

## TAPIRS

### Tapiridae

**Class:** Mammalia

**Order:** Perissodactyla

**Family:** Tapiridae

**Number of species:** 4 species

## family

### CHAPTER

phylum

class

subclass

order

monotypic order

suborder

▲ family

### PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Tapirs (TAY-perz) have muscular bodies that are powerful enough to push through thick jungle growth. Males are slightly smaller than females. The head is small with flat sides and a slight upward arch. The front trunk acts as a nose. Eyes are small and the ears are round and able to move on their own. The rump is flat. Tapirs are skinnier than rhinos, and their short legs are powerful.

The tapir's weight rests on the third toe of each of the four feet. Hind feet are three-toed, while front feet are four-toed. In three of the four species, the coat is short; the mountain tapir has longer fur. Coat color varies and can be dun, a reddish brown color, whitish gray, coal black, and black-and-white two-tone. Newborns have horizontal stripes and dots for the first year.

### GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

Tapirs live in South America, Central America, and Southeast Asia, including Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Sumatra.

### HABITAT

With the exception of the mountain tapir, these mammals live in lowland rainforests and other moist forest regions. Mountain tapirs prefer cloud forests, tropical forests that are covered with constant clouds year-round, and paramo, treeless plateaus of tropical South America and the Andes Mountains. Lowland

tapirs are found in grasslands and woodlands at lower elevations in South America. All tapirs enjoy swimming and spend a good deal of time in rivers and lakes. Females often need secluded forests in which to give birth and raise their young.

## DIET

Tapirs eat small branches and leaves as well as fresh sprouts. They pull the food from trees using their teeth and their mobile snout. They also eat fallen fruit and water plants. On mountains, they eat in a zigzag pattern and eat just a little bit from each plant. This method of eating keeps food plentiful. If food is out of reach, they will reach up, with hind feet planted firmly on the ground and front feet pushing against rocks or other objects. Lowland tapirs have been reported eating stranded fish in the Amazon. Tapirs tend to eat before the sun rises and after it sets.

## BEHAVIOR AND REPRODUCTION

Despite their bulk, tapirs are swift runners and agile climbers. They are able to climb and jump vertical fences or walls measuring 9.8 feet (3 meters) high. They are shy animals and depend on concealment for safety. For this reason, not much is known about their sleep habits. Some tapirs have been seen sleeping in the water. In fact, tapirs will spend extra time in the water during very hot weather, a habit that not only keeps them cool but protects them from insects. They can even walk on the bottom of rivers and lakes for short periods of time.

Although tapirs prefer the dawn and dusk hours of the day, in densely populated areas the lowland tapir becomes strictly nocturnal, active at night, for its safety. Tapirs generally establish a central location and use the same paths to travel around time after time. They mark their territory with urine and piles of dung, or feces.

Tapirs are more social during the dry season and at full moons and interact at salt licks and river banks. This is also where courtship displays take place. These rituals include grunting and squealing. After a thirteen-month pregnancy, the



**FOLKLORE AND FACTS  
ABOUT THE TAPIR**

- The word “tapir” comes from a Brazilian Indian word meaning “thick,” which refers to its hide.
- Some cultures claim that the powder from a tapir’s ground-up hoof can cure epilepsy.
- A Malay myth claims that God made the tapir from leftover parts of other animals already created.
- The tapir is known as the “mountain cow” in Belize.

female secludes herself and gives birth to a single calf. The calf hides in thick shrubbery for the first two weeks, feeding off the mother's milk. After a few weeks, the calf begins foraging, or searching, for food with the mother, and begins to include the food in its diet. Calves nurse, or drink their mother's milk, for up to one year. Though it is not certain, male tapirs in the wild seem to take responsibility for some of the calf-rearing. Tapirs are monogamous, having only one mate, during the breeding season, but change partners from year to year.

Tapirs live about thirty years in the wild. Aside from humans, it is believed that their main predators include jaguars, pumas, leopards, tigers, and anacondas.

