



The ringtail is a rare sighting in Colorado. (Courtesy photo/Colorado Parks and Wildlife)

In search of the rare ringtail

If you were to ask an outdoor person to name off some of the wildlife found in Colorado, you will probably hear deer, elk, mountain lion, sheep, etc. What you probably won't hear someone mention would be a Couch's spadefoot, a ferruginous hawk, or a Preble's Meadow jumping mouse.

Our state is home to 55 species of fish, 500 species of birds and more than 900 species of animals. I have no idea how many different species I have come across during my tracks into the wild as there are a few I have never even heard of.

One species I have never seen is the ringtail. Ringtails are known by several other names. They are called miner's cats in some areas because they are often found around mines where they hunt the rodents that hung around the mines and the miner's food supplies.

Miners would capture the ringtail and domesticate them to hunt the mice and rats in their cabins, like a house cat. Often a hole was cut in a small box and placed near the wood stove as a dark, warm place for the animal to sleep during the day, coming out after dark to rid the cabin of vermin.

In other locales, they are referred to as civet cats because when they are frightened, or they feel threatened, they secrete a vile and disgusting odor from their anal glands in self-defense. This behavior would make you think they were a relative of the skunk.

This adorable creature is neither a cat nor a skunk, but a member of the raccoon family. The scientific name, because I know you were wondering, is *Bassariscus astutus*. In August of 1986, the ringtail became the Arizona state mammal.

Being nocturnal with excellent eyesight and hearing, the ringtail is a small, secretive little creature, weighing in at around 3 pounds. Their tails are about 17 inches long, about half their entire body length, with a ringed pattern of light and dark



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

rings, like a raccoon. They have large eyes surrounded by white rings of fur, large, rounded ears, short legs and a gray-colored body.

Ringtails are great climbers and use that long tail for balance. They can climb vertical walls and cliffs because they can rotate their hind feet 180 degrees, giving them a good grip for descending the same vertical walls and cliffs.

The rings on the tail also serve as a defense mechanism. Predators see the rings as a distraction and target the white rings, rather than the body where the vital organs are located, giving the ringtail a good chance to escape.

And speaking of the enemies of the ringtail, some predators do prey upon them. Among these predators are the coyote, bobcat and the great horned owl. If the predators don't get them, the ringtail can make it to 9 years of age in the wild and much longer in captivity.

A ringtail's home is called a den. They den up in tree hollows, rock crevices, a burrow abandoned by another animal, mine shafts, and abandoned buildings. Some ringtails have been known to make a den in the attic of an occupied home.

The ringtail have developed an extremely sharp set of teeth. Those sharp teeth are perfect for their diet of rodents, insects, rabbits and ground squirrels. They will also happily feed on snakes, lizards, birds, frogs, acorns, berries and fruit from the orchard. Obviously, they are not picky eaters.

It may be difficult to see one of these little creatures with them being nocturnal and very shy, but you just might be able to hear one if you get close. They are known for a wide range of

calls. When attacked, not only will the attacker get a full dose of the skunk like spray, but he will also probably get a blast of an ear-shattering scream to go along with it. Adult ringtails communicate with each other with a loud barking-like sound, or sometimes a wail, while the young ones speak in a series of chirps and squeaks.

Reportedly there are nine states the ringtail calls home. They are commonly seen in desert areas of the Southwestern states but have also been spotted in the foothills of the Colorado Front Range and the canyons of the Western Slope.

Ringtails are classified as a species of least concern. A least concern species is a species that has not been categorized by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as evaluated as not being a focus of species conservation. They do not qualify as threatened, near threatened, or conservation dependent.

In February of 2019, a Colorado Springs news station (KOAA) published a story and video of a ringtail that walked inside of a Burger King in Canon City. Apparently, nobody would take his order, so the ringtail left on his own accord.

In the off chance you do encounter a ringtail in the wild, you would probably be best off to just snap a picture and keep your distance. I doubt you really want to tangle with a creature that has such a sharp set of teeth, powerful legs, an ear-piercing scream, and get a dose of skunk-like spray, just for startling him.

