

Capybara

Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris

Classification

Class: Mammalia
Order: Rodentia
Family: Hydrochaeridae
Genus: *Hydrochoerus*
Species: *hydrochaeris*

Distribution

The capybara ranges through Central and South America.

Habitat

The capybara inhabits densely vegetated areas and forests around lakes, streams, swamps and marshes.

Physical Description

- Head-body length 42-53 inches (106-134 cm).
- Males weigh 77-141 lbs (35-64 kg), and females 81-146 lbs (37-66 kg).
- Their coarse hair varies in color from reddish-brown to gray with yellow-brown on the belly.
- Their front legs are shorter than their back legs and they have no tail.
- They have slight webbing between their toes.
- Males have a dark, oval-shaped scent gland on top of the snout.

Diet

What Does It Eat?

In the wild: Grasses, aquatic plants, tree bark, grains, squash, melon and other fruits

At the zoo: Rodent pellets with vitamins and minerals plus fruits, vegetables and hay

What Eats It?

Young are vulnerable to predation by vultures, feral dogs, caimans and foxes; adults are vulnerable to predation by jaguars, and some by caimans and anacondas.

Social Organization

Capybara are social animals living in groups of 10-30 composed of a dominant male, one or more females, infants and young, plus one or more subordinate males. They maintain and defend a territory when vegetation is plentiful. During the dry season groups of up to 100 may congregate together.

Life Cycle

Capybara are sexually mature at about 18 months. Breeding takes place in the water and occurs year round. After a gestation of about 150 days, females give birth to litters of up to seven young. Newborns weigh about two to three lbs (1-1.4 kg); they can see, and are covered with hair. A few hours after birth they are able to stand and run. Young can eat grass within the first week but depend primarily on mother's milk for the first few months, then are weaned at about a year. Females in the herd share the job of providing milk for the young as well as protecting and caring for them. Capybara can live eight to 10 years in the wild and up to 12 years in captivity.

Adaptations

Water Rodents

The capybara's eyes, nostrils and ears are located near the top of the head – an adaptation for their semi-aquatic life. They are excellent divers and swimmers with partially webbed toes. When threatened by predators on land, they retreat to the safety of water, and escape by swimming away, hiding in floating vegetation or staying submerged for several minutes.

Chomp, Chomp!

Like all rodents, the capybara's two front teeth continuously grow throughout their life. They gnaw on tree trunks and chew grasses to wear down the teeth. These herbivores are very efficient grazers using their teeth to crop short grasses and other vegetation.

Rodent Recycling

The capybara diet is high in cellulose, which is hard to digest. To process the cellulose they have a large fermentation chamber called the cecum, but they are unable to absorb nutrients from the

cecum. To allow for more complete absorption of the nutrients capybaras recycle their food by ingesting their feces - a practice called coprophagy.

Conservation Connection

IUCN Status: Lower Risk-Least Concern.

Although their numbers had previously declined due to hunting for food and leather, capybara are now classified as lower risk. Laws restricting the number of capybara that can be legally hunted as well as ranching capybaras for the meat market have helped stabilized capybara populations.

Fun Facts

- The capybara is the largest rodent in the world.
- Capybara can stay submerged for up to five minutes.
- They communicate with sounds including whistles, barks, growls, squeaks and twitters, as well as with scent glands.

