



## Ringtails

Look! Up there on that rock! It's a cat! A fox! It's a raccoon! It's...a cacomistle?!? The cacomistle, *Bassariscus astutus*, is more commonly called a Ringtail. It is found from southern Oregon to Colorado and from California to eastern Texas, and south into Mexico and Central America. Another species, *Bassariscus sumichrasti*, is found in Central and South America.

The ringtail seems to be a strange amalgam: part cat, part raccoon, & part fox. Its general size, long lean body, partially retractable claws, and climbing abilities suggest it may be related to a cat. The delicate face, with its large eyes and ears, reminds many of a fox. The black-tipped bushy tail, with its black and white rings, is reminiscent of a raccoon—and the source of the animal's name.

Ringtails are actually most closely related to raccoons. Their bodies are fawn to brownish-gray, with some black. The belly has similar, but lighter, coloring. Their heads are generally the same color as the body, except for the white rings around the eyes. Their tails have an equal number of black and white bands, usually 6-8 each, and are longer than the head and body combined. Total length, from tip of nose to tip of tail is usually 24-34 inches.

Most of us have never seen a ringtail in the wild. This is not because the presence of man has deterred the bold-natured animal. They have been known to take up residence in the attics of occupied houses and to enter campsites to make off with small objects during the night. It is the secretive nature of the ringtail, as well as the fact that it is strictly nocturnal, that has denied most of us the pleasure of sighting one.

Ringtails favor rocky ledges and cliffs, on which they can maneuver with amazing speed and agility. They will tolerate open woodlands of oak and/or pine, but not heavily wooded areas. Territories, which must include a water source, are not generally larger than one square mile and are not usually aggressively defended.

They are likely communal animals, as oftentimes two or more monogamous pairs will share a territory. They will den in caves, crevices, hollow trees, and under rocks. Vocalizations include growls, grunts, short sharp barks, and nuptial calls. The Aztecs called the ringtail "little hisser" because, if threatened, it hisses loudly.

They love to climb: on ledges and cliff faces, on rooftops, and in trees. This predilection for climbing, as well as their nocturnal nature, makes them especially susceptible to predation by owls. Coyotes are less of a threat.

Ringtails are omnivorous. During the winter and spring, their diet consists mostly of rodents. In the leaner

summer and fall months, they survive primarily on insects. They will also eat lizards, birds, cactus fruits, and other plants.

Litters of 1-5 kits are born in May or June. They are covered with white fuzz, their eyes are closed, and they are completely helpless. For the first three weeks, only the female will care for them. Then the male will begin to bring food for them as well. At about one month, their eyes open and they begin to crawl. By two months of age, they will forage for food with their parents. They will be weaned when they are about four months old.

By the age of 4½ to 5½ months, sometimes later, they will have reached full adult size and coloration. At that time they will leave their parents, setting out to find a mate in order to begin their own families the following spring.