

[Preview of book, not for sale]

# COATI KINGDOM

by Alan R. Graham

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Front cover illustration

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Front cover photograph

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## Preface by the Author:



Some of my closest friends will know that as I write this book I will be in tears practically every minute of every day: So many of my children loved and lost; so many heartbreaks and untimely mishaps; so much mayhem, and yet so much success in the process; so much to be thankful for. From the time we had to let 20 little furry monsters into our house prior to the arrival of a violent tropical storm and the ensuing disaster therein – not to mention the destruction outside – to the awful plight of a young, two year old male, mauled by the teeth and claws of a *then* alpha male named, Trouble. This is their story. These are the protagonists who have helped create and maintain Witzoo Wildlife Sanctuary for over ten years; injured, sick or drastically humanized victims of the illegal pet trade, many requiring rehab before soft release back into the wild.

Living with a band of over 80 Coatimundi (Quash, as they are known locally here in Belize, Central America) is a riot at the very best of times. To be able to walk among them, observe their natural habits, absorb their personalities, uncontested; a unique experience, one which allows for the study of a species that in the wild is practically impossible to approach, let alone witness at such close quarters. I have been privileged and owe my thanks to a number of fantastic enthusiasts and experts, whom I acknowledge at the end of this book.

Oh, look! The band is passing by my office window as I write this, babies among them, first and second years, moms of age four or more – as they do almost everyday – all different sizes and colors, ringed tails aloft, each with a name. What a sight!

I recently wrote a science fiction trilogy based on my experience here at Witzoo, the lead character inspired by one of our coatis. The story revolves around a psychologist who must desperately try to convince a life-like android that she is not actually human, a process that might have destroyed the android's fragile mind. It was recently published and dedicated to one of the first coatis to arrive here, a beautiful girl so humanized it seemed impossible that we would ever be able to break her bond with people and return her successfully to the wild. Like the android, she thought she was human and refused to accept she was not. Her name was Mona.

Alan R. Graham



The author with Lauralie before release - 2013

## Glossary:

### By Name. My Adorable Kids:

Common universal – Coati (pronounced *co-ah-tee*).

From Amazonian Tupia Indian – 'cua' meaning, strap; 'tim' meaning, nose.

Latin name – *N. nasua, narica*

Subspecies – (*narica*) white-nosed.

Coatimundi – false ('mundi' suffix refers only to males).

Brazilian – Quati.

Local Belizean – Quash.

Ibero-American Spanish – Pizote.

Local Mexican – Tejon (badger in Spanish).

Southwestern US – Chulo or Chula ('cute' in Mx. Spanish slang).

North American pet name – hog-nosed raccoon.

Classic Maya languages – Chi'ik or Ch'we.

### Vocalizations recorded (non-scientific):

Danger (alert) – loud-burst grunt or cough.

Dangerous Thing, like poisonous reptile, insect - Short, repetitive grunts.

Emotional Excitement – guttural, chattering squeaks (socializing).

Emotional Distress – repetitive, soft chirping, all ages, like a small bird.

Attention Seeking – nasal honks usually by babies (actually the throat).

Anger (possessive, aggressive) – very loud and prolonged, stuttering screech.

Marching signal – barely audible grunt every 10 seconds or so (adults only).

Sleeping – little whimpering snores and grunts (restricted breathing).

They do not cry when sick – high pitched whistle in instance of physical pain.



Map illustration: Alan Graham

Day One, 2010

WELCOME



A young Belizean and his girlfriend approach a tall black man carrying a small, white, furry creature on his shoulder, constrained by string around its neck. They are in a large parking area for tourist buses. It is not busy at 10 a.m. as most of the crowds have already been shunted off to zip lines or cruises down the river on inner tubes.

“Wann’a picture?” says the black guy. “I-me put him on your head, you see. Make I take your camera.”

“How much?” asks the Belizean man.

“Ten dollar – US. On your girlfriend. You take picture. He’s a quash, pure white beauty, like you no see these, not like mine.”

The Belizean shakes his head. “No. How much for the animal?”

“Ha. I no sell he,” replies the black guy.

“300...”

“US?”

“Yes. US dollars.”

“Okay. Sure. You Crazy?!”

So there it was. A scene that has been played out so many times before in so many different tourist locations around the world, Belize being no exception. True story. The Belizean man had spent years working with coatimundi as a handler, he knew the species well, in fact was sure he knew the grandfather of that animal, Vanilla, whose albino genes ran through these parts on the Caves Branch River. The Belizean phoned his ex employer and within a day money was exchanged and that little, six month old coati, sick and malnourished, most likely fed stale tortillas and rice his whole miserable life, was in the care of someone with the knowledge to nurse him back to health.



Stevie Wonder in new cage - 2017



I know that animal, his name is Steve, and I know the good man who rescued him, Rudy Romero. He and I built Steve's cage – a nice big one 10 by 10 feet with a grass floor, sleeping quarters in the loft and a roof.

