

Raccoons aren't the only local animals with a ringed tail

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Legend has it that the ringtail is a better mouser than the domestic cat. Settlers and miners both kept ringtails as pets due to this ability. Thus it was given the common name miner's cat. The ringtail, though sometimes "ringtail cat," is not even related to cats. They're actually most closely related to raccoons, who share their bold ringed-tail pattern

Ringtails are exclusively nocturnal animals. They are well adapted to this lifestyle due to their large eyes, which let in plenty of light and allow them to see quite well in the dark. They also have five clawed toes on each foot, which allow them to climb with ease. In fact, the first ringtails I saw in Humboldt County were a pair of juveniles climbing in a maple tree at night. This was at the Albee Creek Campground in the state park near Weott. As in some squirrel species, the ringtail can rotate its hind feet 180 degrees to allow headfirst descent from a tree.

Ringtails are quite acrobatic, and use some interesting techniques to climb about on cliffs (a preferred habitat) and in tight spaces. One technique is to ricochet quickly from wall to wall and thus move around in a cleft. What a great way to reach those hard-to-reach raptor nests with their tasty eggs! In a tight space, a ringtail can "chimney" much like human rock climbers do. They brace their back against one wall and their feet against the other, and then shimmy right up.

The mating season is from Feb. until May or June. Their young are born in a well-hidden place like a crevice in a rock or a hollow log. Their eyes open at one month of age.

Ringtails are omnivores. They hunt mice, squirrels and rab-



bits, amphibians, reptiles, insects, and birds. They also eat fruits and acorns. Ringtails, in turn, are preyed upon by owls, bobcats, and coyotes.

Ringtail tracks are distinctive and often found on dusty trails or near waterways where they hunt due to the abundance of prey found there. Their tracks show five toes on all feet, with claw marks usually evident. Ringtail tracks can be confused with those of the striped skunk, which have the same number of toes and similar characteristics, but are not as rounded in their overall outline.

Locally, ringtails have been seen in the redwood parks near Weott and Myers Flat. I once watched one run down the Avenue of the Giants bridge over the Eel at Dyerville. When it got close enough to the other side, it jumped off the bridge into the trees. What a way to get

away from cars on the road! Several years ago, I also found ringtail tracks on Redway Beach. They've been sighted in the Mattole watershed as well.

The ringtail plays an important role in the environment by keeping down the populations of rodents and other small mammals. Although they can obtain much of their water through their prey, they do require open water within their habitat for survival. Thus riparian forests are an attractive habitat for ringtails. You can help ringtails by conserving water and maintaining edge habitat on your property for them near waterways.

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This article is part of a series about Natural Life of the Lost Coast, a project of the Lost Coast Interpretive Association. If you are interested in contributing an article to this bi-weekly column about the plants, animals and human history of the Lost Coast Region, contact Cathy Miller at cathymiller50@gmail.com.