



# WILDLIFE NOTES

## Ringtail

On rocky cliffs or canyon walls lives a small but captivating creature, the ringtail (*Bassariscus astutus*). Weighing only about a kilogram (2.2 pounds), this 30-inch mammal is about half striped tail. The 15-inch tail has 14 to 16 alternating black and white rings, and it ends with a black tip. The other end of this fellow is almost as comical: A short, pointed muzzle protrudes from two dazzling white eye rings set underneath a pair of large ears.

The ringtail is largely nocturnal and is seldom seen. Its tracks are similar to those of a house cat; but a house cat print will have four toe impressions, and a ringtail will leave five toe impressions. The ringtail has short, non-retractable claws, but claw marks usually do not appear with its tracks.

Other animals that appear similar to the ringtail are its close relatives, the raccoon and the coatimundi. Both have striped tails, but the raccoon has a black face mask, and the coatimundi is a much larger animal that occurs only in the extreme southwestern corner of New Mexico.

The ringtail is an omnivore, eating both meat and plant material. Its primary foods are small rodents, bats, insects, and fruits of plants like persimmon, hackberry, and prickly pear.

The ringtail nests in hollow trees, caves, or cavities in rock piles. Young are born, two to four per litter, in the late

spring or early summer. The newborn ringtails have closed eyes and lack facial markings, which appear at about 18 days. At 22 to 34 days, the eyes of the kits begin to open.

At first the kits will sleep stretched out on their bellies; after about six weeks the young ringtails will begin to sleep like adults by curling up in a ball, with their heads tucked underneath their bellies, and their tails wrapped around their bodies.

The ringtail is generally a quiet animal, but will bark or chuck when alarmed. Ringtails also have a mating call and will squeal or growl when fighting.

The life history of the ringtail is not well known. Information is scant on the behavior, distribution, and population dynamics of ringtails in their natural habitat. For now, the ringtail is an interesting but reclusive native of the Southwest.