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Celebrate spring and invest in our planet

By ANNE JANIK

FRIENDS OF YOUTH AND NATURE

It's April, and with it comes the arrival of spring —finally!

Daffodil bulbs are emerging, bees are searching for pollen, hawks and owls are nesting, and rivers are beginning to flow with runoff. April is the month to reflect on all the benefits we get from nature and appreciate our surroundings: the open spaces, clear blue skies, and a diversity of wildlife, just to name a few.

It is also an opportunity to celebrate and redirect our attention to improving where we live. April is the month to refocus once again on caring for our planet. Earth Day is celebrated on April 22 and with this celebration comes heaps of information, activities, ideas, and suggestions that can revitalize, energize and direct us to do what we can to invest in the future of our planet, whether that's a small lifestyle change or full out involvement in a large-scale environmental campaign.

We have come a long way in the last 50 years. The first Earth Day happened in 1970, and was the birth of our country's modern environmental movement with an emerging consciousness bringing environmental concerns to the forefront. The impacts of 150 years of industrial development had left a growing legacy of serious human health and environmental impacts from oil spills; factories and power plants polluting the air; raw sewage, toxic dumps, and pesticides polluting our drinking water; the loss of wildlife habitat and remote, pristine landscapes; and the extinction of many native species.

Groups that have been fighting these losses individually began to unite around shared values.

Earth Day 1970 achieved a rare political alignment, enlisting support from Republicans and Democrats, rich and poor, urban dwellers and farmers, business and labor leaders.

By the end of 1970 and for several years after, these efforts led to the creation of environmental laws including the National Environmental Protection Act, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act.

These laws have protected millions from disease



Love our trees! Forests and other non-agricultural lands absorb a net of 13% of U.S. carbon dioxide emissions, according to the EPA. (Courtesy photo/ Friends of Youth and Nature)

and death and have saved hundreds of species from extinction.

Fifty years later, we now have clean air with air quality indexes, clean water with drinking water standards, protected watersheds and wildlife habitat, species protection and restoration programs, congressionally designated wilderness areas, and an awareness of how our health, longevity and happiness is deeply connected to our environment.

Just like caring for, maintaining and improving our homesteads; it's time to look at the bigger picture — our planet.

But how do you invest in our planet?

Unfortunately, humans are still affecting our environment — some impacts are on a small scale, while others are large and far-reaching. The overarching environmental consequence of our actions and lifestyles choices are contributing in varying degrees to changes in our long-term weather patterns.

Of course, there are many variables affecting these patterns; some are a natural warming progression of our evolving planet, and some are accelerated by human activities. Temperatures are rising, snow and rainfall patterns are shifting, and more extreme climate events, like heavy rainstorms and record high temperatures, are already happening.

Many of these observed changes are linked to rising levels of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases (methane, nitrous oxide, water vapor and fluorinated gases) which trap heat in the atmosphere and warm the planet.

Whether you believe these changes are natural or human-caused, you have to agree that we all

can do more to lessen our footprint on the planet and live more responsibly as global citizens. The extent to which you want to lessen your footprint is up to you, but now is a good time to rethink and re-imagine what changes you want to make to do that.

Changes can range from riding your bike for errands or buying a gas economy/electric vehicle, to consciously purchasing greener products, and products with less plastic packaging. This is the time of year where every publication will have advertisements on buying green, earth friendly, sustainable and reusable products.

There is good news! We have a very powerful ally in restoring and investing in our planet. Luckily for us, the planet is equipped with a powerful tool for stabilizing the climate: nature itself.

Did you know that the total amount of carbon dioxide absorbed by the sea is 50 times more than the carbon dioxide content of the atmosphere, and 20 times more than the amounts of carbon dioxide produced on land by plants and soil? (Bagusche, Frauke, 2021, "The Blue Wonder," Grey-stone Books).

In addition, forests, particularly tropical forests also help prevent the most dangerous effects of climate change. Conserving these types of ecosystems can be more cost-effective than many human-made interventions. For example: preserving natural coral reefs can be four times cheaper than building a sea wall for coastal protection, even after 10 years of maintenance costs.

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