



My Drift

Title: Mongoose

Written By: Jerry D. Petersen

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Mongoose in Hawaii (circled in red)

This picture was taken by me at the Patsy T. Mink Central Oahu Regional Park in Waipio while walking our dog Apache. We see 5 or 6 of these critters every time we go there to walk.

Some General Information about the Mongoose

Family

Mongoose are long, short legged furry creatures with a pointed face and a bushy tail. Despite popular belief, mongooses are not rodents. They are members of the herpestidae family which also includes meerkats. There are 34 species of mongoose with most found in Africa with some living in southern Asia (mostly India) and the Iberian Peninsula. Some species of mongoose have been introduced into other areas of the world, such as Caribbean and Hawaiian Islands. **The specie we see in Hawaii is the Small Indian Mongoose.**



Small Indian Mongoose

Size

With so many different types of mongooses, sizes vary greatly. Their bodies range from the dwarf mongoose at 7 inches long to the Egyptian mongoose, which can be over 2 feet long. **The body length of the mongooses in Hawaii is about a foot long (not counting the tail or head), its height ranges from 20-26 inches, and they weigh a little over a pound.**

Habitat

Mongoose live in burrows made of a complex system of tunnels in many different types of landscapes, including deserts and tropical forests. **The Small Indian Mongoose prefers to inhabit grasslands, forests, thickets, orchards, and crop fields.**

Habits

Some species of mongoose are very social and live in large groups called colonies. Colonies can have as many as 50 members, **while other species like the one in Hawaii likes to live alone.** Mongooses are active during the day and sleep at night.

Diet

Mongoose are omnivores, which means they eat both meat and vegetation. Typically, they prefer to eat small animals such as birds, reptiles, fish, snakes, crabs, rodents, frogs, insects, and worms. They will also supplement their diet with eggs, nuts, fruits, roots, berries, and seeds.

Offspring

Baby mongooses are called pups and a group of offspring is called a litter. **The life expectancy of the Small Indian Mongoose is three to four years.**

The Story on how the Mongoose found its way to Hawaii

Although not native to Hawaii, mongooses are well established on Hawai'i Island (aka; The Big Island), Oahu, Maui, and Molokai. In recent years, there have even been a few found either dead or captured alive on Kauai.



Mongoose recently captured on Kauai

How the mongoose got here is an interesting story. In the 1800s up into the mid-1900s, Hawaii's most valuable commodity was not pristine beaches and beautiful scenery. That commodity was sugarcane. One of the major problems Hawaii sugar plantations battled during this era was rats chewing on sugarcane stalks for their sweet taste. This infestation destroyed significant amounts of this most valued of crops.



Rats Love Sugarcane

In 1872, Big Island sugar planters found an article on Caribbean sugar grower's success in controlling their rat problem. They had introduced the mongoose from India into their fields. This supposedly was successful in significantly reducing the sugar cane damage caused by rats. Initially, 72 mongooses from Jamaica were brought in and were raised. Their offspring were shipped to plantations on other islands, first Maui, then Molokai, and finally Oahu. However, none were introduced on the island of Kauai.

Not everyone on Big Island was in favor of bringing in the mongooses. They felt there should be more research on how mongooses were faring in the war on rats in the Caribbean. And that the research should be completed prior to bringing the animals. Unfortunately, those warnings went unheeded.

So, the mongooses were brought to Hawaii and released into the fields to kill the rats. However, there was one small problem! Rats are nocturnal animals, meaning they're mostly awake and active at night. Mongooses are only awake during the day. So, the two hardly ever came in contact with each other. Thus, the idea of the mongoose controlling the rat population was an epic failure!

Instead of ridding the cane fields of rats, the mongoose began destroying some of Hawaii's most native species and small animals. Many bird populations and turtle eggs declined as the mongoose would feed on unprotected nests. It continued to get worse when the mongoose started reproducing and needing food for their young ones. Special fencing was put up just to keep them out of nature sanctuaries and reserves.

Mongooses are not a cute and cuddly animal. If you see one, it will most likely run and hide in the bushes. However, they can be very vicious if cornered so it is best to give them plenty of space. If they feel they're in danger, they may very well become aggressive and will leave a nasty bite.



