



Bandit and the Mongoose Man

The story of Bandit, a banded mongoose raised as a pet, then abandoned and eventually rescued and released in the wild

He is one of the lucky ones. After being dumped in the bushes by his former 'family', Bandit ended up on the streets, but was saved by a kind human and eventually formed a relationship of trust with another human, the 'Mongoose Man', which led to his successful release in the wild.

On the outskirts of town, a small animal has just sneaked into the yard of a suburban home. As he found his way into a garage, the sun was setting. Bandit was lost, extremely scared and exhausted. For a couple of days now he has dodged dogs, motor vehicles and people. The wounds inflicted by a dog a day earlier were getting badly infected. All he wanted was to find his home and snuggle up inside his box. He has never known a life in the wild, nor has he ever met others of his own kind.

The life of pet

Humans were his family. Initially Bandit was spoiled rotten; his young master brought his food on time and spent many hours playing with him. He even slept in his bed initially. As Bandit grew older, the novelty of having a fully-grown banded mongoose around had worn off and the family showed less and less interest in this banded mongoose male. When he first marked out his territory on the couch, they screamed and even kicked at him. His days of living in the house came to an abrupt end. Bandit was banished to live outdoors in the garden in a small cage. Occasionally his young master still took him out and played with him, but this irritated Bandit somehow and last week he sunk his teeth into his young master's hand. It felt so good that he continued to bite until they sprayed him with a hose pipe; but it was the hard blow to his head that made him let go.

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Abandoned and injured

Within a couple of hours, he was unceremoniously stuffed into a box and dropped in the veld somewhere. Bandit simply did not know what to do; where was he supposed to go?

His instincts told him he needed protection and that he could survive on his own; protection meant he was supposed to find his family and his family lived in a human house. He tried for many hours to find his home, but he kept encountering strange people. Some screamed at him, some chased him, but the worst was when he was attacked by a small dog. Bandit fought back viciously and managed to get away. Now he needed help, but as he crawled into a discarded box inside the garage, Bandit had no idea where to find it.

Saving grace

Help found Bandit early the next morning. Alex van Zyl had just walked into his garage when he heard something moving inside an empty cardboard box. He had closed the outside garage door the previous night and now shut the door between the house and the garage to ensure that whatever was in the box could not run into his house. Alex, having grown up in the bush, immediately identified the banded mongoose and he also realised that the helpless animal needed urgent veterinary care. Within the hour Bandit arrived at a veterinary clinic in Pretoria where his wounds were treated. It was obvious that he was a discarded or lost pet and the clinic staff phoned SanWild to collect him as soon as possible. By some good fortune we just happened to be in Johannesburg and late that same day Bandit arrived at his new home in Limpopo Province.

Difficult to release

SanWild has had many critters in the past, but the one species respected by staff all around are the banded mongoose troops. They're cute and pretty, but incredibly nasty



Above: Sagaria, aptly named the 'Mongoose Man' has developed a special relationship with these small mammals

Left: Hand-raised as a pet, Bandit only knew the company of people

Below: Bandit's pups in the wild – they were born in a discarded antbear hole



■ Banded Mongoose Fact File



Scientific name: *Mungos mungo*

Afrikaans: *Gebande Muishond*

Description: This small mongoose comes in colours varying from reddish-brown to light grey with speckles. Characteristic are dark cross bands running across the back, and a pointed snout.

Habitat: Dense *Acacia* woodland and riverine forest. They mostly keep in the undergrowth and forage among ant heaps, fallen tree trunks and dry grass.

Life expectancy: Eight years

Natural enemies: Leopard, lion, black-backed jackal, civet, python and African hawk eagle.

Food: Insects, snails, reptiles, locusts, worms, fruit and bird eggs

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Banded mongooses have between two and eight pups at a time

with razor sharp teeth and a serious attitude. Like Bandit, most of the banded mongooses that arrived at the centre were either injured, orphaned or discarded pets. Placing them with other banded mongooses to form social groups proved extremely difficult as well, and at times it took months before a newcomer could be introduced to a group.

The 'Mongoose Man'

Sagaria Olifant was born in Zimbabwe, a country now torn apart by political conflict and instability. As a child he herded his father's cattle and did the normal things young boys do when they grow up in the bush. He eventually found his way to South Africa, where he hoped to start a new life. However he never anticipated that this life would be built on his love of and ability to work with wild animals.

During the time that the first banded mongooses started arriving at the centre, Sagaria quietly continued to do his work, but took a particular interest in the banded mongooses. To his surprise, his affection and interest was returned and quite soon the banded mongooses bonded with this particular human and, in doing so, trusted him to introduce others of their own kind to their groups. Introductions that normally took months could now successfully be done with in a week or so.

Bandit immediately took to his kind nature and within days accepted Sagaria totally. The bond between this quiet man from Zimbabwe and Bandit grew stronger and stronger and it was this bond that resulted in very close observations of Bandit's makeshift troop. It allowed us, under the guidance of Sagaria, to perfect our rehabilitation techniques with banded mongooses.

Individual animals are now grouped into new troops and are placed in large natural habitat enclosures, where they are allowed to interact socially and breed to increase their troop numbers to at least 15 to 20 individuals per troop before they are set free. Today SanWild is proud to say that we have established a very successful banded mongoose breeding, rehabilitation and release program, all thanks to Sagaria and Bandit. □