

NEWS RELEASE

Weasel watch - UP PhD candidate calls on public to share sightings of elusive African striped weasel



The African striped weasel has a sleek black face, while the striped polecat sports distinctive white facial markings, often in the form of three bold dots (© Michael Jordan)

PRETORIA - University of Pretoria (UP) doctoral candidate [Kyle Smith](#) is on a mission to find out all about one of Southern Africa's most elusive small carnivores: the [African striped weasel](#) – and he needs your help. Smith is calling on members of the public and [citizen scientists](#) to help him by providing information about possible sightings of the animal anywhere in Southern Africa.

"In particular, I'd appreciate comments from people who have seen them in arid, desert-like areas, or who might know the location of some of the animals' burrows or resting places," he says. "If I can collect [scat](#), I could find out much more about the animal's diet too."

African striped weasels ([Poecilogale albinucha](#)) are secretive, [nocturnal](#), solitary black-and-white animals found throughout Africa, south of the equator. They have a characteristically slinky, [snakelike way of moving](#) and bouncing slightly off their front legs. Like [other members of the mustelid family](#), they have well-developed rear scent glands from which they release foul-smelling liquid when they feel threatened.

"Some say the smell can linger on clothes and car seats for weeks," Smith says. "Fortunately, I haven't yet

experienced that.”

Many things about the species still elude wildlife experts. For instance, very little is known about their movements and diet in the wild. Smith would love to definitively confirm anecdotal comments that these small carnivores hunt mole-rats inside their tunnels.

“If this turns out to be the case, it will make the weasel the only Southern African carnivore to hunt mole-rats in this way,” he speculates.

The 31-year-old from Benoni grew up in a family of nature lovers – he has already seen about 518 South African bird species. His interest in African striped weasels was piqued when he first learnt about them in his final year of undergraduate studies in the [Department of Zoology and Entomology](#) at UP.

“I couldn’t believe that there was indeed a South African mammal that had eluded me,” Smith says. “I was immediately fascinated.”

He’s since learnt that many [confuse the animal with striped polecats](#) or honey badgers.

“We are not sure why they’re so seldom seen, and whether it might merely be because they are nocturnal. We don’t know their actual numbers, nor do we know if they’re endangered. It’s quite possible that they could go extinct without 99% of people ever knowing about their existence.”

Smith first saw an African striped weasel in 2019 while passing through the [Knersvlakte](#) in the Western Cape, but it was roadkill, having been hit by a car. A year later, while driving on a gravel road at night in the [Sandveld](#) near [Redelinghuys](#) in the north-western part of the Cape, he saw two live weasels within minutes of each other.

“They were like two small black-and-white ghosts running along a dirt road,” he recalls. “Seeing two within minutes either meant I was extremely lucky or that they’re quite common in the [Sandveld](#) area.”

The sightings kindled in Smith a longing to know more about their behaviour and role in the ecosystem. He soon learnt that the species had last been studied in some detail in the 1970s by [Dave Rowe-Rowe](#), when he’d done research on mustelid species in KwaZulu-Natal. There have since been more recent papers on their use in traditional African medicine.

“To protect this species and its natural habitat, it is important to understand its ecological and conservation needs,” Smith says. “We need to raise awareness about them. The lack of knowledge, their mysterious nature and the challenge that comes with researching such a secretive species inspired me to do an ‘old school’ behavioural study for my PhD, reminiscent of zoological research of the previous century. I took the idea to small-carnivore specialist [Professor Michael Somers](#), who supported my somewhat crazy plan.”

Smith’s work is supported by UP’s [Mammal Research Institute](#), and he is being supervised by Prof Somers of the University’s [Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences](#), [Prof Emmanuel Do Linh San](#) of [Sol Plaatje University](#) and [Prof Tim Hofmeester](#) of the [Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences](#).

Smith has scoured museums around South Africa for possible records to include in a distribution map, and is gathering data on recent sightings across the country. He is heartened by the interest and support that his project has received thus far.

His fieldwork will see him crisscrossing the [Western](#), [Northern](#) and [Eastern](#) Cape provinces, and parts of the [KwaZulu-Natal Midlands](#). There have been recent sightings in the [Boland](#) and [Cape Winelands](#) regions in the Western Cape, the area around [Gqeberha \(formerly known as Port Elizabeth\)](#), on the West Coast from [Nieuwoudtville](#) in the north down to [St Helena Bay](#), and the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands.

He hopes to collar and track some wild animals – a first for this species – to learn more about their behaviour. He will have to do monitoring work between dusk and dawn, as the animals are nocturnal. By day, Smith plans to

write up data or scout for burrows and tree hollows that might serve as the animals' resting places. He will also interview community members to get a sense of their knowledge about and attitudes towards African striped weasels.

How you can help with the African striped weasel project

If you have information about sightings of African striped weasels, contact Kyle Smith via:

- Email at africanstripedweasel@gmail.com or
- message him on WhatsApp at 073 620 8517 or
- send sightings through to his social media handles on Instagram: [@africanstripedweaselproject](https://www.instagram.com/africanstripedweaselproject) or [@kylezoologist](https://www.instagram.com/kylezoologist)

Please include the following details:

- The date and time of the sighting (at the very least, the month and year)
- GPS coordinates or as precise a location as possible

Additional information includes:

- Photographic evidence (regardless of quality)
- Any other observations, such as sightings of prey caught, interactions with other species or, in cases of dead animals, speculations on the cause of death
- GPS coordinates of burrows

Sightings include roadkill and other dead animals, as well as animals seen in neighbouring countries.

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>> Watch the [video](#) in the sidebar to see how the African striped weasel moves around in the wild.

>> Click on the [infographic](#) in the sidebar to learn more about the differences between the African striped weasel and the African polecat.

>> View the [gallery](#) to see more detailed and close up differences between the African striped weasel and the African polecat.

>> Here is [more information](#) on Kyle's research project

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa. Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the [Gordon Institute of Business Science](#) (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a [Faculty of Veterinary Science](#), which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The [2025 Times Higher Education \(THE\) Impact Rankings](#) placed UP 7th globally for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17: Partnerships for the Goals, recognising the University's leadership in building impactful global collaborations. UP also ranked 41st in the world and 1st in Africa and South Africa for SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, and maintained its position as the second-highest ranked university overall in both Africa and South Africa.

The 2025 Times Higher Education subject rankings placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of [Accounting](#) and [Finance](#); [Architecture](#); [Electrical and Electronic Engineering](#); Law; Sport Science; and Veterinary Science. UP's Faculty of Law has been ranked as the top law school in Africa for a remarkable eighth consecutive year.

In the [2025 QS World University Subject Rankings](#), UP is ranked in the top 100 in the world in Mineral & Mining Engineering (41), Veterinary Science (51–60), and Development Studies (51–100). Six UP subjects are ranked No. 1 in South Africa: Mechanical Engineering, Veterinary Science, Mathematics, Accounting & Finance, Business & Management Studies, and Economics & Econometrics.

For more information, please go to www.up.ac.za