

Misconceptions about Baboons

Below are some things we've heard people say about baboons....and some answers based on current scientific knowledge.

We see more baboons around, so their population numbers must be growing.

In greatest likelihood, **you see more baboons around you because the baboons in the area where you live are (a) gradually losing their fear of humans while (b) discovering how easy it is to gain access to human foods.** These are psychological and behavioural changes in the baboons as a response to their interactions with humans. The baboons have formed a mental association between humans and easily-acquired food and have learned that they need not fear humans but can instead get food from them! This occurs because some people (particularly tourists) feed baboons and the baboons that do raid are not being stopped from doing so. Over time, the baboons will spend more and more of their time near people awaiting a free meal unless they learn that those free meals are no longer available.

As a result of these changes, we see the baboons around more often and naturally come to the conclusion that there are more of them in the population. The most likely scenario, however, is that there are just more of them *near us* because they are waiting for us to feed them!

Baboons are becoming bolder and more aggressive.

Baboons are not naturally aggressive towards humans and will usually only show aggression if you trap them or try to take something away from them. Baboons are wild animals and, like most wild animals, are naturally afraid of humans! **The increased aggression and boldness of baboons that we perceive simply reflects a decreased fear of humans combined with an increased opportunity for free food.** As stated above, these are psychological and behavioural changes occurring in the baboons themselves as they learn that humans are a source of easily-acquired food at the same time that they discover that there is no reason to fear humans. If humans and baboons are to co-exist peacefully then we must try to reverse or at least slow down this process as much as possible. To do this, we must **(1) remove these opportunities for free food** (i.e., decrease the attractants) and **(2) increase the baboons' fear of humans** (i.e., use effective deterrents and **never** feed or approach baboons!).

Baboons are competing with humans for territory.

A territory is an area that animals defend against other members of their own species. **Unlike many other primates, such as chimpanzees for example, baboons are NOT territorial.**

Rather, each baboon troop occupies a 'home range', part of which overlaps with the home range of other troops. Usually different troops avoid using these overlapping areas at the same time, and troops and home ranges shift fluidly in accordance with one another. (Thus, if humans encroach upon the home range of one troop, this can affect that troop's relationship with other troops as well as the home ranges of all other troops in the area.) When baboon troops fight, it is usually over a food resource, over a sleeping site, or it is related to male-male competition over females and/or attempted infanticide – it is not over territories.

Baboons are opportunistic and will take food from our properties if it is available. This will occur whether or not our property is (or was) within the home range of that troop. We may think that we can keep baboons away by 'showing them' that this is 'our' territory. This is pointless, as a baboon couldn't care less whose territory it is – it just wants the food!

Expanding human populations results in **increased overlap between baboons and humans.** This, combined with the natural flexibility of baboons, means that **instead of 'moving out' of their original home range or simply dying off, a baboon troop may instead simply adapt its behaviour to this increased contact.** As baboons lose their fear of humans (sometimes as a result of interactions with tourists and/or deliberate provisioning of baboons by humans), they become more and more willing to exploit the human-derived food resources they see as readily available to them and they start helping themselves to the food they find in gardens, homes, and cars with little or no regard for the humans who may be nearby.

Baboons mark their territories, and we can 'fight back' by marking ours.

Many animals mark their territories with urine or other bodily fluids, leaving a scent that is detectable by other animals. Baboons do not do this. There are two issues to consider here:

- 1. Baboons are not territorial** (see above).
- 2. In the monkey and ape species that are territorial, vocalizations are used most often to defend territories, NOT scent-marking.**

All monkeys and apes, like humans, use visual and vocal communication far more than the sense of smell. Monkeys and apes do not have the *rhinarium* (wet nose) that dogs and cats have, and without this feature they have to get very close to something to smell it. Many people assume that baboons have a keen sense of smell because of their dog-like face, but in fact their sense of smell is not very different from our own!

Lone baboon males are 'rogue males' that have been rejected by their troop and are out to cause trouble.

Male baboons typically leave the troops in which they were born and move into new troops to reproduce. Some males do this two or more times during their lifetime. This process of group transfer, called **dispersal**, may start when a male is a young subadult (i.e., not yet full body size, canine teeth not yet fully developed), at which point he may leave his natal troop and join other

troops on a temporary basis while he decides which troop to ultimately immigrate into. We thus sometimes see male baboons wandering around alone during this dispersal process, which may last several months or more.

Unfortunately, some of these dispersing males do 'get into trouble,' as it is much easier for a lone male baboon to slip into the urban area and enter buildings looking for food without being seen than for an entire troop to do so! These males are often viewed as 'sneaky' because they enter buildings silently. This probably has nothing to do with the baboon deliberately trying to hide from humans. Rather, it is likely because the baboon is alone, surrounded by members of another species that he is naturally afraid of, and without any other baboons around to communicate with!

Also unfortunate is the situation in the Cape Peninsula of South Africa where dispersing males often end up stuck in urban areas because they are trying to disperse across them – but there is simply too much urban sprawl in the way for them to be able to reach new troops.

Look at those long teeth - they must be for hunting prey.

Unlike dogs and cats, **baboons are not natural carnivores and they do not have adaptations for hunting and eating meat.** The long canine teeth you see on a male baboon are instead adaptations for male-male competition; males use these teeth to fight with other males and gain access to females. More commonly, males do not even have to use their teeth: they simply display them to other males in an open-mouthed threat or yawn, which serves as a signal to other males to stay away. Baboons do occasionally hunt and eat small animals such as hares and lizards, but such foods comprise only a very small portion of their diet, which includes virtually everything (i.e., they are 'omnivores').

Also keep in mind that **there are other animals, such as cats, snakes, and raptors, that habitually prey on birds, birds' eggs, and other small animals.** These animals, unlike baboons, are natural predators and are much better than baboons at locating and catching prey.

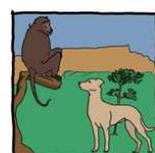
Look at those long teeth - he's out to get me!



Baboons are not natural predators and thus would not normally attack a human unless threatened in some way. Examples of this would be if a baboon is made to feel trapped (e.g., inside a house with no escape route), if a person tries to take something away from a baboon, or if someone gets between a baboon and its infant. A baboon may also feel threatened if you look at it directly in the eyes, as baboons use direct eye contact to threaten one another.

Look at those long teeth - he's out to get my pet!

A baboon will not normally attack a dog or cat unless threatened in some way. For example, a baboon may react aggressively if the dog threatens or attacks the baboon, if the dog gets between the baboon and a baboon infant, or if the



baboon is made to feel trapped (e.g., inside a house with no escape route). With small dogs and cats, it is possible that the baboon may perceive it as prey - as baboons do sometimes hunt and eat small mammals such as hares and small antelope. So, best to keep your pets away from baboons.

The alpha male baboon leads the troop.

Baboon troops are held together by kinship bonds among related females, who typically stay their entire lives in the troop in which they were born. These females are organized into *matrilines*, with each female that is born ranking in a dominance hierarchy just below her mother. The oldest females in the troop are the 'matriarchs', and they have been in the troop the longest and have acquired the most knowledge. Male baboons, by contrast, leave their natal troops and disperse to new troops one or more times in their lives. Males fight for dominance amongst themselves, and there is invariably an 'alpha male' of the troop, but his alpha status may be short-lived and he may not have been in the troop for very long. Thus **it is the females, especially the oldest females, that hold the troop together**, that know the most about local resources, and that probably contribute the most to the troop's movement patterns.

