

Capybara

Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris

Class: Mammalia **Order:** Rodentia **Family:** Caviidae

Other names: Capy

Other Subspecies:

Other Relatives: One of two species in the genus *Hydrochoerus*; Lesser capybara, *Hydrochoerus isthmius*

Zoo Capybara 0.1

'Candace (or Candy)' 0.1 – female

Birth: Dec 1, 2011 Aq: 07/02/14

About Candace

Candace came from Elmwood Park in 2014. Before that she lived at Franklin Park Zoo where she was acquired as a relinquished pet. Because she was formerly a pet, we do not know an exact birth date. Candy weighs ~104 lbs.

Status Least Concern [1]

Geographic Region

Capybara is a strictly South American rodent species. Its range extends throughout most of Brazil, Uruguay, Venezuela, and Columbia, south into the Argentinean pampas and west to the Andes [2].

Habitat

Capybaras are found only in areas where water is easily accessible, and occupy a range of habitats, including dry forest, scrub, and grasslands in S. America [2].

Characteristics

Size Average shoulder height: 20 – 25"

Average weight: 77 – 146 lbs.

Average length: 3.5 – 4.4 ft.

Longevity: Wild: 4 years **In Captivity:** 7-10 years

Physical Description

- Capybaras are the largest of the rodent family, weighing from 35 to 66 kg (77-145 lbs) and standing up to 0.6 meters (~2ft.) at the shoulder, with a length of about 1.2 meters (~4ft.) [2].
- Their fur is coarse and thin, and is reddish brown over most of the body, turning yellowish brown on the belly and sometimes black on the face [2].
- The body is barrel-shaped and sturdy. Capybaras have **vestigial** tails
- The front legs are slightly shorter than the hind legs, and the feet are partially webbed with short, strong claws [3].
- They have four toes on each front foot and three on each back one [4]
- Similar to hippos, the location of the eyes, ears, and nostrils on top of the head make capybaras well-suited to semi-aquatic life-allowing them to keep their entire body submerged while evaluating their surroundings [4].
- Due to its dry skin, a capy requires a swimming hole as part of its lifestyle to stay healthy [4].
- As a rodent, its front teeth never stop growing.

Dimorphism

Males:

Females: Females capybaras are slightly larger than males [2].

Diet: Herbivore

An adult capy can eat 6 to 8 pounds (2.7 to 3.6 kilograms) of grass per day [4]

Diet in the Wild: Capybaras are selective grazers, feeding mainly on grasses and aquatic plants. Bark and fruit are consumed occasionally.

Diet in the Zoo: Mazuri rodent block, Mazuri new world primate, apple, carrot, yam/sweet potato, ½ an orange, greens, corn & peanuts.

Behavior

- *Crepuscular*, with the hottest part of the day is spent in the water.
- Because of their large body size, capybaras are susceptible to heat stress.

Social Structure



- Capybaras live in groups of around ten adults of both sexes, although groups can range in size from 3 to 30.
- Larger **aggregations** often form around water resources during the dry season.
- Each group maintains and defends a territory that encompasses feeding and wallowing sites.
- Among males, there is a strict dominance hierarchy enforced by chasing and, rarely, fights.
- Group living appears to be extremely important to capybara survival—without a group, an individual is excluded from most grazing habitat and has no chance of finding a mate, so solitary capybaras are seldom found. Capybara society is relatively stable over the course of time: group membership changes rarely and a territory can be maintained by one group for over three years.

Swimming & Aquatic Life

- Capybaras are strong swimmers, helped by the fact that their bodies are only slightly denser than water. They seem to be just as at home in the water as on land. They can even sleep underwater with just their noses sticking out to breathe.
- They will wallow in shallow water and mud to keep cool during a hot day before wandering out in the evening to **graze** [4].
- Capybaras' lives revolve around water: eats water plants and grasses and uses the water itself to escape from danger [4].
- They can hold their breath for up to 5 minutes [4].

Feeding Behavior

- The capybara diet is high in cellulose, which is hard to digest. To process the cellulose they have a large fermentation chamber called the cecum, but they are unable to absorb nutrients from the cecum. To allow for more complete absorption of the nutrients capybaras recycle their food by ingesting their feces - a practice called **coprophagy** [5].

Reproduction

- *Placental mammal*
- *Polygynous* to promiscuous
- They breed throughout the year, with a peak in breeding activity at the beginning of the rainy season.
- Capybaras live in harems typically consisting of a **dominate**, breeding male, females, and **subordinate** males.
- Young are born after 150 days, in litters ranging in size from 4 to 5.
- The young are **precocial**, beginning to stand and walk shortly after birth, and can graze within a week of being born.
- They are weaned at about 3 months old, during which time they suckle both from their own mother and the other females in the group, who are usually closely related. Young capybaras stay with their parents' group until they are about a year old.
- A capybara female and her young use vocalizations to keep in close contact, even if another female is caring for the baby [4].

Conservation

Use & Trade: The Capybara is hunted for its leather [1]. Capybara leather is valued in South America and from 1976 to 1979 almost 80,000 skins were exported from Argentina (Eisenberg and Redford 1999). There is a large internal market for the skins [1].

Threats: This species is severely threatened by hunting [1]. Occasionally, they are illegally poached for meat, pelts, and because they graze competitively with livestock.

Predators: Young are vulnerable to predation by vultures, feral dogs, caimans and foxes; adults are vulnerable to predation by jaguars, puma, ocelot, eagle, caiman, anaconda, bush dogs, and foxes.

Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- “Capybara” means “slender leaf-eater” in Tupi, the language of the Guarani Indians
- *Hydrochoerus* and *hydrochaeris* both mean “water pig”
- Can make many sounds including clicks, whimpers, purrs, and barks [4].

Glossary: List of definitions of the most important recurrent technical terms used in the text.

Aggregations - a group of organisms of one species that live and interact closely with each other.

Dominate – in social animals, to occupy a more elevated or superior social position

Graze - to eat small portions of food throughout the day

Precocial - hatched or born in an advanced state and able to feed itself almost immediately.

Subordinate - in social animals, to occupy a lower in rank or social position.

Vestigial - refers to genetically determined structures that have apparently lost most or all of their ancestral function in a given species, but have been retained through evolution.



References

- [1] IUCN Red List, "Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris," IUCN Red List, 2014. [Online]. Available: <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/10300/0>. [Accessed November 2014].
- [2] Animal Diversity Web, "Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris," Animal Diversity Web, 2014. [Online]. Available:

http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/accounts/Hydrochoerus_hydrochaeris/. [Accessed November 2014].

[3] San Francisco Zoo, "Capybara," San Francisco Zoo, 2014. [Online]. Available:

<http://www.sfzoo.org/explore/animals/mammals/capybara.htm>. [Accessed November 2014].

[4] San Diego Zoo, "Capybara," San Diego Zoo, 2014. [Online]. Available: <http://animals.sandiegozoo.org/animals/capybara>. [Accessed November 2014].