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Aonyx congicus.

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Aonyx congicus (Lönnberg, 1910)

Congo Clawless Otter

Paraonyx congicus Lönnberg, 1910:3. Type locality "Lower Congo."

Aonyx microdon Pohle, 1919:145. Type locality "Nana-Fluss, bei Dorf Bomse, Kamerun" (= Cameroon).

Paraonyx philippsi Hinton, 1921:195. Type locality "British Ruanda [= Rwanda]."

CONTEXT AND CONTENT. Order Carnivora, family Mustelidae, subfamily Lutrinae, genus *Aonyx*. *Aonyx congicus* often was placed in its own genus, *Paraonyx*, which would include all clawless otters with small molariform teeth (Davis 1978). However, the genus *Paraonyx* does not appear to be valid because tooth size varies geographically (Davis 1978). Alternatively, *A. congicus* often is considered either synonymous with *A. capensis* (Davis 1978) or a subspecies of *A. capensis* (Lönnberg 1910). However, van Zyll de Jong (1972) and Wozencraft (1993) recognized *A. congicus* and *A. capensis* as separate species. Within *A. congicus*, Kingdon (1997) recognized 4 subspecies: *A. c. congicus*, *A. c. microdon*, *A. c. philippsi*, and *A. c. poensis*. However, *A. c. poensis* refers to *Lutra maculicollis* (Harris 1968; Lönnberg 1910), and the small geographic distribution of the species likely does not warrant subspecific designation. Thus, recent authorities consider the species monotypic (Wozencraft 1993).

DIAGNOSIS. The Congo clawless otter is very similar to the Cape clawless otter (*A. capensis*), but the 2 species are only sympatric in Rwanda and Uganda. The Congo clawless otter has a more slender neck and head and smaller and more deeply cusped molars than does the Cape clawless otter (Kingdon 1997).

Aonyx congicus also is sympatric with the spotted-neck otter (*Lutra maculicollis*) and the water mongoose (*Atilax paludinosus*). However, *Aonyx congicus* lacks foot webbing and the spotted markings on the neck and throat of *L. maculicollis* (Rowe-Rowe 1978). The water mongoose has a darker pelage compared with the brown-and-white coloration of the Congo clawless otter (Dorst and Dandelot 1970).

GENERAL CHARACTERS. Pelage is dark brown with conspicuous silvery gloss on the anterior parts of the body due to white tips on hairs. Vibrissae, sides of face, ears, nose, and upper parts of the chest are grayish or white (Dorst and Dandelot 1970; Lönnberg 1910). A distinct marking of black fur exists between the eyes and nostrils (Kingdon 1977).

Front feet lack claws and webbing. Hind feet are partially webbed, and small claws are present on digits 2, 3, and 4 (Lönnberg 1910).

Mean (range) length of head and body (sex and sample size unknown) is 85 cm (79–97 cm), and length of tail is 50 cm (41–56 cm—Kingdon 1977, 1997; Lönnberg 1910). Body mass of adults ranges from 14 to 34 kg (Kingdon 1977, 1997).

Skull (Fig. 1) is massive. Teeth are smaller and sharper than those of *A. capensis* (Lönnberg 1910; Rowe-Rowe and Somers 1998). No skull measurements have been published.

DISTRIBUTION. The Congo clawless otter occurs in the rainforest of the Congo River basin (Rahm 1966; Rahm and Christiaensen 1966), extending eastward to the forests and wetlands of Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda (Fig. 2). It is common in Central African Republic and Zaire, rare in Angola, Congo, Gabon, Rwanda, and Uganda, and very rare in Cameroon (Crawford-Cabral 1989; Rowe-Rowe 1990a, 1990b, 1995). The species may occur in Burundi and Nigeria, although its status in these countries is unknown (Rowe-Rowe 1990a, 1990b).

FOSSIL RECORD. The Lutrinae reached Africa in the Pliocene, but most ancestral forms cannot be linked to current forms (van Zyll de Jong 1972). *Aonyx* is first genus recorded from the late Pleistocene at Swartklip and Florisbab in South Africa and at

FIG. 1. Dorsal, ventral, and lateral views of cranium and lateral view of mandible of *Aonyx congicus* (adult, sex unknown, SMF 4636, locality: Molundu, Dja River, South Cameroon). Greatest length of skull is 143.5 mm.

