



Sutter Creek Community Benefit Foundation

November Newsletter, 2024

Another “Tail” of a Local Resident Likely Never Seen and Probably Never Even Heard of...

However, just because it's super shy and nocturnal, doesn't mean it isn't out there. It's the seldom observed “*Bassariscus astutus*”, better known as the Ringtail Cat.



Ringtail at home.

Also called the Miner's Cat and Civet Cat, it's not actually a cat at all, but a small mammal in the raccoon family. Sometimes called the "California Ringtail" (mostly by people in California I suspect) it's the State mammal of Arizona.



Just being a raccoon is hard work.

The Ringtail's Latin name means "clever little fox" and they are certainly clever when it comes to hiding and concealment.



A not-so-clever grey fox.

We have lived a few miles outside Sutter Creek for 27 years and my wife's family moved here in 1955. In all that time neither of us, nor anybody we know, had ever seen a Ringtail or were even aware of their presence. Years ago, the Sacramento Zoo had one that had come from Southern Mexico.



Territory of the Ringtail.

Since it was supposedly from out of the area, I never gave the Ringtail a second thought. That is until one day my neighbor emailed us and said “look what I caught on my game camera”. Sure enough, it was a Ringtail!



Ringtail posing for our neighbor's game camera – 1:30 am.

Ringtails have a pointy face with long whiskers like a fox. They have large eyes and large upright ears with generally tan fur on their faces. The really distinguishing feature is a fluffy black and white striped tail about the same length as the body. The body is shaped like a house cat, but smaller. They are great climbers owing to the ankle joint being able to rotate over 180 degrees. Try that in your next yoga class.



Ringtail's can back down as easily as climb forward.

Ringtails are omnivores and will eat anything from berries and insects to small vertebrates such as mice, frogs, snakes, and lizards. Unfortunately, at least on our property, they don't seem to care for gophers!



Happy Ringtail with its catch.

Ringtails are said to be easily tamed and readily take to humans, making them affectionate pets.



Who doesn't love that face?

They are very effective mousers as well, leading to the nickname of "Miner's Cat". During the Gold Rush, they were kept as pets by settlers and miners to help control the rodent population. Most mining camps lacked any kind of real sanitation.



Typical mining camp of the 1850's.

Mice, rats, and other small vermin were serious problems, not only for their own destructive capabilities, but also because of the fleas and lice that came with them. Domestic house cats were practically non-existent in Gold Rush California.



Of course, that was 170 years ago. Not so rare today.

People paid exorbitant sums for the house cats because of their scarcity. In the East, companies were formed for the sole purpose of shipping cats to California. Shipping times were long and survival rates were low. Our little buddies, the Ringtails, filled the void.

Today, Ringtails are so rare and difficult to see that I can't imagine trying to catch one and tame it. Maybe the Ringtail population was far greater than it is today. Maybe they weren't as skittish never having seen many people. We just don't know. I only know that never having actually seen one in person, I find simply knowing of their presence makes life just a little more interesting.



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SCCBF's current renovation project is the Historic Sutter Creek Grammar School which is rich in Gold Rush history. This beautiful building is California's second oldest two-story brick schoolhouse. There are four rooms within the Historic Grammar School that can be rented. Contact the City of Sutter Creek for information on rates and availability - (209) 267-5647 ext. 230 or email info@cityofsuttercreek.org / website - cityofsuttercreek.org



The Sutter Creek Community Benefit Foundation (SCCBF) is dedicated to the restoration, preservation, and development of the community's historic assets both now and for future generations. (nonprofit 501(c)3 – Tax ID #87-1825043)

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