In My Backyard: Ringtail Cats: The Silent Sentinel

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I was standing at my kitchen sink one night, getting a drink of water. As I stared out into the pitch-dark yard, suddenly I was blinded by the motion-detector light flashing on, flooding the yard in brilliance. As my eyes adjusted, I could see them...three smallish creatures walking carefully down the top of my backyard fence, as agile as wirewalkers. I couldn't believe my eyes; it was a trio of ringtail cats! Although ringtails are not threatened and certainly not few in number, their diminutive size and shy personalities make them a rarely-seen creature in our southwestern desert. And here, in my backyard, were three of them!

As soon as the light flashed on, they froze in their tracks, not moving a muscle. I got a chance to look at them for a good 20 seconds, and then they were gone, hopping off the fence and away into the darkness. Although my wife says they have returned since then, I have not seen them.

I am not a fan of raccoons, kinfolks to the ringtails and similar in ways, but the ringtails are utterly charming, with their baby faces and big black eyes. No, they are definitely not raccoons.

Ringtails **(*Bassariscus astutus*)** are smallish animals, not weighing over 3 pounds and about 12 to 17 inches in body length, with a tail of 12 to 17 inches on top of that. The tail is the most impressive thing about ringtails...impossibly long and beautiful and decorated with alternating black and white rings...hence, the name. The body is found from a buff color to dark brown above with white below, and the eyes sport white patches. These "bandit mask" markings show their kinship to raccoons.

Ringtails are omnivores. They are exceedingly good at catching rats, mice and other small vermin. So good, in fact, that early settlers and miners kept them as pets to keep their dwellings free of pests. That also gave rise to another common name...miner's cats. Miners would turn them loose in the mines to keep mice and rats under control. They also eat rabbits, ground squirrels, fish, birds, snakes, lizards, and carrion. They will eat juniper, prickly pear, hackberries, black berries, persimmon and other fruit, whatever is available during the season.

The main predators of ringtails are Great Horned Owls and Red-tailed Hawks, but occasionally they are taken by coatimundis, foxes, coyotes, bobcats, lynxes, and mountain lions. The ringtail has evolved a protective adaptation in a particularly pungent musk, given off in times of stress and distress.

Ringtails are widespread in Central America, Northern South America, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, California, Colorado, Oklahoma, Kansas, Oregon, Nevada and Utah. They like mountainous, rocky terrain with plenty of water available, but they do live in our arid environment.

These charming little animals lead a solitary existence, except in the spring during breeding season. After mating, the female delivers two to four cubs in a litter, which are able to fend for themselves after four months. During the forty-five to fifty day gestation period the male hunts for both, but soon leaves after the young are born. Youngsters can reproduce after ten months and adults live for about seven years. In captivity their lifespan is increased.

Ringtails are nocturnal animals, hunting and foraging during the night and sleeping in dark dens and secluded spaces during the day.

Ringtails have the well-earned reputation as the most voracious and tenacious members of the raccoon family, yet they are easily domesticated and make affectionate pets. They are comparable to having a good cat on the premises, and if the truth was known, they have domesticated us, rather than the other way around. So, give a shout-out to the ringtail cat, silent sentinel of my backyard.

And, what's in your backyard?