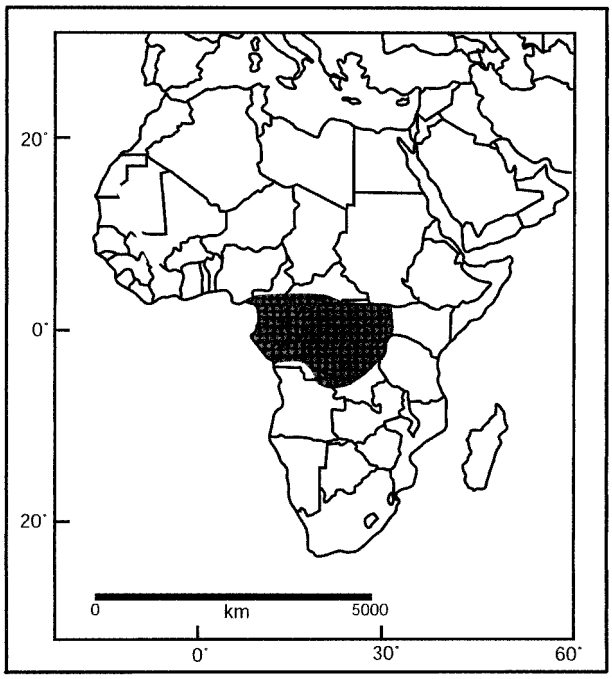

FIG. 2. Distribution of *Aonyx congicus* in Africa (modified from Davis 1978; Rowe-Rowe 1990a; Rowe-Rowe and Somers 1998).

Gamble's sites in Kenya (Hopwood and Hollyfield 1954; Savage 1978), but no information is available on the specific fossil record of *Aonyx congicus* (Savage 1978).

FORM AND FUNCTION. The structure of the toes suggests that the Congo clawless otter may be more terrestrial than the Cape clawless otter (Dorst and Dandelot 1970; Lönnberg 1910). The development of sensitive, clawless fingers is an adaptation for finding food by feel in muddy and cloudy water (Lönnberg 1910; Kingdon 1997). Molars and premolars are sharper than those of *A. capensis*, and the skull is slightly smaller (Harris 1968). This weaker dentition may be useful for cutting fish (Dorst and Dandelot 1970; Rowe-Rowe and Somers 1998).

ECOLOGY. Nothing is known of the reproduction of *A. congicus*, and very little is known about its biology in general (Mason 1990; Rowe-Rowe 1986, 1995; Rowe-Rowe and Somers 1998). Congo clawless otters occur mostly in rain forests and lowland swamp forests, but they also may inhabit forested rivers and streams (Rowe-Rowe 1990b; Rowe-Rowe and Somers 1998). Congo clawless otters consume mostly fish and crabs, but they opportunistically eat giant worms, frogs, clawed toads (*Xenopus*), lizards, insects, and aquatic birds (Baranga 1995; Carpaneto and Germi 1989). Only 1 parasite has been reported, the nematode *Microfilaria aonycis* (Round 1968).

Aonyx congicus is sympatric with the water mongoose, spotted-necked otter, and Cape clawless otter. Most likely, segregation in diet allows those species to coexist (Rowe-Rowe and Somers 1998).

Potential predators of Congo clawless otters include crocodiles (*Crocodilus*), leopards (*Panthera pardus*), pythons (*Python*), and large raptors (Carpaneto and Germi 1989; Kingdon 1997). Congo clawless otters are hunted for fur, may be captured in fish nets or fish traps accidentally, and may be killed by fishermen who regard them as competitors or because they damage fish traps (Kingdon 1977, 1997; Rowe-Rowe 1990b). Most regions in which *A. congicus* occurs are sparsely inhabited by humans, but on the fringes, deforestation, drainage of wetlands, and agriculture may alter or destroy natural habitats of the Congo clawless otter (Rowe-Rowe 1990b). Mbuti pygmies in northeastern Zaire use the skins of Congo clawless otters to make hats (Carpaneto and Germi 1989). The conservation status of *A. congicus* is unknown in many countries (Rowe-Rowe 1990a, 1990b).

BEHAVIOR. Congo clawless otters are mostly nocturnal and solitary. They are excellent swimmers and often explore the shores of rivers and swamps when foraging (Kingdon 1997). During the day, they sleep in natural cavities along rivers (Carpaneto and Germi 1989).

GENETICS. *Aonyx congicus* has 2n = 38 chromosomes (van Zyll de Jong 1987).

REMARKS. Similarities in morphology, ecology, and behavior have contributed to the recurring placement of *A. congicus* under *A. capensis*. Thus, unknown biological characteristics of this species may be inferred from the better known *A. capensis*. Other vernacular names for *A. congicus* include Zaire clawless otter, swamp otter, loutre à joues blanches du Congo (French), and Kongo weisswangen-otter (German). The etymological origin of *Aonyx* is from the Greek *a* meaning "without" and *onyx* meaning "claw or nail" (Borror 1960). The specific epithet *congicus* is from the Latin suffix *icus* meaning "to belong to" and refers to the original type locality (= Congo).

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