### **TAPIRS AND PEOPLE**

The tapir is hunted for its skin, which is used to make leather goods. It is also hunted for its meat as well as other parts of its body, which are used to make medicine.

### **CONSERVATION STATUS**

All four species are listed Endangered, facing a very high risk of extinction in the wild, or Vulnerable, facing a high risk of extinction in the wild, due to habitat destruction and hunting.



## LOWLAND TAPIR

### *Tapirus terrestris*

## SPECIES ACCOUNTS

**Physical characteristics:** Lowland tapirs are 6 to 7 feet (1.8 to 2.2 meters) in length with a tail that measures 2 to 4 inches (5 to 10 centimeters) long. They weigh 396 to 660 pounds (180 to 300 kilograms) and have a shoulder height of 2.5 to 3.5 feet (0.77 to 1.10 meters). This species is tan to black or dun in color. Their black mane runs from the forehead to mid-back.

**Geographic range:** Lowland tapirs are found in Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, northern Argentina, and the Guianas.



*The lowland tapir is a good swimmer, and spends time in the water to cool off during hot weather. (Photograph by Tom Brakefield. Bruce Coleman, Inc. Reproduced by permission.)*

**Habitat:** Lowland tapirs live in lowland rainforests and mountain cloud forests up to 4,920 feet (1,500 meters) in Ecuador. They live in higher altitudes in other locations.

**Diet:** Lowland tapirs eat trees, bushes, and herbs. They also eat aquatic plants and walk on river bottoms as they feed. Lowland tapirs play an important role in their ecosystem by dispersing seeds. When they eat, they spit some of the seeds out, which allows for more plants to grow. This keeps food and plant life plentiful.

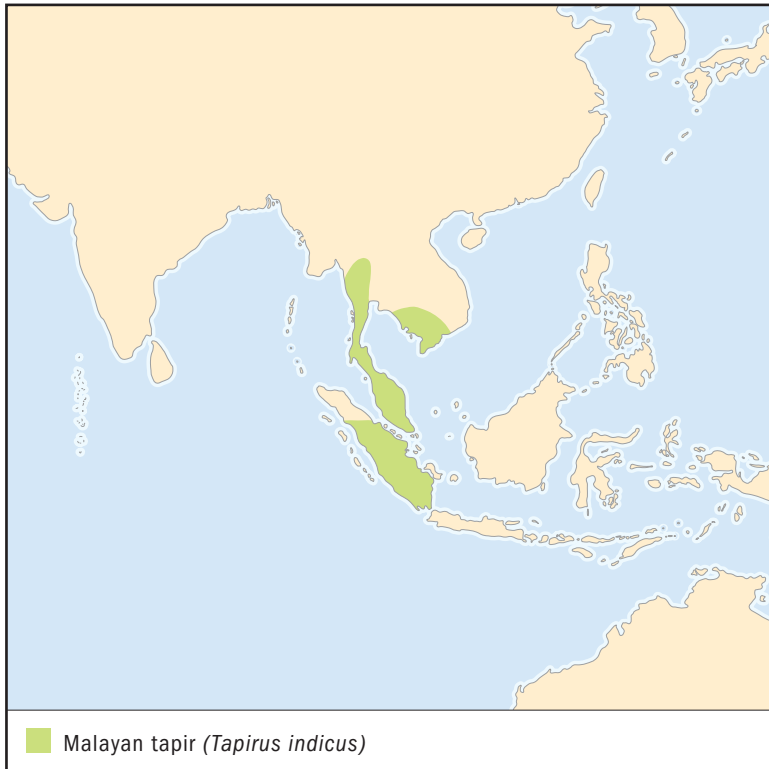
**Behavior and reproduction:** Lowland tapirs gather together around salt licks, which they require to obtain nutrients. Otherwise, they are mostly solitary creatures. They are agile swimmers and spend time in the water. When frightened, they squeal loudly. On land they stand absolutely still to avoid detection. In the water, they immerse themselves until only the tip of their snouts is sticking out of the water.

