

## News from the Field

### ■ CENTRAL AMERICA

#### Belize

### Central American Tapir Activity in Upper Macal and Raspaculo River Valley

By Sharon Matola

During the first ten days of June 2003, while investigating nesting activities of the Northern Central American Scarlet Macaw (*Ara macao cyanoptera*) a total of twelve tapirs (*Tapirus bairdii*) were observed in this remote river valley of the Maya Mountains of Belize, Central America.

On the third of June, a pair was observed mating. Approaching in a kayak, my field assistant, Eligorio Sho, and I heard what I know to be an “alarm” or “stress” call made by *T. bairdii*. We have 2 male and 1 female *T. bairdii* at The Belize Zoo and have heard this vocalisation occasionally.

The pair were mating in the water, in the shallow portions of the river, closest to the riverbank itself. The water level reached their shoulder in depth. They were oblivious to our quiet approach, and when finally sensing us, both left the river, went up the riverbank and in separate directions. We stayed for a while, but they did not return to the river.

Water appears to play a significant role in the natural history of *T. bairdii*. As far as I know, this is the only recording of a mating observation in the wild. However, if the Central American tapir does prefer water as part of the reproduction strategy, then this is an important idea to note as far as inducing breeding within a captive situation, i.e. providing water to encourage breeding behaviour.

It is important to note that this same river valley, the Upper Macal and Raspaculo in the Central Maya Mountains of Belize, would be flooded should the Chalillo Dam go forward. We are still awaiting the Supreme Court to reconvene in order to see what the next position will be on this. With so little quality habitat remaining for the species, this is critical habitat for *T. bairdii* in this part of their range.

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#### Honduras

### Notes on Baird's Tapir (*Tapirus bairdii*) from the Southern Region of Biosfera Tawahka–Asangni, Honduras

By Josiah Townsend

During July and August 2001 I took part in a herpetological survey of the border region of Biosfera Tawahka–Asangni in eastern Honduras. During the expedition some observations were recorded regarding the local occurrence of Baird's tapir (*Tapirus bairdii*). Evidence of tapir activity as well as the human exploitation of tapirs for meat was recorded at the following sites in Departamento Gracias a Dios: Casca Tingni, Quebrada de Dos Caras, Caño Awalwas, Cayrasa, Cueriadora and the mouth of Caño Awawas.

#### Region

We surveyed the environs of the Reserva de la Biosfera Tawahka Asangni (RBTA) in the remote region of eastern Honduras known as La Mosquitia. Formerly an anthropological reserve, RBTA was granted “biosphere” status in 1999 by the Honduran congress. We accessed the lowland tropical forest on the southern edge of the Biosphere via the Rio Coco Segovia, which in that area forms the boundary between Honduras and Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan side of the river is heavily deforested with a number of well-established towns made up mostly of indigenous Miskito and Tawahka peoples. The Honduran side of the river that lies within RBTA boundaries contains large tracts of intact primary forest, with only some minor deforestation on the periphery of the river. This stretch of forest continues nearly undisturbed north to the Rio Patuca, and many of the people living to the south report using this forest as their primary hunting grounds. The southern area of RBTA that we surveyed is relatively flat in comparison to the rugged

topography found in the north and west. All sites visited were less than 100m in elevation.

### Observations

Evidence of tapir activity was observed at six sites, all of which were within the department of Gracias a Dios and five of which are within the boundaries of RBTA. The observations reported herein were made by the author, Larry D. Wilson and James R. McCranie.

*Casca Tingni*: Primary forest surrounding an isolated homestead approximately 10 km north of the town of Awasbila. A small river (Casca Tingni), a forest lagoon, and two pebble-bottomed streams were located in the immediate vicinity. The residents had in their possession salted tapir meat that reportedly came from an animal shot in the nearby forest.

*Quebrada de dos Caras*: A narrow (ca. 2–3 m) but relatively deep (1–1.5 m) mud-bottomed creek that flows into the Rio Coco Segovia. The forest immediately surrounding the stream was highly disturbed, and contained dense stands of banana plants and bamboo. Fresh tapir tracks were seen in a muddy bank leading up out of the stream.

*Caño Awawas*: A slow-moving muddy stream that meanders through primary forest. An adult tapir was observed fleeing our approach through the forest during the daytime. Fresh tracks were also seen where the tapir apparently crossed the stream prior to or whilst making its escape.

*Cayrasa*: An area of pristine forest in the vicinity of a small, slow-moving river (Rio Almukwas). Tapir tracks were seen on a trail, as well as the tracks of an adult jaguar (*Panthera onca*), peccaries (*Tayassu sp.*), and an unidentified small cat.

*Cueriadora*: A large stream with some slow moving backwater areas flowing through primary and secondary forest into the Caño Awawas. Tapir tracks were seen leading up a game trail away from the stream.

*Mouth of Caño Awawas*: The area surrounding the confluence of the Awawas and Coco Segovia rivers is the site of rapid deforestation being carried out by a group of *campesinos* hired to clear land and establish a homestead for a rancher. They have cleared ca.100 hectares as of August 2001, and chainsaws were heard throughout our visit. This farm lies within, and actually helps to form, the southern boundary of RBTA. When we arrived at the farm, the resi-

dents were in the process of butchering a large tapir that had been freshly killed. Whether the tapir had been deliberately hunted down and killed or was the victim of a chance encounter is not known. The added pressure of hunting associated with the establishment of a large ranch in this area may be more than the local *T. bairdii* populations will be able to withstand.

### Recommendations

The lowlands of eastern Honduras are an area of Central America deserving of closer study from the scientific community. The isolation of this region that has helped to preserve its natural resources and has also made it difficult to access and conduct fieldwork. There are no roads connecting this region with the rest of Honduras, leaving rivers (the Patuca and the Coco Segovia) and small aircraft as the only methods of entry. Add to that inaccessibility, a nearly complete lack of government or police presence as well as the stigma associated with working so close to the Nicaraguan border, and the result is that relatively few biologists choose to work in this area. The documented occurrence of a number of Central America's endangered vertebrates, including the tapir, jaguar, giant anteater (*Myrmecophaga tridactyla*), American crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*), harpy eagle (*Harpia harpyja*), great green macaw (*Ara ambigua*), and scarlet macaw (*Ara macao*), as well as a diverse flora and fauna that is roughly comparable to north eastern Costa Rica, make this previously neglected region a prime candidate for future study. Unfortunately, an increase in efforts to promote community based conservation and sustainable hunting and forestry practices is needed sooner rather than later if the forests of Tawahka-Asangni are to have a chance at surviving the pressure of a rapidly expanding human population.

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