



Eva Crane Trust

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FOR THOSE INTERESTED IN HISTORY

An excursion into prehistory

Fuller details are given here of some of the observations on primitive honey gathering mentioned in the Editorial on page 3. I should like to thank Dr. J. Woodburn for drawing my attention to some of the sources listed on the next page.

Professor Cipriani writes: 'Few of the fruits on Little Andaman contain much sugar, but the Onges eat more than enough honey to compensate any deficiency. Whatever the fruit in season, men, women and children climb happily about like acrobats, hanging in the trees to get at it and the honey that goes with it. . . . When one of the Onges finds a nest of bees he puts a mark on the rock or tree as a sign of ownership. None of the others would then dare to take possession of it, for fear of punishment by the group, but when the time comes to take the honey everyone helps in the hard work of getting at the nest and opening it up. . . . The Onges make no attempt to protect their bare bodies while they are extracting honey. . . . I watched an Onge from the ground with my field glasses as he climbed up a tree to a *dorsata* nest and saw him blowing on the bees round about the trunk as he went up. As he approached the nest they huddled round it in a protective cloud, hiding it completely from view. Suddenly, as the Onge's face came within twenty centimetres of the boiling, humming mass, the bees seemed to shrink back as he blew on them. Not one moved to attack as he gouged out the combs with his bare hands, throwing handfuls of bees out into the air. And then the whole cloud of bees gathered into a swarm and left the tree and the nest to the interloper. The Onge stripped lengths of green bark from the lianas growing up the tree, and then broke the nest up. Tying the combs to his back with the strips of bark he lowered himself down to the ground, swinging like an ape from liana to liana.'

Dr. Schaller's experience with the Batwa was as follows: 'On one occasion . . . a Batwa . . . discovered bees hovering by a small hole in a tree about twelve feet above ground. Immediately the Batwa wedged a sapling against the trunk and climbed up. They lit a dry, rotten piece of wood and blew the heavy smoke into the opening. They made little progress pecking away at the bark with their spears in an attempt to enlarge the hole and decided to return the following day. During the next attempt their spears were fitted with a chisel-like point. The chips flew as they chopped, and they were coughing and spitting in the dense smoke. One Batwa reached into the tree and hauled out the combs dripping with golden honey. They ate and ate, laughing and swatting at the bees that buzzed angrily around them. Some combs held white grubs, and these were eaten too. Only the wax was spat out. The Batwa had honey all over their arms and chest, and the bees landed on their skin and stung them. Then they licked their fingers and arms and stuffed the extra honey into the small calabashes they carried.'

There is recent evidence of the exploitation of bees' nests by gorillas, chimpanzees and baboons, all primates less advanced than man. Honey gathering does not however seem to be as common in any of these animals as it is in a few others, such as bears and the honey ratel (*Mellivora capensis*).

In a study of gorillas, Dr. G. B. Schaller reports: 'The natives also told me that gorillas frequently raid the nests of wild bees, but around Kabara [near the Congo-Uganda border] the only nest-robbers were the Batwa, which were so elusive that I only found their child-sized footprints and the smoking remnant of the tree which they had burned to get at the bees. Several gorillas once climbed up on a hollow log which contained bees, but the apes seemingly ignored the combs which were clearly visible.'

Drs. Merfield and Miller report on the use of stick tools by chimpanzees to obtain honey: 'Each ape held a long twig, poked it down the hole and withdrew it coated with honey'. On the other hand Vernon and Francis Reynolds, watching chimpanzees in the Budongo Forest where there were numerous bees' nests, saw no signs of interference with them.

Dr. Friedmann discusses the antiquity and evolution of the co-operation between the honey guide bird and mammals; he says 'In Northern Rhodesia, Maj. E. L. Haydock was told by his native collectors that the bird also calls to baboons and monkeys, and that occasionally the baboons do follows it, but the monkeys never do. A corroborating and wholly independent bit of evidence came to me from the Cape Province, where Mr. Trevor McKenzie Crooks told me that one morning around Christmas time near Uitenhage he saw a baboon (one of a troop) opening a wild bees' nest with a greater honey-guide in attendance, chattering from a perch a little way up in a tree close to the hive. Crooks watched the procedure from a distance. The baboon first made a clearing by repeated short dashes towards the hive, which was low down in a soft-barked tree, until it had made more or less of a path. Then the baboon backed up to the tree and reached in with its hind foot, grabbed a piece of comb, and dashed off about 30 yards where it dropped it. Then, when the bees had calmed down, it came back to the piece of comb and cleaned it of bees by wiping it in the sandy ground, and frequently wiped its hands in the sand to get rid of the bees.'

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