Pregnancy lasts 385 to 412 days and results in a single birth. During the breeding season, lowland tapirs are monogamous. They will change partners from season to season. In captivity, this species lives

to be about twenty-five years old. In the wild, their main predator is the jaguar.

**Lowland tapirs and people:** In native religions, the tapir is endowed with magical powers. This species is hunted for its meat, leather, and body parts for use in medicine. Lowland tapirs are important to their ecosystem because of their ability to disperse seeds.

**Conservation status:** Lowland tapirs are listed as Vulnerable due to forest destruction, hunting, and competition from domestic livestock. A renewed interest in the wild-meat industry is also taking its toll on the population. ■



## MALAYAN TAPIR

### *Tapirus indicus*

**Physical characteristics:** This species is 6 to 10 feet (1.85 to 2.50 meters) long with a tail measuring 2 to 4 inches (5 to 10 centimeters). They weigh 550 to 825 pounds (250 to 375 kilograms) and have a shoulder height of 35 to 41 inches (90 to 105 centimeters). This large tapir has a black coat except for the rear half above the legs, which is white.

**Geographic range:** Malayan tapirs are found in Southeast Asia, including Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand.

**Habitat:** Malayan tapirs live in the lowland forests of swamps and mountains up to an elevation of 6,560 feet (2,000 meters). This species needs a permanent water source with plenty of water for drinking and



*A young Malayan tapir shows its maturing coat. (© Terry Whittaker/Photo Researchers, Inc. Reproduced by permission.)*

bathing. Highest populations are found in swamps and lowland forests.

**Diet:** Malayan tapirs prefer tender leaves and shoots from certain trees and bushes. They eat moss and a variety of fruits. A Thailand study revealed that this species preferred thirty-nine plant species of which 86.5 percent were eaten as leaves, 8.1 percent as fruit, and 5.4 percent as twigs with leaves. Because they do not digest the seeds as well as multi-stomached animals, their feces contains seeds that eventually lead to new plant life.

**Behavior and reproduction:** Malayan tapirs are nocturnal and rest in seclusion during daylight hours. These excellent swimmers emit shrill whistles when alarmed or trying to settle down their offspring. They follow paths with the head down, sniffing the ground. Their sense of smell is good while their eyesight is weak.

Pregnancy lasts between 390 and 407 days and results in a single birth. The calf nurses for the first six to eight months, at which time it begins eating the vegetation of adults. This species is ready for breeding around the age of three years. Malayan tapirs live for about thirty years in the wild, and their main predators are tigers and leopards.

**Malayan tapirs and people:** Malayan tapirs are hunted in some areas of Asia for meat and other products and illegally traded in other areas. Humans have always been the prime enemy of the Malayan tapir.

**Conservation status:** This species is listed as Endangered. Their forest habitat is being destroyed at an alarming rate for agricultural purposes. Asian countries have laws protecting Malayan tapirs, but they are still killed for their meat. ■

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

### Books:

Emmons, Louise H. *Neotropical Rainforest Mammals: A Field Guide*, 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Kricher, John. *A Neotropical Companion*, 2nd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

### Web sites:

“Animal Bytes: Tapirs.” Sea World. <http://www.seaworld.org/AnimalBytes/tapirs.htm> (accessed on May 27, 2004).

“Brazilian or Lowland Tapir.” Enchanted Learning. <http://www.enchantedlearning.com/subjects/mammals/tapir/Tapirprintout.shtml> (accessed on May 27, 2004).

“Malayan Tapir.” Animal Info. <http://www.animalinfo.org/species/artiperi/tapiindi.htm> (accessed on May 27, 2004).

“Malayan Tapir.” Animal Planet. <http://animal.discovery.com/fansites/jeffcorwin/carnival/lilmammal/malayantapir.html> (accessed on May 27, 2004).

“The Tapir Gallery.” Tapir Preservation Fund. <http://www.tapirback.com/tapirgal/> (accessed on May 27, 2004).