



CAPYBARA

Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris

POPULATION STATUS

N Not Threatened



CONSERVATION

- The capybara is not currently classified as an endangered species although it is threatened by deforestation, habitat destruction, and illegal poaching. This species is considered locally common and widespread, but uncommon or rare in populated areas of the Amazon. They are hunted for their hair and meat which adds some conservation pressures as well.





SCIENTIFIC NAME

Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris

RANGE

South and Central America, east of the Andes Mountains

HABITAT

Grassy, swampy areas surrounding freshwater ponds, marshes and lakes.

DESCRIPTION

A barrel-shaped rodent with long, shaggy, light brown hair, webbed feet and no tail. The eyes, ears and nose are all positioned on the top of the head.

AVERAGE SIZE

Length: 3 to 4 feet

Weight: 60 to 170 pounds, depending on sex.

LIFESPAN

In the wild: 10 years

In human care: 12 years

DIET

Grasses and aquatic plants

GESTATION

5 to 6 months

LITTER SIZE

5 – 8 pups

SEXUAL MATURITY

15 months of age

PREDATORS

Jaguars, mountain lions, caimans, snakes, birds of prey, and humans

BEHAVIOR

Capybara are semi-aquatic, meaning they are adapted for a life both in the water and on the land. They are variable in activity schedules throughout the year depending on a variety of factors. Hunting pressures from predators, food availability, and the type of habitat all play a role in determining if capybara are diurnal (active in the daytime) or nocturnal (active at night). These same factors also determine the group size which can range from one or two animals to a large herd of up to 30. Generally, they are found in small groups of about 10 composed of a dominant male, one or more females, subordinate males, and youngsters.

Because of their seasonal adaptability, the diet of the capybara runs the gamut from grasses and water plants in the wet season to roots, squashes and melons in the dry season when they spend more time on land. They use their constantly growing front teeth to cut off the plants and chew them thoroughly to break down all the cellulose for easy digestion. Although they are not ruminants like cows or giraffes, they will cough up undigested food to be rechewed, which aids them in eating such tough plant materials.

REPRODUCTION AND BREEDING

Capybara breed throughout the year in the wild, with peak activity occurring at the beginning of the rainy season. They are polygynous (multiple females for one male) to promiscuous with dominant males trying to monopolize mating activity, which can be nearly impossible in the larger groups. Males follow females that are coming into estrus, but are often run off by the dominant male, who then takes his place and mates with that female.

The young are born precocial (able to fend for themselves) and are up and walking shortly after birth. Baby capybara are grazing within a week of birth but are not fully weaned until three to four months of age. They remain with their natal group with the other youngsters getting protection from predators from the whole group until they are a year old.

AMAZING FACTS

The capybara is the largest rodent in the world.

While vocalization is very important to capybara groups, scientists have yet to discover the purpose of all the sounds they make.

Capybara eat their own feces, usually the next morning, to add protein rich microbes to their digestive tract to assist with breaking down cellulose material.