Steve couldn't be released. By the time he was a year old, physically fit and healthy he had become too humanized. And another thing, he was an albino with no knowledge of the bush; easily spotted, he would be caught and killed out there in the wild by hunters or predators. Packs of farm dogs are also an ever present danger for coatis. Suffice to say, he is still alive today as I write this book.

Here is another example of what I loosely term “The Illegal Pet Trade”, the internal traffic of wildlife which is even known at times to permeate international borders:

A small girl, perhaps ten years of age, enters a Chinese supermarket in downtown Belmopan, the capital city of Belize – population five thousand. On her shoulder is a tiny, brown coati, little ringed tail curled around her neck. She wanders the aisles, her pet calmly looking around. An ex-pat, a white woman, on hearing a familiar squeak, approaches the girl; it is August 2009.

“Hello,” the woman says with a smile, eyeing up the infant coati barely the size of a kitten. “What are you going to do with that little quash when you go back to school? Who will look after it?”

The girl shyly points at her mom a few yards away.

The white woman has a few words with the mother, explains how difficult and dangerous it will be to leave a coati at home, in doors, unattended, while she is at work and it is then agreed: She, Tershia, will buy the little animal from them and care for it, herself. This ex-pat was a good friend of mine; her husband, Hugo, a vet. The coati was then given a name: Mona.

Two more infants were brought to my friends' front gate that August. The locals knew she would pay money to look after orphaned, baby quash. And she did; she took two more in fearing

that the emaciated little creatures would die if not properly cared for. Their names were derived from the Italian Renaissance era: Mona, from the painting; Leo, from Da Vinci; Angel, from Michelangelo.



Dolly meets Mona for first time - 2010

Coatimundi are particularly vulnerable when it comes to the illegal pet trade, Amazonian parrots and monkeys, too. Though most South and Central American countries these days protect the majority of indigenous species from poaching and have strict rules on hunting of any forms of wildlife, the pandemic is throughout: Coati infants are adorably cute – ridiculously cute. They have no incisors until they reach 4 months of age, their claws though long as they are equipped for climbing from day one are relatively harmless, and they are easily humanized. Monkeys are similarly

sought after, the abundant squirrel monkey being the one most frequently sequestered – though spider monkeys, howlers and capuchins, too.

How and why? The issue is two fold: First, the mothers are a good source of food for locals living in dire poverty, simply shot while sitting in a tree trying to protect their young; second, the infants are then easily caught, bundled into rice sacks and tossed into the back of an aging pickup for transport to town and sale.

This happens everywhere in the coati's extensive range: From Argentina and Brazil in the south through Venezuela, Ecuador and Columbia west, then into Central America and all the way up to Arizona in the US. It is thought that they may have been introduced into the southern states of Arizona, New Mexico and Texas by Mexican hunters in the mid 1800s – following the Mexican-American war – selling them as pets to the curious. Such transactions were cited by scientists of the day from Arizona although there is always dispute, the first official documentation of a resident coati in the US going to Brownsville, Texas in 1877. Either way experts are drawn, some considering they are a recent invasion while others think they have been around forever but only recently spotted due to the sparse, native population of the time.

Not really surprising. As you will soon discover, nothing is cut and dry when it comes to coatis. Whether it be their behavior, their diet or their range you will find contradictory reports wherever you look. Even consensus between scientists can at times be shaky. What little you *can* find is likely from the various online “Fact Sheets” concerning pet care which have contributed to this plethora of confusion over the years.

It would seem unlikely that coatis crossed the Rio Grande into Texas – it's a big river and they don't like swimming nor do they like open spaces. More likely, then, that they were introduced... hmm, we'll see. Arizona? Yes, possible that coatis made their way on foot, though neither the arid Sonora Desert of northwestern Mexico nor the coniferous mountain spine to the east are any place for these bush-loving creatures, so what *were* they

doing in these parts anyway if not having been introduced? One thing that *can* be said of this dispersal is that coatis are wonderfully adaptable.

If coatis made it to Arizona and New Mexico all by themselves then they would have followed the snaking rivers and riparian woodland carved through the dry, mountainous region. As is often reported, coatis are never far from water though it is probably the cover of trees they like.



Mona wild, in adulthood - 2014

Did this migration occur many thousands of years ago, as could be construed by a recent 2018 phylogenetic dispersement paper which irrefutably argues that the migration was from south to north? Or has more recent Global Warming spurred them on? And why did they stop their northerly march a mere hundred miles over the border? Added to which, what were Mexican hunters doing selling coatis on that border back in 1860 to American

scientists unfamiliar with the species if the US already had its fair share? Perhaps it was the decimation of the Mexican gray wolf after the war that opened up the coati's migration north? How about the great drought of 1860? El Niño and its affect on Colorado snow fall has been put forward as has the 1907 building of the contentious Elephant Butte dam in New Mexico. It is possible, therefore, that the Rio Grande *has* historically occasionally dried up all the way east to Brownsville, thus freeing up passage to non-swimmers. Confused? So are we.

Thank you for reading this preview of Coati Kingdom.

Please purchase the book on line at:

[www.alan-r-graham-author.com](http://www.alan-r-graham-author.com)