



Tapir

Baird's Tapir:

Tapirus bairdii



Description:

Long, flexible snout, four toes on each fore foot, three toes on each hind foot. The adult is blackish-brown in colour with whitish face, chest and throat.

Habitat:

Swampy or hill forests.

Distribution:

Central America.

Length:

160cm.

Height:

(At shoulder) 90cm.

Weight:

Approx. 270kg.

Diet:

Vegetation.

Distantly related to the horse and rhinoceros, tapirs have lived on earth for about 35 million years. During that time they have hardly changed at all in appearance. There are four species. One of these lives in the forests of Malaysia and Sumatra, the other three in Central and South America. Tapirs once roamed Europe and North America too, but became extinct there long ago.

About the size of a shetland pony, the tapir is a rather odd looking animal. Not only has it a long and flexible snout like a short trunk, but it has four toes on each of its fore feet and only three toes on the hind feet!

The

Malayan tapir

lives in densely forested areas of south-east Asia, from Burma to Malaysia and Sumatra. It differs from the South American species in its greyish black and white body markings. Seen in a zoo, this tapir's colouring might seem to be rather conspicuous, but in its natural surroundings deep in a humid jungle, the black and white markings help the animal to blend perfectly with its moonlight dappled background. This species spends much of its time in the water and it is an excellent swimmer.

The smallest of the tapirs is the thick-coated

Mountain

or

Woolly tapir

which lives in the Andes of Colombia, Peru and Ecuador at altitudes of up to 12,000 ft. They occur in isolated regions of the Andes and their numbers are becoming smaller day by day. Unfortunately, this species has suffered as a result of heavy exploitation of its habitat by man. It has also been hunted either as a source of food or by those who capture live animals for export to zoos.

The

Brazilian

or

South American tapir

is nearly always found close to water as, like other tapirs, it is a good swimmer. This blackish-brown species is also fast and sure-footed on land, however, even over the roughest terrain. It is a low land species and lives in marshy forests in parts of Columbia and Venezuela and southward to Brazil and Paraguay. It is the most common of the American tapirs, although it too is suffering from the exploitation of its natural habitat by humans.

The

Central American

or

Baird's tapir

is the largest of the three American species and is found throughout Central America from southern Mexico to Columbia, and in parts of Ecuador west of the Andes.

Tapir Habits

Tapirs are shy, inoffensive animals, living in habitats varying from tropical rainforest to deciduous forest, from sea level to heights of at least 3350 metres. They are found close to water, in marshes, mangrove swamps, lakes and rivers. They are excellent swimmers and are said to be able to dive and walk along the river floor. They also enjoy mud baths, the mud keeping the tapirs cool in the steamy heat of the forest.

Solitary by nature, no more than two or three tapirs are ever seen together. The tapir is a nocturnal animal, spending much of its time feeding on water plants and browsing on twigs, leaves, grasses and fallen fruit. The compact streamlined shape of the tapir's body is ideal for pushing through the dense undergrowth of the forest floor.

The tapirs main natural predators are the big cats, the jaguar in South and Central America and the tiger and leopard in Malaya. A tapir cornered by a big cat can put up a good fight, and often manages to escape if it can get into water. Baird's tapir and the Brazilian tapir both have short, bristly manes stretching along the back of the neck, helping to protect the most vulnerable part of the body from the deadly bite of the jaguar. Bears sometimes prey on Mountain tapirs and caymans (a type of alligator) will attack young tapirs in the water.

Breeding

. Tapirs have no fixed breeding season. After a gestation period of about 390 days, a single baby is born (twins are rare). The baby can follow its mother within minutes of being born and all new-born tapirs have a reddish-brown coat dappled with white spots and stripes. This pattern helps to provide the young one with excellent camouflage. Whenever there is danger lurking nearby, the baby 'freezes' and becomes part of its background. These coat markings last until the baby is about six months old, and then fade as the young tapir grows its adult coat. The youngster will remain with its mother for up to twelve months and then goes off on its own.

Tapirs and Man

Tapirs have always been a source of food for the natives of the forest, but over-hunting by outsiders has drastically reduced their numbers in some areas. Probably the tapir's most serious problem is the ever-increasing destruction of its forest habitat. All four species of tapir have declined over recent years. These strange but appealing animals need full protection if they are going to survive in the wild. Efforts are being made to give them that protection, by creating forest reserves - but nobody can be certain that action has been taken in time to save the tapir, and its forest habitat, from extinction.

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