

Nine Banded Nine Banded Armadillo

Cusuco (Spanish)

Dasypus novemcinctus

Class: Mammalia

Order: Edentata

Family: Dasypodidae

Genus: Dasypus



Photo by Vincent P. Lucas

Distribution

Its ancestors originated in South America. It now occurs in North, Central, and South America.

Habitat

Across their range they are found in many kinds of habitats, from mature and secondary rainforests to grassland and dry scrub.

Food

They are opportunistic feeders, consuming a great variety of items including arthropods, small reptiles and amphibians.

Reproduction

They are usually solitary animals, however during the breeding season they form pairs. A male will remain within a few metres of a female as they forage. Proximity allows him to determine when she is receptive. Subsequent interactions include sniffing, dorsal touches, tail wagging, tail lifting by the female, exposing her external genitalia.

It is the most widespread of the armadillos, and its range is expanding. Migration and establishment of populations northward is governed by the severity of cold, winter weather. Global warming will facilitate this northward distribution. It is quite common throughout Costa Rica.

They most often inhabit forest and scrub-brush areas in tropical and temperate regions. They are also found in grasslands and savanna regions around woody areas. Nine-banded armadillos are not often found in arid regions; they thrive especially in riparian habitats or areas with a sufficient amount of water and/or at least 38 cm of rain annually. As long as sufficient food and water supplies are available, they are very adaptable to different habitats.

They are for the most part insectivores, feeding on beetles, ants, and termites. Adult and larval beetles are a large component of their diet, but they also feed on millipedes, centipedes, grasshoppers, arachnids, and several other insects and terrestrial invertebrates including worms. They supplement their diets with amphibians and small reptiles. Less than 10% of the diet of this species is composed by non-animal matter. Fungi, tubers, fruits and seeds are occasionally eaten.

The mating system is polygynous. Males produce sperm year round. They have multiple partners but pair with only one female at a time. Females almost always have a single mate. They are receptive once a year. Copulation takes place with the female positioned on her back. A single egg is fertilized. This ovum passes into the uterus and lies free, forming a blastocyst which remains at this stage for a period of time before becoming embedded in the uterine wall. This is delayed implantation (embryonic diapause). The implant buds into four identical embryos. The subsequent gestation period (after implantation) is four months. The four are identical quadruplets, all from the same egg and all attached by umbilical cords to a single placenta.

Development

Newborn are in a fairly advanced state of development, closely resembling adults, just smaller in size. Eyes are open from the first day. They remain in their burrows for several weeks. When they emerge they are ready to forage with their mother.

Characteristics

This is a very distinctive animal. The outer body armour is composed of bony plates covered in a leathery skin which is nearly hairless. The body is oval shaped. Typically they have nine visible bands (this may vary). The muzzle is pointed, as are the ears. These prominent ears are covered in a rough, bumpy skin. The tail is long, tapered and covered with rings of scales.

Adaptations

Delayed implantation allows timing of birth to the best advantage for survival of the young. Remarkably modified skin provides protection against predators.

Status/Threats

They have many natural predators including jaguars, raptors and crocodiles. IUCN: No Concern.

Sightings at Cano Palma



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They make their homes in underground burrows and may create several of these for themselves. The burrows vary in size. A male and female may share one during the breeding season, however only a female and her young usually share, with birthing taking place in her burrow. The mother has four nipples, and four young are almost always produced in this species. She provides milk for up to two to three months before weaning occurs. Babies are well formed with soft, leathery skin which takes a few weeks to harden. They are able to walk within a few hours of birth. They remain together as a family for several months. Full maturity and development is attained by age three or four.

The name “armadillo” comes from the Spanish word “armado” – one that is armed. These bony plates or scales (osteoderms) are hard and yet flexible. These grow continuously and do wear but are never fully shed. They have three main areas of coverage: the bands on the back, a pelvic shield, and a shield on the shoulder area. The head is partly covered. The underside is not covered by this armour. It has yellowish hair sparsely scattered across the underside. Body colour is brownish tan. They have sturdy legs. Front legs have four toes with claws; back legs have five toes also with claws. These strong claws are larger towards the middle. Teeth are peg-like; they lack enamel and continue to grow throughout the animal’s lifetime. Both sexes are similar, males being slightly larger. Male average is 5.5 to 7.7 kg, average female being 3.6 to 6.0 kg. Average body length is .752 m. Tail length averages 0.3 m with 12 to 15 rings of scales.

They have very sensitive snouts and noses which can detect food items in leaf litter and loose soil. They lap up invertebrates using their sticky tongues. They often roll around vigorously on anthills to dislodge ants. If frightened they may freeze or jump straight up in the air, or, run quickly from danger and if overtaken can withdraw their limbs, curling up to protect their softer underparts. Using their strong claws they will also burrow rapidly into the ground and anchor themselves in the burrow. They cross water by either walking along the bottom or by swimming. They can stay submerged for six minutes or can increase buoyancy by swallowing air to inflate the intestine.

In rural areas they are hunted for meat and skin. Many are killed by motor vehicles. Because of their softer carapace, juveniles are vulnerable to predation. Armadillos are susceptible to leprosy.

These are a presence around the station area, even more so at slightly higher elevations nearby.

Mother and her four babies

