



BAIRD'S TAPIR

Phylum Chordata, Class Mammalia, Order Perissodactyla, Family Tapiridae, Genus *Tapirus bairdii*

Baird's tapir has historically lived in southern Mexico, Central America, and at least part of Columbia in South America. The Baird's tapir was the first to be described by European explorers, but the last to be given a scientific name, and the last to be studied in any detail. It's the second largest of the tapirs next to the Asian tapir, and is the largest land mammal from Mexico to South America. It is known as the mountain cow in Belize.

Height: 4 ft. at the shoulder **Length:** 6 ½ to 8 feet **Tail length:** 3-5 inches
Weight: 551-651 pounds **Lifespan:** Over 30 years.

Habitat: Tropical forests, often near streams
Range: Southern Mexico to Northern Columbia

Status: Baird's tapir is extinct in parts of its former range, and endangered in other parts. Poaching and hunting are killing them off, along with the encroachment of humans, and deforestation. Nobody knows how many are left.

Diet in the wild: Aquatic vegetation, buds, leaves, shoots, and fruits of low growing shrubs.

Special features:

- The short trunk of the Baird's tapir is composed of nose and upper lip. Its prehensile nose looks and functions like a shortened version of an elephant's trunk. It uses its trunk to pick up grasses, leaves, and fruit and carry them to the mouth.
- The species was heavily hunted for sport, its meat, and its hide.
- The Baird's tapir is easy to track because it often follows previously used paths and it leaves distinctive three-toed tracks (each toe has a broad hoof).
- The thick hide is covered with a short, bristly-haired, dark brown coat. Young animals have a reddish-brown coat brightly marked with white streaks and spots. At higher elevations, animals grow thicker coats as protection from the cold.
- It has a barrel-shaped body, oval ears, and stocky legs.
- Its main predator is the mountain lion, jaguar, and humans.
- They are very agile and can negotiate steep slopes with ease.
- W.M. Baird was an American naturalist who made an expedition to Mexico in 1843. Although Baird is credited with its "discovery," this tapir was first documented by W.T. White, another American Naturalist.

Social organization and behavior:

Baird's tapir can be either diurnal or nocturnal, although in area where it is hunted most activity occurs during the night. They usually stay close to water, and on hot days have been observed submerged with only their heads above the surface. Although it spends most of its time in the water or lying in the mud, the tapir can move quickly and is an excellent swimmer. They are agile climbers, crashing up steep hillsides and river banks with apparent ease. When surprised, tapirs generally head for water, but will sometimes stamp their feet loudly. They communicate with shrill whistles. This elusive creature is an important seed disseminator because it prefers to spit out fruit seeds rather than eat them along with the flesh. They sometimes run afoul of man when they cause damage to corn fields and other crops. Tapirs are usually solitary except when mothers have young.

Breeding and care of young:

Sexual maturity occurs at 1 ½ to 2 years. They mate year round. After a gestation period of 390-405 days one calf is born. They have a lifespan of 22 years.

