

Ringtail

(*Bassariscus astutus*)

Legal Status

Federal: None

State: Fully Protected.



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Global and State Conservation Status: G5S3S4; Global rank, G5 = Secure: Common; widespread and abundant; State Rank, S3S4 = somewhere between an S3 indicating vulnerable in the state due to a restricted range, relatively few populations (often 80 or fewer), recent and widespread declines, or other factors making it vulnerable to extirpation, and an S4 which indicates uncommon but not rare; some cause for long-term concern due to declines or other factors..

Recovery Plan: None

Species Description and Life History

Ringtails (*Bassariscus astutus*) have a slender build, large black eyes, and a distinctive tail with alternating white and black rings. This cat-sized carnivore weighs approximately two to three pounds (Poglayen-Neuwall and Toweill 1988). They closely resemble a small raccoon; however, they lack the raccoon's characteristic "mask".

This non-migratory species is nocturnal and active year-round (Zeiner *et al.* 1990). Of 390 visits to a feeding station recorded by Trapp (1978), 93.6% were after dusk and 6.4% were at dusk.

In the Central Valley of northern California (Sutter County) Lacy (1983) reported the size of four ringtail home ranges 5.0-13.8 ha (12.4-34.1 ac), with a mean of 8.8 ha (21.7 ac). In northwestern California (Siskiyou County), Callas (1987) determined the home range of eight ringtails, a range of 68-349 ha with an average of 175 ha (437 ac). Home ranges can shift through the year (Trapp 1978). Wyatt (1993), also in the Central Valley of California, Sutter County, found home ranges of eight ringtails to be 5.3-21.4 ha (13.1-52.9 ac), averaging 12.0 ha (29.7 ac).

Lacy (1983) estimated a density of 7-20 ringtails/sq km (18-52/sq mi), in the Central Valley of northern California (Sutter County). In the same region, Belluomini and Trapp (1984) estimated densities to be 10.5-20.5/sq km (26.7-52.8/sq mi). Wyatt (1993), also in Sutter County, California, calculated a density of 28.7 ringtails/sq km (74/sq mi). These three studies occurred in high quality riparian forest, which accounts for the high densities.

In Texas, home ranges of females were separated widely with male home ranges overlapping those of the females (Toweill and Teer 1981).

Ringtails mate in late winter and a litter of three or four young are born in May or June (Ingles 1965, Jameson and Peeters 1988). Poglayen-Neuwall and Toweill (1988) report that breeding occurs from February to June with a peak in March through April. Dens can include a hollow tree, rock pile, a crevice in a cliff, or abandoned burrows or woodrat nests (Ingles 1965, Zeiner *et al.* 1990). Gestation takes approximately 40 to 50 days and females may drive males away 3-4 days prior to giving birth (Ahlborn 2005). Newborn ringtails begin walking and climbing at 6 to 8 weeks of age and reach sexual maturity at two years of age, although young-of-the-year have been known to breed (Poglayen-Neuwall and Toweill 1988). In captivity, ringtails have been reported to live 12-14 years (Crandall 1964).

Habitat Requirements and Ecology

The ringtail occurs in various riparian habitats and in forest and shrub habitats (Ahlborn 2005), at elevations from sea level to 2,682 m (8,800 ft) (Schempf and White 1977). For diurnal rest sites, Callas (1987) found ringtails using trees twice as much as rock outcroppings. Vaughn (1954) reported that ringtails occur in canyons in the chaparral belt in the San Gabriel Mountains. In the Central Valley of California, ringtails were found almost exclusively in riparian forests along major waterways such as the American River, Feather River, Sacramento River, Butte Creek, and Butte Slough (Belluomini and Trapp 1984). Its principal habitat requirements seem to be den sites among boulders or in hollows of trees with sufficient food in the form of rodents and other small animals (Williams 1986).

Ringtails are primarily carnivorous and prey mainly on rodents (woodrats and mice) and rabbits (Ahlborn 2005). They will also take substantial amounts of birds and eggs, reptiles, invertebrates, fruits (berries of madrone, manzanita, cascara, cacti and mistletoe), seeds (yew, blackberries, cacti), and some carrion (Taylor 1954, Trapp 1978). Acorns are another favored food item (Grinnell *et al.* 1937, Taylor 1954, Alexander *et al.* 1994). They mainly forage on the ground, among rocks, and in trees, near water (Ahlborn 2005). In summer and fall, the ringtail diet consists primarily of insects, while birds, mammals, and carrion are eaten in the spring and winter (Taylor 1954, Trapp 1978).

Possible predators of the ringtail include bobcat (*Lynx rufus*), raccoon (*Procyon lotor*), gray fox (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*), great horned owl (*Bubo virginianus*), and golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) (Mollhagen *et al.* 1972, Poglayen-Neuwall and Toweill 1988). Competition for food may exist between ringtails and many sympatric species (e.g., raccoons, gray foxes, coyotes, barn owls, great horned owls, rattlesnakes, gopher snakes) (Ahlborn 2005).

Species Distribution and Population Trends

Distribution

The ringtail's range in the U.S. extends from southwestern Oregon over much of California and the Southwest to the southern south-central states as far east as northern Louisiana and southern Arkansas to the Mexican border (Poglayen-Neuwall and Toweill 1988). The ringtail is considered widely distributed in California and is believed to be a common to uncommon permanent resident (Ahlborn 2005). The distribution in California has been described to include all portions of the state except portions of the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys, Modoc Plateau, eastern Sierra Nevada, and Mojave Desert (Grinnell *et al.* 1937). Belluomini (1980) found the ringtail in 49 counties and reported an extension of its range into Imperial, eastern Riverside, and southwestern San Bernardino counties. Due to its secretive nature, there is little documentation on known occupied areas in Yolo County. However, it is likely to occur along the Sacramento River, Putah Creek, Cache Creek, and potentially in other smaller drainages with sufficient riparian habitat with suitable rocky areas or tree hollows for den sites. It also has the potential to occur in chaparral habitats in rocky drainages of the hills and mountains in the western portion of the County.

Population Trends

The population trend and status of ringtail in California or locally in Yolo County are unknown; however, it is likely that they have experienced long-term declines due to habitat loss in areas including Yolo County where they have a strong association with riparian habitats.

Threats to the Species and Other Conservation Issues

Little information is available regarding the threats to ringtail populations. The primary threat to the species in California is likely habitat loss and degradation as a result of urbanization and development.

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