

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Wildlife Rescue & Rehabilitation Caring for Illegal “Pet” Coatimundi

San Antonio, TX- San Antonio’s Animal Care Services (ACS) received a call on Friday, January 6th from a man who discovered an unfamiliar animal on his front porch. ACS officers arrived and found a coatimundi, who they were able to capture after a bit of a chase. She was safely transferred to Wildlife Rescue & Rehabilitation, Inc., one of only three organizations in Texas who can legally care for her.

About Coatimundis: Coatimundis, or Coatis for short, are relatives of the raccoon and are native to Central and South America and parts of Mexico, and can occasionally be seen in parts of Arizona, New Mexico, and West Texas. Female coatis are social, and can often be found in bands of 20 or more. Male coatis, however, are solitary animals. They are highly intelligent and nimble, and have traits similar to raccoons in terms of their natural curiosity and “mischievousness.” Coatis are not a domesticated species, even if the wildlife “pet” trade tries to claim otherwise.

About Wildlife Rescue & Rehabilitation: Wildlife Rescue & Rehabilitation (WRR) is one of the largest accredited wildlife sanctuaries in Texas. They have been in existence for 46 years and have 2 locations—the main 212-acre Sanctuary in Kendaia, TX, and a smaller intake facility in San Antonio, TX. They rescue over 10,000 animals annually, and have approximately 600 resident, non-releasable animals living at the Sanctuary at any given point. WRR also operates a hotline that is available if an animal is in need of rescue, or if someone needs advice regarding wildlife. WRR is a non-profit with a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) status. They are 100% donation-based and do not receive any government funds.

Why are coatimundis illegal to keep in San Antonio?

Coatis are not permitted to be kept as “pets” within the city limits of San Antonio per city ordinance. While coatimundis are, unfortunately, legal to keep in the state of Texas, each county and city has the prerogative to create laws against this practice. While we cannot know why an area would allow wildlife to be kept as “pets,” we strongly advocate against it for several reasons:

Wild animals are not domesticated. They may have been born in captivity or desensitized to humans, but this does not make them domesticated animals. It is not only unethical because it is wrong to unnecessarily distort and diminish the life of another creature for human purposes, but often it is unsafe for the household—especially children. It is possible to imitate “domestication” in a wild animal, as birth in captivity and exposure to humans may dramatically affect their behavior, but it means their inherent nature has been distorted and who they truly are has been taken from them. It is wrong to do this to another creature and often proves to be unsafe since wildness has a way of reemerging at times.

They are often sold by breeders under the guise of “preservation,” but this could not be further from the truth. With coatimundis in particular, many breeders like to mention how coatis' natural habitat (tropical areas of Central and South America) is being ravaged by deforestation, and that breeding coatis helps preserve the species. The problem with this statement is that breeding and selling coatis for the “pet” trade does nothing to protect their habitat or wild populations. Coatis are not endangered (they are considered “Least Concern” on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species—the lowest level), and preservation actions are not needed, other than protecting their habitat and not harming them. Also, keeping wild animals in unnatural conditions is not “preserving” anything other than a creature who looks real but who has lost the sense of who he or she actually is. Professionally operated breeding programs for species preservation, with all the money and expertise they have, are rarely successful at reintroductions owing to habitat changes, loss of natural behaviors by the animal, and hostility from local populations who often are glad to see the animals gone.

Caring for a wild animal is not easy, and most people simply do not have the knowledge, space, finances, or time to care for a wild animal at an acceptable level (and even if they did it remains wrong to treat a wild animal as an object for human indulgence). In the wild, these animals thrive. As “pets,” they usually merely survive. Beyond the space and specialized diet coatis require, they are social animals, and females normally live in bands of 20 or more. These living environments are hard to replicate, which is why so many “ex-pets” end up at our Sanctuary. Most people eventually realize they have become responsible for more than they can handle. While we are proud to be able to offer a resource for these wild animals, we are saddened that our services are so often needed after human negligence. As exemplary as our sanctuary is, we know it can never replace the lives these animals would have lived in the wild.

What will happen to this particular coatimundi?

This coati is a juvenile and seems to be healthy; however, she is still going through a standard veterinary check-up at Wildlife’s Rescue Sanctuary to give us further insight into her overall health. She is pending some more tests, but we have not rushed into these as we wanted to let her settle down and avoid becoming overly stressed. If any health concerns become known to us, she will be treated by our staff veterinarian and overseen by our many animal caretakers during her recovery.

Once we are sure she is well, she will be slowly integrated into one of the outdoor enclosures at our 212-acre Sanctuary. There are 13 other coatimundis who are residents at the Sanctuary, so our initial effort will be for her to safely cohabitate with them.

All resident animals of Wildlife Rescue's Sanctuary live out the remainder of their lives there. While we minimize human interaction to replicate their natural living environment, they are fed and cared for by our staff. Like many of the animals we receive, returning this coati back to the wild is not feasible as she has become desensitized to humans, and would likely not survive on her own.

Why are coatimundi traded on the illegal market?

In the United States, coatimundis are usually sought after as "exotic pets"; however, there are some people, here and abroad, who purchase coatis for their fur or meat. Keeping coatis is not federally regulated and the legality of owning various wildlife, such as coatis, is left up to the individual states. While unethical, many wildlife breeders in Texas are not breaking any laws if they obtain a permit from Texas Parks & Wildlife. This is not true for every county or city (like San Antonio), and this coati, in particular, was removed because she was being housed illegally (within city limits). Like in any trade, there is a "black market" for those who want illegal "pets." Just for reference, illegal wildlife trafficking is the 4th highest-grossing crime worldwide, after the trafficking of drugs, humans, and arms.

What kind of harm can happen to a coatimundi if not cared for properly?

There is immeasurable harm done to their mental well-being, even with the proper care. Coatis are intelligent and curious animals, and a lack of enrichment and mental stimulation leads to boredom and stress. Coatis can easily become malnourished if not provided with a balanced diet, and they are especially susceptible to lethal GI issues from malnourishment and/or parasites. Coatis also need opportunities to dig and climb often, as their nails can become painfully overgrown. While female coatis are social and generally live in large communities, male coatis are solitary and can become very aggressive once they reach sexual maturity—this can lead to a healthy coati being euthanized, simply for following his natural instincts.

Wildlife Rescue & Rehabilitation's mission is to rescue, rehabilitate, and release native wildlife and to provide sanctuary, individualized care, and a voice to other animals in need. WRR rescues and cares for all wildlife, including native and non-native species. We believe that all animals – rare or common, regardless of species – are deserving of our care, attention, and respect.

WRR is accredited by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries and serves San Antonio, Austin, and all contiguous counties as well as the state of Texas. It also provides assistance on a national basis to wild animals in need of sanctuary.