

# First Sight Records of a White-nosed Coati in Texas in Nearly Thirty Years

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## ABSTRACT

A white-nosed coati (*Nasua narica*) was seen on two occasions in Victoria County, Texas, while conducting a study on biodiversity of the area. The first sighting occurred on 27 Jul 1994, in riparian habitat approximately 1.0 mi SW of the Guadalupe River and 2.7 mi E of Highway 77 (28° 39' 59" N, 96° 59' 37" W). The second sighting of a coati occurred on 29 Apr 1995; a coati was seen crossing State Road 175 approximately 2.0 mi N of the intersection of Highway 77 and State Road 175 (28° 44' 30" N, 97° 01' 00" W). This represents the first sightings of a coati in Texas in nearly 30 years and the northernmost observation of a coati in the Gulf Prairies region of Texas.

KEYWORDS: *Nasua narica*, range expansion, Victoria County

The white-nosed coati (*Nasua narica*) is considered a native species of the southwestern United States (Kauffman et al., 1976). However, coatis are rarely seen in Texas and can be found only sporadically. Presence of coatis has been documented in the southernmost portion of the state along the Rio Grande (Tabor, 1940; Davis and Schmidly, 1994). The first recorded account of a coati in Texas was from the Brownsville region, Cameron County, Texas, in 1877 (Bailey, 1905). The next three sightings occurred in Maverick, Brewster, and Uvalde counties in 1938, 1939, and 1943, respectively (Davis, 1943; Kauffman et al., 1976). Davis and Schmidly (1994) reported coatis from Aransas and Kerr Counties, Texas. The last three known sightings occurred in the Trans-Pecos region near Big Bend in 1959 (i.e., twice) and 1966 (Kauffman et al., 1976). A road-killed coati was found near Abilene, Texas, in 1975; however, it was considered an escaped pet and not a range expansion of the species due to the surrounding suboptimal habitat (Kauffman et al., 1976). To our knowledge, there have been no other records of free-ranging coatis in Texas.

## OBSERVATIONS

As part of a larger study comparing biodiversity of different habitat types in Victoria County, the second author and an associate observed a lone coati on 27 Jul 1994 approximately 10.5 mi S of Victoria, Texas. It was found approximately 1.0 mi SW of the Guadalupe River and 2.7 mi E of Highway 77 (28° 39' 59" N, 96° 59'

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37" W). This is the first known sighting of a coati in Victoria County and the first sighting of a coati in Texas in nearly 30 years.

The coati was observed for about 10 seconds from a distance of approximately 50 yards on a clear day at 1130 hours. It was observed crossing an unimproved road within the riparian area of the Guadalupe River. Both observers noted a raccoon-sized (*Procyon lotor*) animal with an elongated snout, reddish brown in color, and a slender tail as long as its head-body length, which was held vertically erect. Soils of this area consist of deep, moderately-permeable clay which are subjected to frequent floods (USDA, 1982). On this day, the soil was dry with a hard crust that precluded identifiable tracks.

A second sighting of a coati in Victoria County occurred on 29 Apr 1995. The first author observed a coati at 1530 hours crossing State Road 175, approximately 2.0 mi N of the intersection of HWY 77 and State Road 175 (28° 44' 30" N, 97° 01' 00" W). The coati was travelling in an eastwardly direction, moving toward the northern shore of Stubbs Lake, located approximately 1.0 mi W of the Guadalupe River. Once across the highway, the coati appeared to forage with its tail in an upward position and curved forward over its back. The coati was followed for about 1 minute; the first author approached as close as 10 yards before the coati disappeared in the brush. Due to the moist clay soil, tracks were left by the animal. Front and hind tracks consisted of five toes with deep claw marks approximately 0.3 inches in front of each toe. Front tracks were slightly smaller than the hind tracks. Front tracks, on average, measured 1.5 inches long by 1.6 inches wide, while hind tracks, on average, measured 1.8 inches long by 1.6 inches wide. The heel pad of the hind feet registered a longer extension on the outside portion of the track than on the inside portion of the heel pad. Overall, the tracks resembled those of a ringtail (*Bassariscus astutus*), only much larger.

Woody plants identified on both areas of coati sightings included hackberry (*Celtis* sp.), pecan (*Carya illinoensis*), American elm (*Ulmus americana*), cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*), and black willow (*Salix nigra*). Dominant understory included eastern gamagrass (*Tripsacum dactyloides*), common bermudagrass (*Cynodon dactylon*), rustyseed paspalum (*Paspalum langei*), cocklebur (*Xanthium chinense*), mustang grape (*Vitis mustangensis*), palmetto (*Sabal minor*), and sedges (*Carex* sp.). Victoria County is characterized as having a humid subtropical climate, receiving 38 inches of annual precipitation (USDA, 1982). This habitat description is consistent with known coati habitat preference for tropical woodlands (Kauffman et al., 1976).

## DISCUSSION

Because coatis are listed as endangered by the State of Texas, collection of a specimen for deposition in a museum to document its occurrence was undesirable. Even though a voucher specimen does not exist, we believe it highly unlikely to have misidentified the animal. No other comparable species exhibits the "tail-up" posture like the coati (Russell, 1984), and the tracks left by the animal were consistent with those described for coatis (Murie, 1954). These sightings constitute the northernmost occurrence of a coati in the Gulf Prairies and Marshes Vegetational Area of Texas.

Attempts were made at both sighting locations to capture a coati in Havahart single door cage traps. However after 2400 trap-hours, only six raccoons and two

opossums (*Didelphis virginiana*) were captured. Area residents ( $n = 15$ ) were questioned and shown a photograph of a coati; no one remembered seeing such an animal. However, several responded that they do not frequently travel roads along the Guadalupe River, therefore, limiting their chances of observing a coati.

The lone specimen could have been a wandering adult male. Adult males are documented as being largely solitary (Russell, 1981; Davis and Schmidly, 1994) and can live up to seven years in the wild (Russell, 1984). Coatis also are known to be mobile and adaptable, capable of crossing deserts and grasslands in order to reach optimal habitat (Kauffman et al., 1976). It is possible that the same animal was seen on both occasions. The two sighting locations were only 5 miles apart; the second sighting was 9 months after the first.

We believe it unlikely that the observed coatis were escaped pets or zoo specimens. The only zoo in South Texas that has coatis is the Texas Zoo, which is located in Victoria, Texas. They reported no missing specimens. Regional game officials were not aware of individuals keeping or breeding coatis locally. Coatis are not a common animal in the pet trade industry within the United States (L. Shotts, TPWD biologist, pers. comm.). Because they are endangered, coatis only can be sold legally as pets if they were born in captivity and documentation exists to substantiate their captive status (Texas Parks and Wildlife, 1989).

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