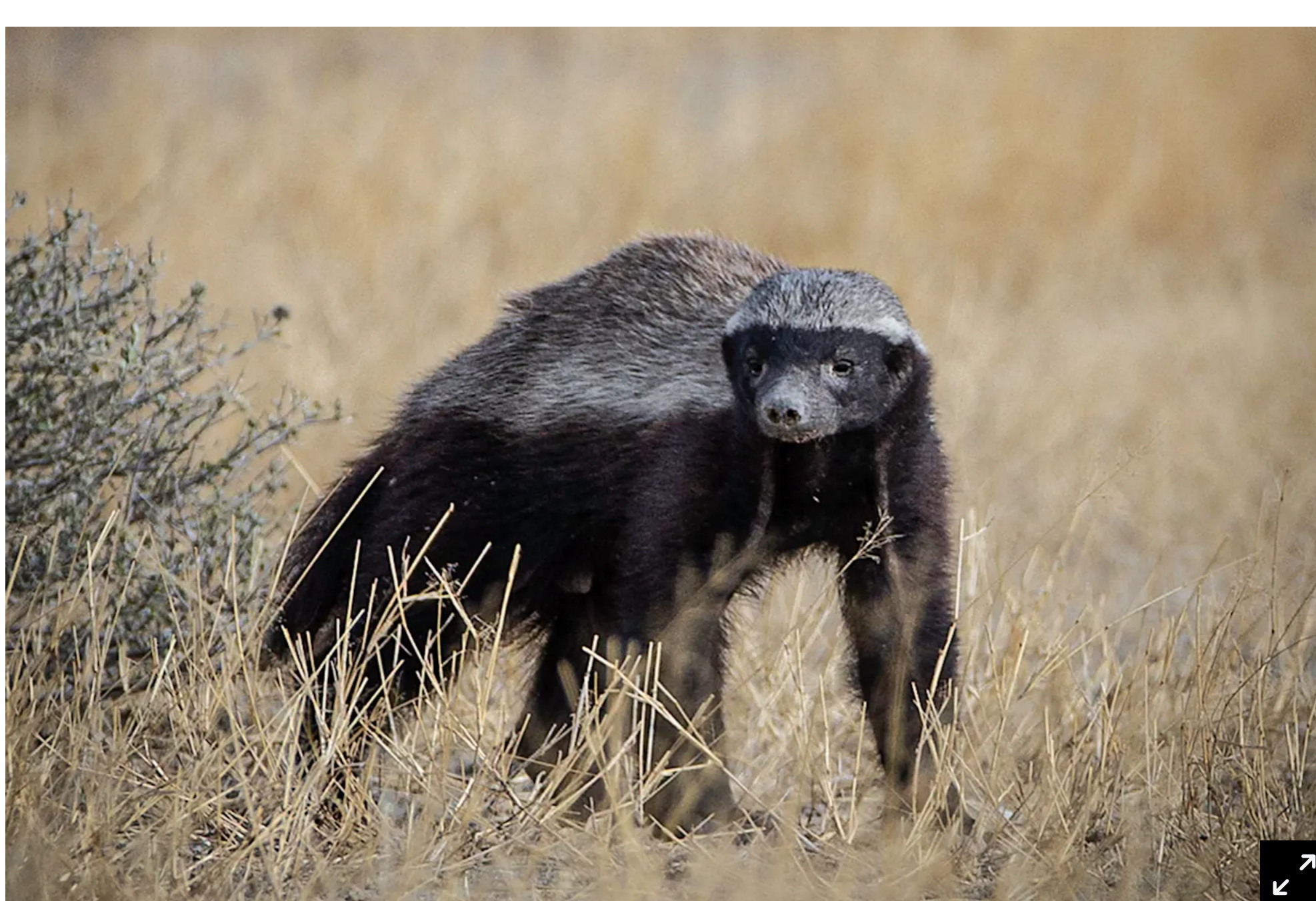
Move over, lions: The surprising African animal that even guides fear

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There are no known instances of them latching onto a pair of human testicles but that doesn't stop knowing African safari guides instinctively grabbing theirs protectively whenever they spot one.

