

COLUMNISTS

Seeing a ringtail cat is a special treat

Jared Rhoton Special to the Reporter-News

Published 5:00 p.m. CT Nov. 8, 2020

When people think of the many nocturnal animals that live in our area, they usually think of raccoons, bats or opossums, but that leaves out one of our most interesting animals of the night - the ringtail cat!

The fact is that few people think about the small ringtail cat because ringtails are good at keeping a low profile. The range of the ringtail is quite large and covers much of the southwestern United States and Mexico. It has been the state mammal of Arizona since 1986.

Despite their name, ringtail cats are not even cats at all. They are members of the raccoon family.

The ringtail is a small nocturnal carnivore that is a little smaller than a typical housecat. They usually weigh under three pounds and males are larger than females.

Ringtails are short at an average height of 6 inches, but their extremely long bushy tails can extend the length of their bodies to almost 3 feet. If you ever see a ringtail, it will most likely be the tail that will leave a lasting impression.

Ringtails resemble their larger raccoon cousins and are often misidentified as such by people who are fortunate enough to see them. However, you can easily tell the difference between raccoons and ringtails by looking at the area around the eyes and their distinctive tails.

Raccoons have the black band around their eyes that make them look like little bandits, but ringtails have white fur around their eyes that make them look like they are wearing spectacles.

The defining feature of these animals is their large ringed tail which resembles that of their raccoon cousins, but are much larger in comparison to their body size.

Ringtails are rarely seen during daylight hours since they are usually asleep in their dens after a long night of hunting for food. Their diet includes birds, rodents, grasshoppers and

other insects. While they are generally carnivorous, they have also been known to eat fruits and berries. After a meal ringtails have the cute habit of cleaning themselves by wiping their heads with dampened paws.

Ringtails are excellent climbers because they can swivel 180 degrees on their back legs. They prefer to build their dens in areas that are rocky and hard to reach to protect themselves from predators. If they are in forested areas, they will most likely have their dens in a hard-to-reach hollow tree.

However, they are far less common in forested areas. Ringtails will even den inside the walls of rarely used buildings, having successfully adapted to humans.

Ringtails breed in mid spring and each litter usually ranges from two four babies. They are born blind and deaf with a mainly white coloration and do not open their eyes for the first month of their life. At the age of 4 months, the young have usually achieved their adult coloration.

The ringtail fathers are interesting because they may stay in the area and play with their offspring as they grow to adulthood.

While ringtails have an average lifespan of 10 years in the wild, they can live up to almost 20 years when kept in captivity.

It is interesting to note that ringtails were first captured for use by miners to control rodent populations within their living quarters. This led to the species being known as “miners’ cats.” As mining began to fade as an industry in the United States, the knowledge of the ringtail began to fade as well. Hopefully, this trend will begin to reverse itself and their fan base will begin to grow.

The next time you see what you think is a small long raccoon, take a closer look. You might have been gifted with a glimpse of one of the coolest nocturnal animals in our country — a ringtail cat!

Ringtails are just one of many very interesting native Texas animals that Master Naturalists learn about. Be on the lookout for native animals in your own backyard! Master Naturalists are sponsored by Texas Parks and Wildlife and Texas A&M AgriLife Extension. For information, go to txmn.tamu.edu or the BCTXMN Facebook page.

Jared Rhoton is a Texas Master Naturalist, Big Country Chapter.