



## RINGTAIL

*Cacomixtle norteño*

Centennial Museum Collection 2006.8.6

**Scientific name:** *Bassariscus astutus*

### Systematics

Class: Mammalia

Order: Carnivora

Family: Procyonidae

### Description

From the Aztec Nahuatl, *Cacomixtle* means half mountain lion; whereas the scientific name comes from Greek *bassara* for fox, and the Latin *iscus* for little and *astutus* for cunning. This member of the raccoon family can navigate limbs and ledges. Its tail is approximately the same length as the rest of its body (about 28 inches for an adult). At about 2.5 pounds, it is sleek and compact with a pointed muzzle and whitish circles around large eyes. Its coat is tan-brownish-grey with black bands and tip on its tail. Fossils from late in the Miocene period (ca. 9-6 million years old) are similar to the living species.

### Distribution

Southwest Oregon, California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and parts of northern Mexico. The Ringtail became the State Mammal of Arizona on 13 August 1986.

### Home

Dens are narrow and padded with plant materials.

### Diet

The diet is varied. This nocturnal mammal forces prey animals down with forepaws and

delivers a killing bite to the throat and proceeding to devouring the head first.

### Breeding

Occurs in late winter and early spring with litters of usually three born in May or June. In five or six weeks the eyes open and by fall the young have adult coloring, but not size, and can hunt independently.

### Defenses

Young ringtails squeak, but adults bark, snarl and scream. When threatened it also secretes a foul smelling secretion. Its chief predators are Bobcats, Coyotes and Great Horned Owls.

### Desert Diary: Ringtail

By Arthur Harris, PhD, Director

Laboratory for Environmental Biology

The University of Texas at El Paso

Common names often are misleading or confusing. For example, depending on where you're from, "gopher" may mean a tortoise, a ground squirrel, or a pocket gopher. But sometimes, common names really are descriptive. "Ringtail" is one of these. A long, fluffy, and distinctively ringed tail is the hallmark of this graceful member of the family Procyonidae, a relative of the raccoon and the coati. Like other members of this family, Ringtails are omnivorous, a 50-cent word meaning that—like humans—they'll eat almost anything: fruit, insects, mice, eggs—you name it. They are, however, somewhat more predatory than their relatives. Inhabiting rocky canyon lands, they are constantly on the prowl during the night, inspecting every nook and cranny that might house a tasty mouse or beetle. Wonderfully adapted for their rugged terrain, they are agile climbers and jumpers, and even have hind feet that can turn 180 degrees, allowing them to safely descend vertical cliffs. Consider yourself lucky if you spot one of these shy denizens of the desert.