"People I know have seen honey badgers grab the balls of a buffalo," says Lawrence Banda, head guide at Time + Tide Luwi, a remote luxury bush camp in South Luangwa National Park, Zambia. "The buffalo have very big balls and the only way the honey badger can beat one is by biting on them."



The honey badger is built like a rugby prop. ISTOCK

Why would a 15 kilogram animal from the weasel family try to take on (up to) 900 kilogram African buffalo?

"Some people say they can be quite cruel, which is a bit of a legend, but they're very small and solitary so they need to be very aggressive for self-defence," he says. For the strange, maniacal honey badger, the best defence is offence, even against big cats.

"I saw a honey badger attack a lioness. He bit her snout, locked on hard, and was still attached after four or five good shakes. The only thing that saved the lioness was a young male lion who [eventually] came up and bit the badger as hard as can be."

Its true combat advantage is an ability to twist and turn within its loose, thick and multi-layered skin; rarely penetrated by bites and or bee stings (they raid hives for honey). The black-and-white beastie is a relative of the skunk and also uses a skunk-like "stink bomb for protection and to mark territory.



Honey badgers will raid safari camps for sweet foods. GETTY IMAGES

Males grow larger, up to 75 centimetres long, having rugby-prop proportioned bodies that feature low centres of gravity, short and sturdy legs, with long claws on the front feet. While physically smaller, females will ramp up that psychotically fearless reputation a notch or two, engaging full mama-bear mode if they sense a threat to their young "kits".

Banda was once following a female honey badger on safari when he noticed a baby nearby (a relatively rare sighting). "She must have thought, 'this thing just keeps on following me', and became stressed because of the baby, so she turned around and ran at the vehicle.

"At first I thought she went underneath the car and ran away, but when I started to reverse, I saw that she'd grabbed onto a tyre with her teeth [holding on, rotating with the tyre, only letting go well after the car stopped]. I still can't believe there was no puncture."

Badgers have a tenacious ability to "get into things" when there's food on their minds. Banda narrowly missed being attacked when he disturbed one who'd pilfered a five-litre container of cooking oil from Time + Tide Luwi's storeroom. Another one managed to get its claws into, and mouth around, a box of wine.



Time + Tide Luwi safari camp.

"It made a hole in the bladder and started siphoning the wine. The waiter saw something sleeping behind the bar at 4.30am in his torchlight – next to the spilled wine. Eventually, he tried poking the animal with a stick, but it was pass-out drunk.

"We dragged it by the tail out into the sun, leaving it to sleep it off, before he eventually wandered into the long grass [no doubt with a colossal hangover]." The camp now uses bottled wine and has better badger-proofed the storeroom.

What does the honey badger, also known as "ratel", normally like to eat? The omnivore's first preference is anything sweet (sugar and raisins have been pilfered from kitchens in the past). "Out in the wild [across both Africa and south-west Asia], they follow the greater honeyguide bird because it leads the badger to beehives.

"But they will feed on just about anything they find, including eggs, snakes and lizards. In villages, they'll get into chicken coops and kill one at a time."

For their fearsome reputation and all the legendary anecdotes (there are apocryphal stories of the animals digging up human graves for a meal), they "will usually run away if you surprise them". The best time to see a badger in the wild is at night, when it's looking for crabs, mice and dung beetle larva, but the best way to see one is from a distance.

"Stay away and don't provoke them because [if they feel cornered] the honey badger will, by all means, drive you away – and it could be fatal. They're crazy, good climbers and have a high pain threshold."

All things that even Africa's Big Five, who struggle to defeat them in battle, know all too well.

THE DETAILS

FLY

Qantas flies from Sydney and Perth to Johannesburg non-stop. Connect to Zambia with Airlink. See flyairlink.com

STAY

The Classic Safari Company (Sydney) can arrange multi-camp Zambian itineraries, including Time + Tide Luwi. Prices start from \$US940 (\$1319) per person per night, including a canoe safari. Flights extra. See classicsafaricompany.com.au

The writer was a guest of The Classic Safari Company.