

Eira barbara (Tayra)

Family: Mustelidae (Otters and Weasels)

Order: Carnivora (Carnivores)

Class: Mammalia (Mammals)



Fig. 1. Tayra, *Eira barbara*.

[<http://www.flickr.com/photos/fabrice-schmitt/3139946364/> downloaded 24 October 2011]

TRAITS. The tayra has a very similar appearance to the weasel and the marten and it also has a resemblance to a small dog (Beard, 2011). The tayra is short four legged mammal that is slim built and very alert. They are covered with a very coarse, smooth and dark fur that may either be dark brown or black, depending on their geographical range it is found, from the top of its head to the very tip of its tail (Britannica Online Encyclopedia, 2011). As the tayra ages, the fur on its head becomes lighter in appearance, changing either to brown or gray (Britannica Online Encyclopedia, 2011). The fur on head and neck are usually lighter compared to the rest that covers their body. Underneath their fur is dark skin and most of the tayras have a lighter patch on its chest, usually a white patch (Britannica Online Encyclopedia, 2011). They can weigh between 2.7 kg to approximately 7 kg (Britannica Online Encyclopedia, 2011). Tayras can measure up to about 60-68cm in length and their long bushy tail can be as long as 39-47cm in length (Britannica Online Encyclopedia, 2011). They have a robust head with round, short ears that are

about 35-40 mm long and large hind feet approximately 80-90 mm in length (Caribbean Critters, 2011). Also present are sharp claws and canines.

ECOLOGY. A solitary and diurnocrepuscular predator, that travels mostly within a large home range (Presley, 2000). It is rarely found outside forest habitats and feeds on small vertebrates such as *Echimyus semivillous*, *Rhipidomys* and *Iguana iguana*, fruits such as *Guazuma tomentosa*, *Genipa americana* and *Zanthoxylum cutantrillo* and even on honey (Presley, 2000). They spend 25% of their time in trees and inhabit tropical, subtropical as well as secondary rainforests, gallery forests, gardens, plantations, cloud forests and even dry scrub forests (Presley, 2000). Their diet mainly consists of whatever fruits and small vertebrates are available within their home range (Presley, 2000).

ACTIVITY. Tayras are diurnal and are mostly active in the early mornings and late afternoons. They can, however, be seen indulging in sexual activities during the night time. They can also be spotted foraging for fruits in the canopy during the day. They are usually found alone or in pairs, that is, a male and female pair. Their eye sight is very poor, therefore, they rely on their olfactory senses as the main source in finding prey and food. They hunt and forage unidirectionally and may travel at an average distance of about 6.89 km per day (Presley, 2000). Tayras are active hunters that chase their prey. They would stand on their hind legs in an erect position and scope out their surroundings. Even though the tayra is relatively short, their bodies are long and slender, therefore, when they stand on their hind legs they are able to reach a fairly good height that would enable them to see over tall grasses (see Fig. 3) (Presley, 2000). They can move quite well both on the ground and on trees using their long tails for balance. Their walking style on the ground is a trotting motion with a bounding gallop and they move rather fast. They ascend and descend trees head first in a galloping motion grasping the tree trunk with their sharp claws on their fore feet and hind feet in an alternative manner. Their feet are partially webbed that would allow them to swim relatively easily through water. But they try to avoid going into water as much as possible. They either create dens in hollow trees or dig burrows at the base of tree trunks. They sometimes build nests in trees between two branches that make a forked shape (Presley, 2000).

FORAGING BEHAVIOUR. The tayra would walk around on the ground with their nose close to the soil and using its sharp claws to flip and turn over rocks in search of small insects (see Fig. 2). They also use their claws to dig into the soil to find any hidden arthropods buried underground. If they are lucky and find food, such as a beetle, they eat it quite quickly, in a matter of seconds the entire meal is consumed. The tayra uses its sharp canines and jaw teeth to crush and grind its food. They do not use their hands much whilst eating except if the meal is either a fruit or they are eating on a tree. If they are consuming a large prey such as a lizard, they would use their claws to open up the lizard to gain access to its flesh. They also use their claws to rip through the barks of trees in search of tree dwelling insects. They pull the bark away from the tree trunk and stick their nose and tongue into the creases. While on the trees they use their claws to grip onto the tree branches as well as they use their long tails for balance (Arkive, 2010). Whilst eating they sometimes lick arms occasionally and look around for any potential predators that may try to steal their catch. Tayras sometimes hunt alone and some even hunt in groups. When hunting in groups, sometimes made up of four members, there is usually a leader and the others would follow him. They move extremely fast through the trees and on the ground but are very silent when ambushing their prey (Leopold, 1959).

