

Bulletin No. 21  
December 24, 1925.

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Stencil No. 48

SEQUOIA NATURE GUIDE SERVICE

THE CALIFORNIA RING-TAILED CAT

The California Ring-tailed Cat (*Bassariscus astutus rapter*) is one of the most remarkable animals of the Sequoia National Park. Owing to nocturnal habits it is seldom seen by park visitors; but when once seen it is remembered because of its grace, varied coloring and almost human facial expression of kindliness. This cat belongs to the racoon family; the body length is about 15 inches and a round slim tail of nearly the same length is heavily furred to the tip. The body is slender, legs short, height about 9 inches, weight about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  pounds; ears broad,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches, scantily haired; eyes large, mild and expressive. The fur is strikingly marked with black, white, brown, and gray.

This pretty animal ranges from Costa Rica, on the south, northward through Mexico and Texas, thence on to Colorado, southern Utah, Nevada, and Oregon on the North. Throughout its range it seeks the warmer climates as it is not well adapted for cold weather. In places it is fairly abundant, while elsewhere it is very rare and in many places wanting. In California this racoon is not plentiful anywhere, but inhabits the Upper Sonora Zone below 5,500 feet along the western slopes of the Sierras. In other localities the zonal range differs greatly from California; in Oregon it is sea level, while in Mexico it is from sea level up to 10,000 feet.

The California Ring-tailed cat is strictly nocturnal in habit and wanders far and near in quest of food, eating almost anything that comes its way. The principal food here is rats, mice, gophers, birds, frogs, lizards, berries, fruit and many insects. Although the animals can run somewhat rapidly and climb trees quickly, they seldom catch their prey except by stalking. The animals hunt alone, and I have never heard them give voice except when pursued closely or captured. When approached, they will give a short, quick bark similar to the California gray fox, and when captured they utter a shrill cry of fear and rage.

The breeding season for this locality is April to June. The young are three and four in number, and probably only a single litter is produced each year. The animals den in rock crevices, under logs and in hollow trees. In these dens the young are born in beds of dry grasses and leaves, and when first born they have closed eyes, no visible teeth, but feet armored with tiny brown claws. Their bodies are covered with downy fur lighter in color than the adults, and the tail bands are scarcely visible. When six weeks old the young come out of the den, and at two months they go on nightly hunts with their mother. The mother weans them at the end of the third month, and leaves them to shift for themselves.

I have had many interesting personal experiences with these animals, and find them intelligent, bold and inquisitive. They are not combative, and they respond quickly to kind treatment, making fine pets.

On May 25th, 1906, while I was camped at Rocky Gulch, Sequoia National Park, I saw two of these cats, an adult male and a female, beautiful specimens. Both were so good natured and gentle that it was only necessary to feed them a

few times to induce them to come into the cabin with me. They became so tame that they would eat from my hands, climb into my lap, and sleep in a bed that I prepared for them in the cabin. A few days after my arrival the female had three kittens, about the size of newly born house-cats. For two or three days the mother would not permit the father to come near them, but later the family occupied the one bed. The kittens grew rapidly, and when three weeks old the parents began to carry food to them; at the age of about eight weeks they accompanied their parents on nightly hunts, returning to the cabin in daytime. Later I was relieved by a detachment of soldiers, who also made pets of the ring-tail family, so that they became as tame as any house-cats.

Scarcely any other wild animal has as many names as the ring-tailed cat. In the United States it is known as "ring-tailed cat", "miners' cat", "coon cat", and "band-tailed cat". In Mexico it bears the name of "coacomixtle", except in Lower California where it is the "babisuri". Despite this nomenclature, the animal is not related to the feline family, but is akin to the racoons. All the common names in the United States are gradually giving way to that of "ring-tailed cat". While this common name is not well chosen, as the term "cat" properly belongs to the feline family, it is now too firmly established to be dislodged.

Will the ring-tailed cat continue to thrive and hold its own under existing laws? Positively, it will not. The animals have no protection except in the National Parks; but as the park areas comprise but a small portion of their range the protection from this source is but meager. Outside the parks these pretty animals are being depleted from year to year by the ever increasing number of fur trappers. The animals in the neighborhood of the Sequoia National Park are not half as numerous as they were 10 years ago. They are not endangered on account of their fur, as it is not high on the market; but as the trappers make their sets for other animals of higher fur value, the ring-tailed cats are constantly getting into their traps and are killed and taken along. While the animals are not in danger of immediate extinction in California, I do consider that it will soon become necessary for the State to furnish adequate protection or we shall lose this beautiful species of California mammal life.

It is not safe to upset the balance of nature and destroy the many species of mammals, birds and harmless snakes which prey on rats, mice, gophers, ground squirrels, and other vermin. The ring-tailed cats, the badgers, the skunks, the racoons, and even the coyotes are men's best friends; while as to the hawks and snakes, they destroy hundreds of vermin for one domestic bird. Let nature alone and there will be little need to spend millions to poison and to trap vermin. As it is now, the poison and traps put out only too often destroy as many friends as enemies.

The campaign against vermin is too often foolishly and thoughtlessly conducted; and when there is a financial reward for men to trap and poison, the facts of natural science are neglected. Man is but slowly emerging from the savage state, when the lust to kill was among the strongest of his instincts. It is easy to appeal to this instinct by labeling animals as "vermin" to be destroyed without proper consideration of the many biological factors involved.

Only in the National Parks is proper protection given the balance of nature, and the parks are pitifully small in area; in California, where there are more national parks than in any other state, the park area is less than one per cent of the total land area of the state.