Capuchin Monkeys

What is a Capuchin Monkey?

Capuchins were named after capuchin monks because the dark fur that forms a cap on their heads and extends down in 'side-burns' resembles the cowl or headdress of the priests.

Capuchin monkeys are one of the most intelligent and adaptable of all South American primates. The first capuchins (*Cebus* species) appeared 16.3 million years ago in South America and, like all monkeys they share about 97% of their DNA with humans. All capuchin species are neotropical, in other words they are mainly found in northern and central South America. Within this range only the howler monkey is as widespread, and the black-capped or tufted capuchin has the widest distribution of any new world monkey, as they are found in every South American country except Uruguay and Chile.

There are 5 or 6 different species of capuchin monkey (the number is somewhat disputed as we discover more about DNA and new species of monkeys are discovered). So far, the following have been classified as distinct species and, within these there are many sub species: black-capped or tufted (*C. apella*); yellow-breasted (*C. xanthosternos*); white-faced or white-throated (*C. capucinus*); white fronted (*C. albifrons*) of which there are 11 subspecies and weeper or wedge-capped (*C. olivaceus*).

Where do they live?

Capuchin monkeys exploit almost every type of forest from lowland rainforest, dry forest, mangroves to mountain forests (primary, disturbed and secondary forest). Thus they are extremely adaptable which has contributed to their success as a species. (In contrast, woolly monkeys are highly specialized which makes them more vulnerable to environmental change.) All capuchins are primarily tree dwellers that will occasionally descend to the ground in search of food, to raid crops and orchards, or just to play.

Clever capuchins

Capuchins are one of the most intelligent and adaptable of all South American primates. They are one of the species that are known to use tools; a trait that was once attributed solely to humans. For example, capuchins employ a variety of nut-cracking techniques using tools, including using the correct combination of rocks as a hammer and anvil to break open shells, as well using rocks and sticks as ammunition (in the wild against predators and at the Sanctuary in attempted territory demolition or heated arguments!). They have also developed their own insect repellent; by squirting millipede innards over themselves they keep away mosquitoes!

Integral to forest life

Capuchins are important to the ecology of the rainforest. They pollinate flowers as they feed on nectar, disperse seeds when they eat fruits and eat the buds of trees, which enhances fruit production. Some seeds are more likely to germinate or germinate sooner if they have passed through a primate's digestive system. The monkeys themselves can be food for predators like jaguars and harpy eagles.

Capuchins often share their habitat with other monkeys. Black-capped capuchins are often seen with white-fronted capuchins (who follow them and then chase them off if they discover something particularly good). Several other species are often seen around capuchin groups including the small

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squirrel monkeys, who perhaps take advantage of the protection of the quick-witted capuchin against predators. Uakari, saki and spider monkeys are also seen in association with capuchins, but howler monkeys are not tolerated when they meet in the much-favoured fig trees.

Capuchin Society

Capuchins live in multi-male – multi-female groups of between 10 to 30 individuals. Both males and females have their own hierarchies and although the males tend to be larger and more muscular and will physically protect the group from external threats, the females are very influential in the group structure and formation of alliances. Grooming is important for maintaining friendships, making up after a quarrel and showing respect as well as keeping parasite free.

The females stay in the birth group while males may emigrate as they reach sexual maturity (between 5 and 7 years), except in weeper males who can leave as young as 2 years old.

The female decides when she is ready to mate and chooses her partner—if the object of her affections is not forthcoming, she may give him a quick slap and pull on his fur! Sexual behaviour varies between species; the female black-capped capuchin for example, always solicits the dominant male, who in turn is very protective. He will only mate once a day and afterwards the female will mount the male by hugging him from behind. As her receptivity recedes, she will mate with several subordinate males in a day.

Female weeper capuchins generally choose one male for mating and ignore all others. This could be why infanticide has been observed in weeper groups, as the males could know their offspring and might kill others to promote the success of their own genetic line. It is common for the child-care to be shared amongst the females and the males also take youngsters for protracted rides on their backs.

Intelligent individuals in a complex society need to communicate; Capuchins gesticulate, flash their eyebrows, scream, purr and much more to explain their needs, feelings and tell of dangers. Each individual also uses their unique perfume by rubbing their urine over hands, feet and fur that then marks the branches as they move around their territory. Generally, capuchins are louder and more 'up-front' than the woollies, causing great consternation when they first encountered each other here.

Implications for rehabilitation at the Sanctuary

Knowledge about the life of a wild capuchin helps us to understand the needs of the capuchins in our care. The monkeys need to be physically, mentally and emotionally healthy. With a limited environment at the Sanctuary, the monkeys' social life is all-important. Not only do the individuals who arrive here often need to learn to adapt after years of isolation, they also have to contend with differences between species. We discovered quite quickly that different species use different behaviours and vocalisations and thus it can be difficult for them to communicate with each other; in fact, when Frosty (a black capped capuchin) and Peppy (a weeper capuchin) first met, Peppy interpreted Frosty's excited high-pitched black-cap greeting as the very similar and aggressive high-pitched attack noise that weepers make when angry. This led to a literal "breakdown in communication" and the two have never been able to mix well with each other. Thankfully, both monkeys now have a number of other companions to choose from in their daily social life so this minor dispute has led to no lasting problem.