Well, I think mongooses are cute, but they do have a nasty disposition

Now, next time you see one of these little critters scurrying through the bushes or jumping out of a public trash can, you'll know what they are and how they got to Hawaii.

THE BIG FIGHT



The King Cobra Snake vs The Mongoose

Although cobras rarely eat mongooses, the mongoose can kill and eat cobras as well as other venomous snakes. The venomous nature of the cobra is not enough to stop a hungry and determined mongoose. The mongoose has thick fur and some specialized receptors that make it immune to the cobra's venom. In a fight between a cobra and mongoose, it is more likely that the mongoose will win. Most people would think that cobra will triumph in such a battle. This thought is based on the fact that the mongoose is a tiny animal and that the cobra's venom would have the same effect on the mongoose as it would have on other animals including humans.

Why the Mongoose is able to win against a Cobra? The mongoose is agile and swift. It possesses strong jaws and a tough skin that tends to resist cobra fangs. Despite its small size, the mongoose will always challenge the cobra despite its toxic venom that is capable of killing humans within 30 minutes. Due to the mongoose's natural defense against snake venom, the only way a cobra can kill them is with several bites. So, mongooses actually win 75 to 80 percent of fights with cobras.

How does the Mongoose kill venomous snakes? They depend on speed and agility, darting at the head of the snake and cracking the skull with a powerful bite.

What are Mongoose Predators?

- Some **snakes like the Viper** will kill the mongoose most of the time in a fight. The mongoose cannot crack the skull of a full-grown viper. The Viper will continually strike at the mongoose until it gets a clean venomous shot in, at which point the mongoose will be dead shortly after.
- **Hawks and eagles:** Birds of prey are a mongoose's most well-known enemy. Large birds such as hawks and eagles hunt by sneaking up on mongooses, swooping down, lifting them into the air, and crushing them before they can put up a fight.



Viper



Hawk

- **Jackals:** These wild dogs are quite a bit larger than mongooses, and they tend to hunt in pairs, increasing their chances of securing a kill. They will hunt mongooses because they often live in the same territories and consider the smaller predators to be relatively easy to hunt.
- **Marabou stork:** this ugly bird is one of the largest birds of flight in the world. It is known for sometimes hunting mongooses, and though it usually sticks to snatching unattended pups, it will sometimes hunt adults as well.

Mongoose have no natural predators and very few parasites or diseases on the Hawaiian Islands to control their population.

How Fast Can a Mongoose Run? Mongooses are rarely eaten by other animals because they are so fast. But just how fast can they run? Mongooses can reach top speeds of up to 20 miles per hour, which is extremely fast for animals of their size.

What scares a Mongoose? Generally speaking, mongooses are afraid of animals that are larger than them, though they will fight just about anything encroaching on their territory or threatening their young.

Another Fight – This time in Okinawa where a Mongoose takes on a Habu



A little background information

Are there mongooses in Okinawa? The mongoose was introduced to Okinawa in 1910 in attempt to control the population of venomous snakes. The problem is the habu snake is nocturnal (active at night) and the mongoose is diurnal (active during the day), so they rarely meet. **Hey, this sounds familiar! Didn't something like this happen in Hawaii?**

Are there poisonous snakes in Okinawa? Yes. The Okinawan habu is the largest and the most venomous of the three habu species found in Okinawa.



On one of my TDY trips to Okinawa, I took a tour of the island. One of the places they took us to see was the Ryukyu Folk Village.



Ryukyu Folk Village

This was where I learned a lot about the history of Okinawa. It was also where I got to watch the mongoose fight a habu (snake). The mongoose won – The mongoose almost always wins because they are so quick and mean. It killed the snake in a few seconds. Then they cremate the dead snake and sell the powder to us tourists, stating that the powder had magical health benefits. I gulped down two packages of snake powder with my Orion beer hoping it would make me strong.

Come to think of it, I could sure use some of that snake powder now in my old age!

Conclusion

Next time me and Apache come across a mongoose at the park, we will keep our distance. Those cute little critters can be vicious!

Bigdrifter44@gmail.com

Bigdrifter.com