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First report of the near-threatened western mountain coati, *Nasuella olivacea* (Gray, 1865), in Vereda Santa Helena, Cundinamarca State, Colombia

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Abstract

The western mountain coati, *Nasuella olivacea* (Gray, 1865), is a vulnerable species in Ecuador and has been classified as near threatened by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The current field note is the first report of the western mountain coati near a local farmhouse at 3016 metres above sea level (4°44'39"N 73°55'25.5"W) in Vereda Santa Helena, Cundinamarca State, Colombia. The coati was observed on a pile of dry branches and wood on 6 April 2025 at 10:45 am. The current observation highlights the relevance of buffer zones outside Chingaza National Park, especially areas with forest patches. It is pertinent to determine the degree of connection between such forest patches and to establish their importance to the western mountain coati.

Keywords

Procyonidae, South America, sighting, Páramo, Andean habitat, forest patches

Introduction

Coatis are a rare and largely unknown mammal species from Colombia, Ecuador and the Americas (González-Maya et al. 2016a; González-Maya et al. 2015; Urgilés-Verdugo et al. 2021). They are social animals that are often found in groups (Mena & Yagui 2019). Coatis can be either arboreal or terrestrial (Webb & Blincow 2024). Mountain coatis are mainly terrestrial and consume insects, but will also feed on fruits and vertebrates.

The western mountain coati, *Nasuella olivacea* (Gray, 1865), is a vulnerable species in Ecuador due to deforestation, habitat reduction and fragmentation, which has resulted in a 30% population decline (Urgilés-Verdugo et al. 2021). The reduced population of *N. olivacea* has been associated with feral dogs in Ecuador. *N. olivacea* is classified as a near-threatened (NT) mammal species according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) (González-Maya et al. 2016a).

The western mountain coati is a small blackish-brown or dark reddish-brown mammal species (Webb & Blincow 2024). It has a paler rufous-tinged chest and throat, and has a characteristic pointed face with a naked nose. The snout is more elongated than in *Nasua* species (Wilson & Russell 2009). The tail accounts for 50 to 60% of the body length and has six to eight blackish bands (Webb & Blincow 2024). It is found at mid- and high-elevation sites ranging from 1300 to 4525 metres above sea level (m.a.s.l.) in Páramos and cloud forests.

Coatis are native to the Andes from Venezuela to Peru (Mena & Yagui 2019). The western mountain coati is distinguished from the eastern mountain coati (*Nasuella meridensis*, Thomas 1901) because it is endemic to the Andes of Colombia and Ecuador, has copious, more blackish or rufous pelage that is commonly without the blackish mid-dorsal stripe, and its teeth are larger, particularly the premolars and molars, and bears a smaller lateral extension of the palate near the upper molars (Helgen et al. 2009). The Venezuelan and other populations of *Nasuella* show a high divergence of 8–9% in the cytochrome b gene, which indicates two divergent lineages.

Webb and Blincow (2024) and Hyde et al. (2021) reported that the western mountain coati occurs in the Andes of Ecuador and Colombia, and a highly isolated population, nearly 318 km from the known distribution, has been observed on camera-trap photographs in the San Martín Department, in the Andes of Peru. Ruiz-García et al. (2020) proposed, based on phylogenetic analyses, that the western mountain coati should be a synonym of the eastern mountain coati. However, the two species are recognised based on morphological and genetic features (Helgen et al. 2009; Webb & Blincow 2024). The current article aims to report the first occurrence of *Nasuella olivacea* in a rural site near La Calera, in Cundinamarca State, Colombia.

Materials and Methods

The western mountain coati was observed near a local farmhouse at 3016 m.a.s.l. (4°44'39"N 73°55'25.5"W) in Vereda Santa Helena, a 45-minute drive from the village of La Calera, in Cundinamarca State, Colombia (Figure 1). The study location's temperature ranges between 4 and 21.5 °C, and has a mean yearly precipitation of 2700 mm and relative humidity of 85% (Ramírez & Jorgenson 2025). The temperature, precipitation and relative humidity data were obtained from a nearby weather station and correspond to the mean monthly values for April 2025. The coati was observed standing on a pile of dry branches and wood on 6 April 2025 at 10:45 am (Figure 2). This vegetation was piled by people as gardening waste material. The coati was photographed and videotaped from a distance of 1–2 m on the same day.

This was an opportunistic, non-invasive observation without any baiting, and the coati was not handled or harmed in any way. Thus, there was no need to obtain a permit, and the Standard Operating Procedure for Ethical Wildlife Photography (Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions 2023) was adhered to: the animal was photographed and videotaped without exposure to stress, physical harm, threats, predation or impairment to reproduction, and was not handled or moved to another place.

