



# SEARCHING FOR A MEAL

by Cyril Brass

He cautiously climbed over the rocks, along the fallen logs searching and inspecting. Aware of my presence close by, but not afraid, he was focused on only one thing... a meal.

Stopping every few steps he smelled the fresh tropical air. With his twitching nose, he caught scent of something. He abruptly changed his direction. But what did he smell that I was not able to detect? And where was it coming from? He took a few more steps and more twitching of his nose.

People started to gather around watching, admiring and photographing this inquisitive animal. The determined creature discovered the source of the sweet aroma he so desired. He tracked his way to a black beach bag that was resting up against a log in the sand. Quickly the intruder with nose and paws dove into the opened bag, to seize his reward.

Before the owner of the bag realized what was happening, the furry bandit retrieved what looked like toffee or some type of sweet candy. Fiercely chewing the sticky substance, he devoured his tasty reward. After cleaning his paws, licking up every morsel of food, he casually trekked back into the forest.

This was just one of many encounters that I have enjoyed with the Coatimundi in Costa Rica. Most of my experiences with these wild animals were not like the above encounter but about seeing them in their natural habitats searching for their natural food sources. However, they are opportunistic creatures and will look for any type of food whether natural or processed.

The Coatimundi are widely dispersed throughout the entire country because they are so adaptable to the environment, from their habitats and food sources to their social systems and behaviors. With lush rainforests, open grasslands and forest-covered mountains blanketing most of Costa Rica's terrain, these diverse eco-systems provide sustainable territories for the Coatimundi. This allows nature enthusiasts excellent opportunities to see these energetic creatures, no matter where they are traveling in Costa Rica.

The Coatimundi are also known as the White-nosed Coatimundi and commonly called the Coati or Pizote in Spanish. These small furry mammals are members of the

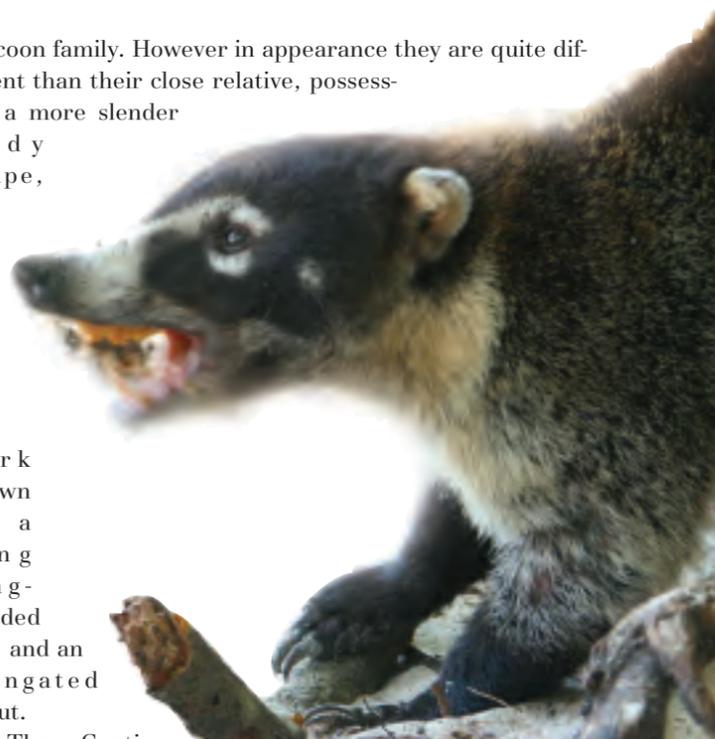
raccoon family. However in appearance they are quite different than their close relative, possessing a more slender body shape,

dark brown fur, a long ring-banded tail, and an elongated snout.

The Coatis are diurnal creatures (active during the day) spending most of their day searching, inspecting, digging for their breakfast, lunch and dinner in order to satisfy their enormous appetites.

I have had the pleasure of walking amidst several groups of Coatis while traveling in several regions of Costa Rica; lush forests near Arenal Volcano, high in the cloudforests of Monteverde, humid rainforest of Corcovado National Park, lowland dry rainforests of Carara Biological Reserve and coastal rainforests of Manuel Antonio National Park. Coatis can be seen in loosely organized bands or as solitary animals, usually males. The females are the leaders of the clan, only accepting males into their group during the mating season.

As their brown fur blends into the dark forest floor, you may hear them before you see them, rustling in the



undergrowth or making vocal sounds. These gregarious animals can be quite noisy chattering when in groups as they travel about the territory. They communicate through a series of grunting, chirping and snorting sounds.

Raising their snout and sniffing the aromas passing through the fresh tropical air, directs the hungry Coatis' quest for nourishment. Their nose lowers to scan close to the forest floor honing in on the growing scent. With such a keen sense of smell they are able to sniff out tiny bugs and invertebrates while checking out every hole, crack and crevice.

In locating a delicious meal opportunity, they become extremely persistent in capturing their prey by rooting with their mobile nose in the dirt like a pig or by digging in the ground or ripping apart rotting logs with their sharp bear-like claws.

Their sharp incisors allow them to chew meat like worms, beetles and sometimes small rodents as well as plant material like fruits, tubers and nuts. Being omnivorous animals gives them the flexibility to eat what foods are available during the dry and rainy seasons.

I have seen the Coatis not only on the ground. These agile climbers can

easily move about the interconnecting branches high in the tree canopy. Having double jointed ankles allows these animals to descend trees head first. Now that would be a sight to see. At the end of their busy day foraging for food on the ground they retire up in a tree for the night, sleeping on a bed of leaves and branches.

Another reason for the abundant number of Coatimundi in Costa Rica is that they are not considered a pest or a threat to local farmers' agricultural crops and livestock. Therefore, there is no useless hunting of this species.

Coatis have become comfortable around humans, interacting within each others space. So, close encounters with these inquisitive hungry creatures are a real possibility as you venture through the different regions in Costa Rica. And remember please don't feed wild animals, even if they are hungry and in search of a meal. **ca**

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