COMMUNICATION. When the tayras are frightened or startled, they produce a short, barking call and climb up the nearest tree to seek protection (Presley 2000). They are usually alone or in pairs and can also be seen in groups of 3 or 4 individuals at one time communicating with yowls, snarls, and clicking sounds (Caribbean Critters, 2011). Some tayras also communicate with each other by rubbing their cheeks, throat, neck and upper back against an exposed portion of root as well as gently licking the root. This is one way in which the tayra shows ownership to a particular tree or territory. Another way of marking their territory, especially observed in males, was by defecating on the same spot twice.

SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR. Little is known about the tayra's reproduction. It is believed that gestation period lasts for about 63-70 days and the female tayra may produce a litter of 2-3 pups per season, between March and July, with each pup weighing about 74-92 grams. Female tayras have four teats which they use to suckle their pups. Males do not stay with the females and the pups during rearing. Sexual activities usually occur during the late night period.

JUVENILE BEHAVIOUR. Cubs suckle and do not leave the den during the first 1-50 days. During the 50-75 days the cubs leave the dens for short period and eat solid food and milk both provided by their mother. 75-100 days, they go exploring and feed on fruits and insects. For the 100-200 day period, the cubs abandon the birth den and hunt with their mother and kill their own prey (see Fig. 5). 200-300 days, the family bond between mother and cub is broken and both go their separate ways. The cubs are born with hair and both their ears and eyes are closed. However, after the first 24-34 days, the ears open and the eyes eventually open after 35-47 days. Prey catching is slowly learned by playing with small birds and rodents. Bites are improved overtime and eventually the cubs can kill their own prey by biting at the base of their prey's skull. The mother also teach her cubs how to catch prey by bringing wounded or slow prey for her cubs and releasing them nearby so the cubs can "hunt" them and kill them on their own.

ANTIPREDATOR BEHAVIOUR. While the tayra is eating, they usually eat their meal very fast, raising their heads ever so often and being aware of potential predators. When on the ground and they find food, they quickly remove the food from the source and consumes it quickly to avoid being targeted by other tayras or by predators of their own. If they are startled, they use their agility to run very fast and up into the safety of the canopy above and would bark at the predator below (see Fig. 4). They give brief clicks and barks when alarmed. Being small, fast and having excellent tree climbing skills, the tayra almost always escapes from any potential danger. Some main predators of the tayra are: humans, jaguar, puma, feral dogs, large snakes and eagles.

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Posted online: 2011



Fig. 2. Tayra foraging for food during the early mornings.

[<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tayra.jpg>, downloaded 1 November 2011]



Fig. 3. Tayra standing on hind legs in an erect position scoping out surroundings.

[<http://www.flickr.com/photos/riomanso/3445195803/>. Download 1 November 2011]

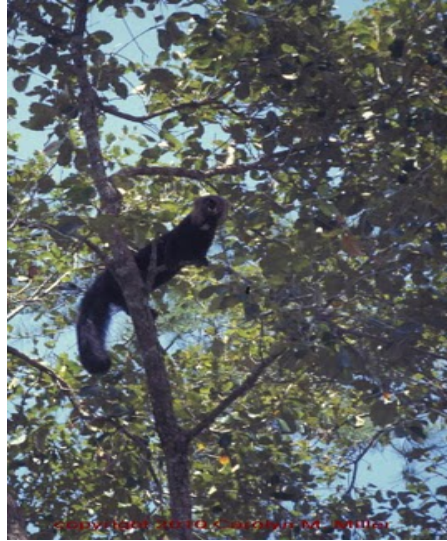


Fig. 4. Tayra in canopy seeking safety from a potential predator.

[http://bzfieldnotes.blogspot.com/2010_02_01_archive.html, downloaded 1 November 2011]



Fig. 5. Mother tayra and her cub.

[http://www.micktravels.com/peru/mammals/60-tayra_mother_and_baby.html, downloaded 1 November 2011]