

CENTRAL AMERICAN TAPIR

Tapirus bairdii (Gill, 1865)

Order PERISSODACTYLA

Family TAPIRIDAE

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Distinguishing characteristics: "A large, heavy-bodied ungulate the size of a pony but chunkier and with much shorter legs. Nose elongate, bending downward over the mouth like a short trunk, or proboscis. Ears short, rounded, and white-tipped. Tail stubby. Four toes on front feet, three on rear. Dusky brown, much paler on face, throat and breast." (3:488) "The size of the animal is characteristic of Tapirella bairdii as well as the absence of mane on the nape of the neck the remains of which in this species are indicated by small bristles along the nape of the neck. A very light and distinctive colouration of the under throat and lower part of the neck appears to be typical." (2:180).

Present distribution: Ecuador and Colombia, west of the Andes and the Rio Cauca, from the Gulf of Guayaquil in the south as far as the Rio Sinu in the North: also found in Central America as far as Mexico and Veracruz. (4:315) Leopold gives the distribution in Mexico as the "wet tropical forests of southeastern Mexico, west to southern Veracruz and eastern Oaxaca. The tapir has been exterminated in much of this range and now lives in only the wildest and least disturbed forests." (3:488) "The best remaining tapir habitat in Mexico is the marshy lowland forest which has been little altered by settlement." (3:490) "In Panama the species is known to range from sea level to the summits of the highest ridges of the eastern and western mountains, ... In northwestern Colombia, east of the Rio Atrato, Baird's tapir lives side by side with Tapirus terrestris colombianus." (1:490).

Former distribution: "Even at the time of the conquest the tapirs were gone from Yucatan, presumably as a result of Mayan settlement and clearing of the forest. ... Originally tapirs occurred in much of the upland forest as well, and there still are a few in the more remote tracts. But most of the uplands

are now too heavily settled to afford a home for this shy and retiring animal." (3:490),

Status: The tapir is the only North American Perissodactyl. (3:488)

"Considering southeastern Mexico collectively ... there remains no secure and assured population anywhere. The tapir ... must be added to the list of important species that are dangerously reduced in number and very much in need of active protection." (3:491) Hershkovitz describes it as the least known species of the genus. (1:492).

Estimated numbers: Unknown .

Breeding rate in wild: Gestation period 390 - 400 days. (6) "In Mexico the breeding season is in March: ... a single young is born, and remains with its mother for about a year. ... Young tapirs are subject to predation by several of the smaller cats and by the tayra in addition to the prime enemy, the jaguar." (3:492).

Reasons for decline: "Rivers, lakes or swamps seem to be an essential part of the tapir habitat along with dense forest." (3:491) "Most of the uplands are now too heavily settled to afford a home for this shy and retiring animal. Even in the lowlands the encroachment of settlers who persistently pursue the tapir has reduced populations to a dangerously low level." (3:490) They are shy animals, highly intolerant of disturbance by man or his dogs," (3:491)

Protective measures already taken: Listed in the Mexican Hunting Regulations under "Animals the hunting of which is permanently prohibited". (3:544).

Measures proposed: "The tapir is associated with and completely dependent upon undisturbed climax rain forest for its existence. It adjusts poorly or not at all to settlement and seemingly can be retained only in virgin areas; it is hoped that some of these will be set aside as national parks or wilderness preserves. One such area that might well be designated as a permanent rain forest reserve for tapirs and other elements of the wet tropical fauna



and flora is the northeastern slope of Volcan San Martin in the Tuxtla Range of Southern Veracruz. There may still be other suitable sites in southern Campeche, Quintana Roo, or Chiapas. The creation of one or more rain forest preserves and the extension of effective legal protection to tapirs everywhere in southern Mexico are steps that should be taken quickly to save this unique member of the Mexican fauna from ultimate extinction." (3:492).

Number in captivity: 6 ♂♂ and 8 ♀♀ + 3 in 7 zoos. (5:381)

Breeding potential in captivity: of the above 2 ♂♂ and 3 ♀♀ + 1 have been born in captivity. (5:381).

- References:
1. Hershkovitz, 1954
  2. Elgener, 1954
  3. Leopold, 1959
  4. Cabrera, 1960
  5. Jarvis, 1965
  6. F.J.Appelman in litt. 9/3/64.