

# TAPIR



**Malayan tapir**

notes

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Most people on seeing the tapir for the first time assume it to be a type of anteater, pig, elephant or even rhinoceros. Strangely, those people linking it to the rhinoceros are on track! Appearances can be deceiving. Colour, size and shape have little value where the relationship of one type of animal to another is concerned.

Animals that walk on hooves are referred to as ungulates. The tapir is an odd-toed ungulate, as only three toes of the tapir make contact with the ground. Other odd-toed ungulates include the zebra, ass and rhinoceros – the closest relative of the tapir. Other ungulates such as the giraffe, bison, hippopotamus and pig have an even number of toes on each foot.

Neither the elephant nor the anteater are ungulates. The elephant belongs to a group of animals called *Proboscidea* which are distinguished by, among

other things, the flattened soles of their feet and possessing a trunk and tusks. Anteaters belong to the group of animals called *Edentates*. Anteaters do not have teeth but have specialised mouthparts for collecting and eating nuts. They have feet with claws.

Fossils indicate that twenty million years ago tapirs and their relatives roamed Europe, Asia and North America. Today, the family *Tapiridae* consists of four species. The Mountain, Baird's and Brazilian Tapirs are found in Central and South America, while the Malayan Tapir as its name suggests, hails from South East Asia.

The Adelaide Zoo displays the Brazilian Tapir, and the Malayan Tapir. Due to continued rapid destruction of their rainforest habitat they are now classified as Threatened Species. It is necessary for zoo's to conserve the species and



prevent their extinction. The Adelaide Zoo has successfully bred Brazilian Tapirs as part of an international breeding program. All of the young have been distributed to other Zoos.

Both the Mountain and Baird's Tapir are Threatened Species due to habitat destruction and hunting for food, sport and leather goods such as whips and bridles. As its name implies the Mountain Tapir inhabits the Andes Mountains in Peru, Colombia and Ecuador. It has a thick coat of hair to protect it from the cold. Baird's Tapir is found in the swamps and hilly forests of Central America, Peru and Colombia.

The tapir's distinctive body shape is useful for pushing its way through dense undergrowth. Its neck is protected by a stiff mane of hair to protect it from the Jaguar, the South American Tapir's main predator. The short 'trunk', an extension of the nose and upper lip, is used to smell its way around the forest. Like the elephant, a tapir's 'trunk' is used for feeding, but rather than placing food in the mouth with it as an elephant would, leaves, shoots and fruits are pulled within reach of the mouth.

The Malayan Tapir inhabits the Malayan Peninsula, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand and the island of Sumatra. It has a broad white band around its middle. This serves as camouflage against predators. Light patches on a dark body break the outline of the animal making it harder to detect by sight. Young tapirs of all species are born with added camouflaging patterns. They have white, horizontal (from bottom to nose) stripes, until they are about 6 months old. Look at the picture on this Zoo Note and note how difficult it is to see the baby.

Living in the dense rainforests where little light filters through, Malayan Tapirs' eyes are very sensitive to sunlight. Many animals in bright, open enclosures develop eye problems that can lead to blindness. At the Adelaide Zoo, the use of plants

and shade cloth has made the tapir exhibit less bright to copy its natural habitat.

Both the Brazilian and Malayan Tapirs have pools in their enclosures at the Adelaide Zoo. Water is an important part of Tapirs' habitat and serves many purposes. Not only do Tapirs hide from predators in the water, they can stay submerged for up to 3 minutes. They also spend time in the water feeding, cooling off and ridding themselves of parasites. The Tapirs at the Adelaide Zoo are often seen in their pools.

At the Adelaide Zoo, the tapirs are given a natural diet of leaves and fruit. This is also supplemented with hay. They share their enclosure with another South East Asian Rainforest animal, the Dusky Leaf Monkey.

