

Madera Canyon Species Spotlight:

White-nosed Coati

Leaving the Canyon one afternoon, Laurie and I surprised a large animal in the road just below Proctor. It wheeled to face the car head on, bristling as we came at it. I recall a slender body on short, bowed legs and a stupendously long erect tail. My immediate impression was, “There’s a monkey in Madera Canyon?!?” As we slowed to a stop, the critter turned to reveal a long pig-like snout; faint rings of light and dark fur banded the tail. We realized it was a big, solitary Coati, arguably the most exotic mammal in the Santa Rita Mountains.

In Summer and Fall, Coatis can be a main attraction for canyon visitors. There has been a large troop of females and youngsters often seen foraging in mid-canyon recently, as well as several handsome solitary males. One “publicity hound” has even been given his own designated feeder at the Santa Rita Lodge, possibly garnering more photos than the local hummingbirds! Sleeping nests of sticks and leaves can be easily seen in the trees along the creek at the Madera Kubo cabins.

White-nosed Coatis (*Nasua narica*) are brown-furred relatives of raccoons and ringtails. Possessing a rather bizarre combination of physical features, like the armadillo, it has been suggested that they were “designed by committee!” These medium-sized mammals sport a dark facial mask with light spots above/below the eyes and a white band around the muzzle behind the nose (thus the common name). They have short legs with stout, elongated front claws for digging and walk “flat-footed” like bears and humans. Unlike its raccoon and ringtail relatives, a Coati’s long tail is indistinctly banded and often held upright, like a signal flag. Short, rounded ears are placed close to the skull. Their long snout is mobile and tipped with a blunt pad – “electrical-outlet shaped” nose prints in soft soil can reveal where coatis have been foraging. There are several other Coati species further south in the Americas.

These mammals often live in mobile groups consisting of adult females, yearlings and infants. Adult males are usually solitary most of the year. Coatis primarily inhabit the oak and pine-oak woodlands in the lower canyons of the Sky Islands in southeast Arizona and are often seen near streams or a water source. They are adept tree climbers. Not desert dwellers, they will travel through desert scrub or desert grassland when moving from one place to another.

Coatis are truly omnivorous and eat whatever is available. They regularly feed on invertebrates, lizards, snakes, rodents and carrion, as well as the fruits and nuts of trees, shrubs, prickly pear and yucca. Snuffling through leaf litter, digging in the dirt, and turning rocks and logs, a band of Coatis can leave ample evidence of their passing! In the canyon, fallen acorns and ripe juniper berries are a particularly important pre-winter food source.

These adaptable animals are believed to be fairly recent immigrants to the region, their range extension from the mountains of northern Mexico facilitated by the ready availability of carrion beef after the catastrophic drought of the early 1890's. The first recorded specimen was taken from the Huachuca Mountains in 1892 and they have spread throughout the Sky Island ranges since. Recent records extend as far north as Walnut Canyon near Flagstaff and Petrified Forest National Park.

