Record of Baird’s Tapir Tapirus bairdii at the La Suerte Biological Field Station in the Caribbean Lowlands of Costa Rica.

LaRoy Stanley Edward Brandt¹, Maggie Singleton²

¹ Department of Biology, Lincoln Memorial University, Harrogate, Tennessee, USA
² Department of Biology, Lincoln Memorial University, Harrogate, Tennessee, USA

Corresponding Author:
LaRoy Brandt¹

6965 Cumberland Gap Parkway, Harrogate, Tennessee, 37752, USA

Email address: laroy.brandt@lmunet.edu

Key words: Costa Rica, Caribbean Lowlands, habitat loss
Widely recognized as the largest terrestrial mammal in the Neotropics, the globally endangered, IUCN Red-listed (Garcia *et al*., 2018), Baird’s tapir *Tapirus bairdii* has been in a continual decline due to habitat loss, localized hunting, and their low reproductive rates (Torres, *et al*., 2006; Naranjo, 2009; Garcia *et al*., 2016). Because of its ecological role, the loss of this species is likely to have a cascading effect on a number of species that are important to the ecological functioning of the remaining fragments of tropical forests across Central America (Cove *et al*., 2015; Ripple *et al*., 2015; Schank *et al*., 2017). As efforts continue to identify regions where this species still persists throughout its known range, we report here a new record of *T. bairdii* in the Caribbean lowlands of northeast Costa Rica. Although *T. bairdii* may have historical existed in the region surrounding the field station, they were believed to be extirpated with only anecdotal reports suggesting their continued existence.

This record of *T. bairdii* originated as part of a larger project monitoring the mammal diversity at the La Suerte Biological Field Station (LBFS). With increasing shifts to more agricultural land use in the Caribbean lowlands, anecdotal evidence suggests that mammalian biodiversity at LBFS may be increasing as many animals are forced into smaller forested areas due to habitat loss. Such anecdotal evidence included increased regional sightings of tapirs, as well as many other animals. In an attempt to evaluate these reports, trail cameras were deployed across LBFS habitats from May through December 2017.

Managed by the Maderas Rainforest Conservancy (MRC), LBFS lies within the Meso-American Biological Corridor (MABC). The LBFS is a prime example of the diverse habitats that exist across the MABC in Costa Rica and is located on Rio Suerte (N10°26'52.707'', W83°46'44.277''). The site (see figure 1) consists of ~400 hectares of a variety of habitats that include secondary forests, swamps, marshes, and pastures surrounded by various types of
agriculture and connected to larger forested areas directly, and through a number of corridors.

The forested areas have relatively no human activity with some areas historically having been clear-cut and used to graze cattle. Over the past 7 years, some LBFS areas have been replanted with over fifty-thousand trees (Gmelina arborea and Tectona grandis). Even with these efforts, LBFS is clearly part of the fragmented landscape in an area that is dominated by large-scale agricultural lands bisected by narrow forest corridors.

Although LBFS property has a long history of lumber harvest and cattle ranching, the habitat management has developed the location into a thriving and growing tropical forest (Garber et al, 2010). As it is connected to larger forest fragments, as well as national parks, through a network of corridors, the site has become a refuge and home to many tropical bird, reptile, amphibian, and mammal species. Numerous anecdotal reports from the staff managing LBFS have indicated that individual T. bairdii have existed on the property for a number of years with recent reports suggesting that their numbers might be increasing (personal communication Renee Molina – MRC Director; Palomo Flores and Rosy Flores LBFS staff).

With the permission of the Maderas Rainforest Conservancy and under the permitting agreement within the memorandum of understanding between the University of Costa Rica and Lincoln Memorial University, a total of eight Reconyx cameras were placed within four habitat types: 1) three cameras in older secondary forests (>30 years old with minimal lumber harvest), 2) two cameras in younger secondary forests (< 10-30 years of regrowth after clear cut and cattle ranching), 3) two cameras in a replanted T. grandis plantation (post clear-cut, <5 years old), and 4) one camera in a replanted G. arborea plantation (Lincoln Memorial University IACUC Protocol 1705-BIO-09). Cameras were deployed from 20 May to 27 December 2018. Camera locations were chosen based on advice by LBFS staff to minimize the potential for camera theft.
The area surrounding each camera location was evaluated for evidence of mammal presence (e.g., animal tracks) on the first day of camera deployment and on the day of camera removal.

Overall, *T. bairdii* were captured on four cameras in two habitat types (see table 1), while *T. bairdii* tracks were identified within 30 meters of all cameras locations in both the old and young secondary forests. Adult male tapirs were detected at two locations, while an adult female with a juvenile was captured on camera at one location, and two other individuals whose sex could not be determined were detected at different locations. Representative images of *T. bairdii* are also presented in Figure 2.

Our camera trap photos clearly indicate the presence of multiple tapir individuals currently inhabit the various habitats at LBFS. It’s important to note that the presence of males, females, and a juvenile suggests that a small population may be in the early stages of establishment at, or in the region around LBFS. Although the presence of *T. bairdii* has been suspect for some time, personal observations (L. Brandt) and anecdotal information shared by LBFS staff indicated that *T. bairdii* were not common until recently. Specifically, over the past 5-7 years, and especially, in the last 3 years, tracks were becoming more common and visual sightings have been increasing. This could be due to an increased interest in seeing a wild tapir by LBFS visitors and researchers resulting in greater “survey effort.” However, we propose that this increase in anecdotal tapir presence is at least in part due to increased habitat loss resulting from increased agricultural land use in the region around LBFS. In actuality, it could very well be a combination of both explanations. At present, it may be impossible to determine which explanation is more likely, but with future monitoring and evaluation of agricultural practices, better management decisions could be made to ensure the survival of any tapirs that may inhabit LBFS in the future.


**Figure 1.** Location and habitats of the La Suerte Biological Field Station (LBFS). A) LBFS is located in the norther portion of the Limon province of Costa Rica central to numerous national parks, B) LBFS is comprised of various stages of secondary growth forests as well as replanted tree plantations along *Rio Suerte.*
Figure 2. *Tapirus bairdii* at La Suerte Biological Field Station in various habitat types A) core of older secondary forest, B) older secondary forest along *Río Suerte*, and C) *Tectona grandis* plantation.
Table 1. Occurrences of *Tapirus Bairdii* in the habitats of the La Suerte Biological Field Station.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Habitat Type</th>
<th>Camera Trap Effort</th>
<th>Camera Detections</th>
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<tr>
<td>older secondary forest</td>
<td>483 camera/days</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>younger secondary forest</td>
<td>389 camera/days</td>
<td>0; tracks observed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tectona grandis</em> plantation</td>
<td>410 camera/days</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Gmelina arborea</em> plantation</td>
<td>342 camera/days</td>
<td>0; no tracks</td>
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