Before the animal was found, there was heavy rain, but it had stopped when the coati was photographed and videotaped. It was photographed for about 10 minutes, remained on the pile of branches for about 30 minutes, and then walked into the nearby paddock. This is a rare sighting in this area; however, western mountain coati have been observed by locals, especially in the forest and nearby paddocks (Figure 1). The current site is 9.14 km from the Piedras Gordas entrance of Chingaza National Park, and 3.47 km from where the author reported a recent sighting of the Andean bear (Ramírez & Jorgenson 2025).



Figure 1. Location of the farmhouse in Vereda Santa Helena, Cundinamarca State, Colombia. Note the green forest patches on the left, midsection and right portion of the photograph. Source: Google Earth.

Results and Discussion

The western mountain coati in the current investigation was observed near a farmhouse that is surrounded by high Andean forest and paddocks. This area is also connected to other forest patches, as can be seen in Figure 1 (see the forest patches on the upper left, middle and right portions of the figure). González-Maya et al. (2015) and Arias-Alzate and Delgado-V. (2016) have obtained camera-trap videotaped sightings of *N. olivacea* in Gachalá and Medina municipalities in Cundinamarca State, and in the southern part of Valle de Aburrá, in Antioquia State, Colombia, respectively.

The current report is the first one from Santa Helena where an animal has been photographed and videotaped by a person approaching it. The animal did not run away and remained calm, moving quite slowly and smelling its surroundings, and the fur of the animal was wet (Figure 2, and Video 1 – available upon request from the author). This is a rare sighting based on previous reports, in which the animal is described as quite elusive and tending to hide (Urgilés-Verdugo et al. 2021).

The current observation highlights the relevance of buffer zones outside Chingaza National Park, especially the areas with forest patches. Buffer zones outside Chingaza National Park have not been regarded as high-quality habitats for forest animals due to human intervention (Ramírez & Jorgenson 2025). Vereda Santa Helena is characterised by forest patches that have been preserved by local owners, which are also evident in satellite images (Nubia Perilla, pers. comm., April 2025) (Figure 1). The owners have established patches of forest near their homes as a conservation measure for animals, plants and the ecosystem as a whole. These actions have been undertaken as a way to help the environment, but have not been investigated by scientists or other governmental organisations. It would be pertinent to determine the degree of connection between forest patches and to establish their importance to the western mountain coati.

The western mountain coati is significant for Andean ecosystems because it feeds on fruits and thus has a role as a seed disperser (Balaguera-Reina et al. 2009; García Pulido et al. 2025). *N. olivacea* feeds on the fruits of blackberry (*Rubus* spp.), higuerón (*Ficus gigantosyce* Dugand) and higuito (*Axinaea* spp.) (Balaguera-Reina et al. 2009). It possibly feeds on *Rubus guyanensis* Focke, *Rubus bogotensis* Kunth, *Rubus glaucus* Benth., *Rubus nubigenus* Kunth and *Rubus acanthophyllos* Focke, all plant species that match the distribution of the western mountain coati (Ramírez 2023; Ramírez 2024; Ramírez 2026).



Figure 2. The western mountain coati on a pile of dry branches and vegetation: note (a) the tail with about eight blackish bands; (b) the long claws; and (c) the black marking the rostrum. Photographs: Nubia Perilla.

The western mountain coati is an opportunist that feeds mainly on invertebrates and fruits, but can also consume carrion and small vertebrates when available (Balaguera-Reina et al. 2009; Ramírez-Mejía & Sánchez 2016; García Pulido et al. 2025). It is also part of the diet of the cougar (*Puma concolor*) and Andean bear (*Tremarctos ornatus*). However, it has been predated upon by domestic dogs in the Chingaza National Park (García Pulido et al. 2025). Thus, it is important to determine interactions, such as the diet percentage in bears and pumas, as well as the number of feral dog attacks in Vereda Santa Helena. It is also important to state and frame bear, puma and dog interactions as future research priorities, as informed by previous studies.

García Pulido et al. (2025) recommended a national management strategy for domestic dogs so they do not stray from human settlements into National Parks or wildlife areas, i.e., the restriction of dogs' movement in National Park areas, promotion of good canine health, sterilisation, a dog census and vaccination against diseases that can be transmitted to wildlife. Management should also focus on feral dogs and their interactions with wildlife, particularly with the western mountain coati in buffer zones near and within Chingaza National Park.

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