



Eva Crane Trust

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TITLE: An African honeybee from 1778

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For those interested in history

An African honeybee from 1778

The Entomology Department of the British Museum (Natural History) has kindly drawn my attention to a description made two hundred years ago of an African honeybee, of which a type specimen still exists.

The description was published by Carl De Geer in 1778 in Volume VII, Mémoire X, of his 'Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire des insectes', under the title 'Insectes du Cap-de-Bonne-Esperance'. On page 607 is the entry:

ABEILLE noire, à deux bandes transverses jaunes fauves sur le devant du ventre et à ailes vitrées.

Apis (fulvo-cincta) nigra, abdomine antice fasciis binis transversis flavo-fulvis, alis byalinis.

Cette Abeille ressemble en figure aux domestiques, mais elle est plus petite et toute noire. Elle n'est distinguée de tant d'autres especes que par deux bandes transversales d'un jaune fauve, qui font le tour du corps ou du ventre à son origine, et dont la postérieure est plus large que l'autre. Le dessous de la tête et du corcelet, ainsi que les pattes, est garni de poils gris et les ailes sont blanches, très-transparentes et garnies de nervures brunes.

The bee is illustrated in Plate 45, Fig. 4, but the sketch has no diagnostic value and is not worth reproducing.

The biologist Carl De Geer (also referred to as Carolus, or Charles, de Geer) was born in 1720; he was Swedish, but of Dutch origin. Tuxen says that he studied biology in Utrecht and was so impressed by Réaumur's work that he continued observations in the same way and even published them under the same title; the final

Volume, VII, was published in 1778, the year of his death. He never met Réaumur, but was induced by him even to publish his 'journal of observations' in French, because the reader would be indulgent with an author writing in a foreign language. Also he points out in his modest preface that the truth very often is first found after many errors. It was the observations which had his interest, not the literature. Many species carry his name as author, because he later gave Latin diagnoses though in pre-Linnean style, which A. J. Retzius (1742-1821) tabulated in Linnean shape in *Caroli de Geer genera et species insectorum* (1783).

In 1912 W. A. Schulz published a short section on Carl De Geer in 'Aelteste und alte Hymenopteren skandinavischer Autoren' (*Berliner entomologische Zeitschrift* 57: 52-102). On page 62 is the entry:

Apis fulvocincta Geer (ebenda VII, 1778, p. 607, pl. 45 fig. 4):

Type 1 Arbeiterin—*Apis Adansoni* Latr. (1804), verglichen mit 4 Arbeiterinnen dieser Form im Stockholmer Museum, die von Sjöstedt am Kilimandscharo gesammelt und von Friese als *Adansoni* benannt worden sind. Geers Species-name gewinnt vor dem jüngeren Latreilleschen den Vorrang.

Translations of the above entries are:

De Geer: This bee resembles the domestic honeybee but it is smaller and entirely black. It is not distinguished from other species except by two transverse bands of yellow which encircle the body, the posterior band being the wider. The upper side of the head and thorax, and the feet, are covered with grey hairs, and the wings are white, very transparent and with brown veins.

Schultz: Type 1 worker—*Apis Adansoni* Latr. (1804), from comparison with 4 workers on this form in the Stockholm Museum that were collected by Sjöstedt on Kilimanjaro and named by Friese as *Adansoni*. Geer's species name has priority over the name given later by Latreille.

We know from Schultz's paper that De Geer's type specimens of Hymenoptera were in the National Museum in Stockholm in 1912. In 1979 I was able to confirm, from the Swedish Museum of Natural History, that De Geer's (one) type specimen of *Apis fulvo-cincta* is still in the Section of Entomology there, but that the Museum has no details of its provenance, nor any information other than that given by De Geer, which is quoted in full above. The title of De Geer's paper suggests that the specimen he named *Apis (fulvo-cincta) nigra* was found at or near the Cape of Good Hope, and was therefore the bee currently known as *Apis mellifera capensis*: this is confirmed by De Geer's description.

There has recently been a renewed interest in African populations of honeybees, and in considering proposals for names to be used for subspecies/types/varieties, it would seem important to take into account names already given by earlier authors. A thorough search of the literature appears to be urgently necessary: De Geer's may not be the only valid early description, although it is unlikely that many other type specimens will exist that are two hundred years old. Any further information that the specimen of *Apis (fulvo-cincta) nigra* can yield would certainly be worth obtaining.