Letters to the Editor

Personal Experiences With a Coati

To the Editor:

The article “Coati (*Nasua nasua*) Attacks on Humans: Case Report”¹ brought to mind personal experiences with a pet coati.

In 1973, during a measles and Bacillus Calmette-Guérin vaccination project among Amerindian tribes inhabiting the tropical lowlands of eastern Ecuador, I had a vivid dream in which I was conducting my work in the company of a pet coati. The next morning, as I stepped out of the home where I had slept, I encountered an elderly Canelos-Quichua Indian woman who was squatting by the gate post. With her was an immature coati on a leash. The woman lifted up the tiny creature and motioned for me to take it. I held the docile animal for several minutes, captivated by its soft squeaking vocalizations, ringed tail, ceaselessly probing hinged snout, and hand-like paws that looked more primate than procyonid. When I attempted to hand the coati back to the woman, she would not accept it. As I understood no Quichua and she understood no Spanish, some minutes passed until a man came by who could translate. “She says during the night it came to her that this animal belongs with you and must join you in your work.” I attempted to pay the woman, but she would not accept any amount of money. “No,” the translator explained, “she is not selling you the animal; she believes it is meant to be with you.”

Shazam!

And so, I came to possess Wachita, a female coati who accompanied me on treks, dugout canoe trips, and short take-off and landing aircraft flights to numerous isolated jungle-dwelling tribal communities throughout Ecuador over a period of months, and whom I eventually brought back to my farm in southern West Virginia.

Wachita was a remarkable animal—highly intelligent (research puts the problem-solving abilities of coatis on a par with many primates), insatiably curious about anything and everything, and mischievous in a playful way. She often accompanied me on daily rambles through the dense hardwood forest that made up the bulk of my farm. She had a habit of scampering ahead on a trail until she was out of sight. When called, she would answer with a little squeak from high in the tree tops and descend headfirst down a tree trunk (coatis have this distinct capability), bound across the ground, and leap up on my shoulder for a ride. All was well.

In the summer of 1974, Wachita began acting oddly and I discovered she had come into heat. While gardening with Liz, my girlfriend at the time, I heard a scream at the far end of a

patch of green beans. I ran to Liz and found blood running from two puncture wounds on her bare legs. “What happened?” I asked. “I don’t know. I was hoeing the beans and all of a sudden your friend there jumped onto my leg and sank her fangs (coati canines actually are fang-like in appearance) in all the way. Then she just curled up on the ground, like she was having some sort of seizure, but without convulsions.” Wachita was on the ground, lying on her side, in an almost catatonic state. “Wachita!” I called out. She continued to lie on her side. After a minute or two had passed, the coati became fully alert and began sniffing and squeaking as usual. During the rest of the summer, Liz wore full-length jeans and had no further unhappy encounters with the coati.

One warm fall day, Liz was harvesting vegetables, in shorts, when I heard her scream. Blood was running from two puncture wounds on her bare thigh. Liz commented, “Either that freaking animal thinks I’m competition or she just goes crazy when she sees a woman’s bare legs.” Wachita lay on one side, dazed and not responding to touch or command. As in the earlier incident, after a minute or two, she began to behave in her normal, friendly fashion. The decision then was to put the animal down or find a zoo that might accept a coati.

The weeks went on and I was a bit slow in doing anything about Wachita until the day when my mother happened to drive by the farm and decided to help herself to some late ripening squash from the garden. Wachita was outside and Mother was wearing shorts. . . . Within two days I found a zoo in Pennsylvania that was looking for a female coati for breeding purposes and off went Wachita.

Though I am not recommending that anyone keep any wild animal as a pet (*Do as I say, not as I have done. . .*), I have since learned from Amerindian friends that lone male coatis are considered to be suitable pets, but not lone female coatis as they become unpredictable on reaching sexual maturity.

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Reference

1. Bittner GC, Ritter Hans N, Hans Neto G, Morais MO, Hans Filho G, Haddad V Jr. Coati (*Nasua nasua*) attacks on humans: case report. *Wilderness Environ Med.* 2010;21:349–352.