

Ringtails (*Bassariscus astutus*)

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Natural History

One of the more elusive animals in the desert, ringtails are small unique mammals, native to the American west and southwest, Central and South America (Poglayen-Neuwall & Toweill, 1988). Although seldom seen ringtails populations are not considered threatened in Utah or elsewhere in the United States. Ringtails are often confused with their better known relative the raccoon, as both have black and gray ringed tails and are nocturnal, preferring to be active during the night (Reid 2006). Raccoons and ringtails are the only two members of the Procyonid family in North America (Reid 2006). Ringtails may also sometimes be confused with ringtailed lemurs; however, lemurs are only native to Madagascar.

Ringtails are much smaller than a raccoon, weighing between 1.5 - 2.5 pounds (680 g-1130g) closer in size to a young house cat (Reid 2006). Ringtails are generally curious and agile, just like

raccoons. Because of their small size and curious nature, they were historically called ringtail cats — miners in the southwest would “tame” them and use them for rodent control around their camps.

Ringtails prefer warm dry climates with rocky outcroppings and talus slopes (Poglayen-Neuwall & Toweill, 1988). In Utah, they can be found in areas such as Zion National Park and Bryce Canyon National Park, usually in riparian areas (Trapp, 1973).

Ringtails are agile climbers. They can easily traverse rocky ledges and scale trees with their semi-retractable claws (Poglayen-Neuwall & Toweill, 1988). They are omnivorous, eating a variety of plants and animals (Poglayen-Neuwall & Toweill, 1988).



Ringtail distribution in North America.



Ringtail in tree in Zion National Park. Photo courtesy of Shaun Mason.

Their diet commonly consists of a mixture of local fruits, small rodents and reptiles, and insects (Trapp, 1973). In the wild ringtails are solitarily, preferring to hunt and forage alone (Poglayen-Neuwall & Poglayen-Neuwall, 1993). They den in rock piles and trees but when people are near, they seem to be drawn to man-made structures. As a result of this preference for man-made structures they are occasionally encountered by people.

Encountering Ringtails in National Parks

If you should encounter a ringtail in the wild it is best to leave it alone. As with all wild animals, it may see you as a threat and attempt to defend itself, possibly injuring both you and it. Wild animals are best viewed from a distance where you can observe their natural behaviors without risk. Never feed ringtails or other wildlife. In the wild, foraging for food is a natural part of day-to-day life;



they need to eat a wild diet in order to maintain their health. When wild animals are feed by humans they are not only eating an unnatural diet but they are losing their fear of humans and developing a dependence on a food source that goes away when the visitors leave for the season.

If you encounter a ringtail in the wild simply observe this beautiful animal and consider yourself lucky to have seen this elusive creature. However, if you should discover that a ringtail is using a cabin, bathroom, or other structure that you would rather not share with wildlife, please do not try to move the animal. Instead contact the front desk or a NPS staff member, who will know the best way to encourage the animal to return to the wild.



Works Cited

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This publication is issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Kenneth L. White, Vice President for Extension and Agriculture, Utah State University.