



# Coatimundi

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**SCIENTIFICNAME:** *Nasua nasua*. From the Latin *nasus*, for nose. Spanish common names include *pizote* or *choluga* (= coati or coatimundi), *solitario* (= solitary) and *chulo* (= cute).

**DESCRIPTION:** Somewhat raccoon-like, but with strong claws and a long, tough, flat-tipped snout. Hind legs much longer than forelegs, thus a swaying, loose-jointed gait resembling that of a black bear. Fur light brown (even blond) to dark reddish-brown or almost black. Weight 10 to 25 pounds. Length 19 to 22 inches, plus a non-prehensile 17 to 21 inch tail normally carried upright and used for balance.

**HABITAT:** Riparian woodlands of oak-pine, oak-juniper, sycamore or walnut in cool mountain canyons. Also shrubby woodlands or grasslands with permanent water. Prefer elevations of 4600 to 7000 feet; move lower in cold weather.

**DISTRIBUTION:** Arizona to Argentina. Probably moved into southeastern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico from Mexico as the climate warmed over the past 100 years. First Arizona record in 1892, Huachuca Mountains. By early 1900s, occurred in Rincons. Now west to Baboquivaris, north to Gila River (or Superstitions?), and east to New Mexico's Animas Mountains. Other records (e.g. Prescott) may be of wanderers, or released or escaped captives.

**BIOLOGY:** "Chulo, a year among the coatimundis," by Bil Gilbert (New York: A. Knopf, 1973), is an easy-reading window on these fascinating creatures. Coatis actively search for food, especially in early morning and late afternoon. They have a keen sense of smell and use a gristle-padded nose to root in soil and leaf litter for tubers and invertebrates. Strong forelegs and claws help them turn over



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rocks and tear open rotting logs to reveal lizards, snakes, and frogs. Coatis also feed on eggs, birds, small mammals, and vegetable matter. They are not major agricultural pests but occasionally visit orchards and gardens, or steal a chicken or two.

Coatis are highly social, usually travelling in groups of 2 to 40 adult females, young-of-the-year, and immatures. Except in the breeding season, females aggressively exclude males older than 2 years from the band, hence the name *solitario* for old males. This may help keep males from killing younger animals. Solitary males occupy home ranges of 173 to 667 acres; bands use 494 to 740 acres. The band moves between foraging areas in single file, an experienced female in the lead and the dominant female at the rear. While feeding, they fan out to explore for food.

Coatis mate in April or May; 3 to 6 cubs are delivered in June or July. The female gives birth alone, in a cave, hollow tree or other protected cavity. The young weigh 3 to 6 ounces at birth. At 6 to 8 weeks of age, they join a band with the

mother but are fed, protected and educated by the entire band.

Few predators pose a threat to coatis; raptors, humans, and other large carnivores are among them. Coatis are excellent climbers and use this talent to escape danger. If forced to fight, they put their strong claws and large canines to good use. They are ferocious in defense, especially to protect their young. When embroiled in battle with a domestic dog, the coati usually wins.

Coatis have an elaborate system of squeals, chirps and grunts; the sounds may have different meanings in different sequences. The young squeal to relocate adults or express concern or fear. Adults grunt while foraging, when meeting members of other bands, and to signal danger.

**STATUS:** Coatis are not on the Department's 1988 list of *Threatened Native Wildlife in Arizona*, nor are they listed or proposed for listing by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Statewide the population appears to be healthy, perhaps even expanding. The hunting season is September 1 through March 31, with a bag limit of one per year. Arizona's 1989 *Live Wildlife Rules* prohibit live possession without a special license but coatis are sometimes illegally captured as pets because of their curious nature and intelligence. Before becoming sexually mature, they are friendly and docile. Later they become aggressive and difficult to control, and are sometimes unlawfully released to fend for themselves. Lacking essential skills, captive-reared coatis probably have little chance of survival in the wild.

**MANAGEMENT NEEDS:** Life history and population studies are needed to determine the status of Arizona's coatis. Potential impacts of various management decisions, especially relative to human recreation, on coatis and their habitats should also be studied. The canyons in which coatis are most abundant are subject to extremely high recreation use and development for vacation and retirement homes. Studies suggest coatis may experience severe population fluctuations, possibly due to canine distemper or other diseases. 