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A Forest View of Kinkajous

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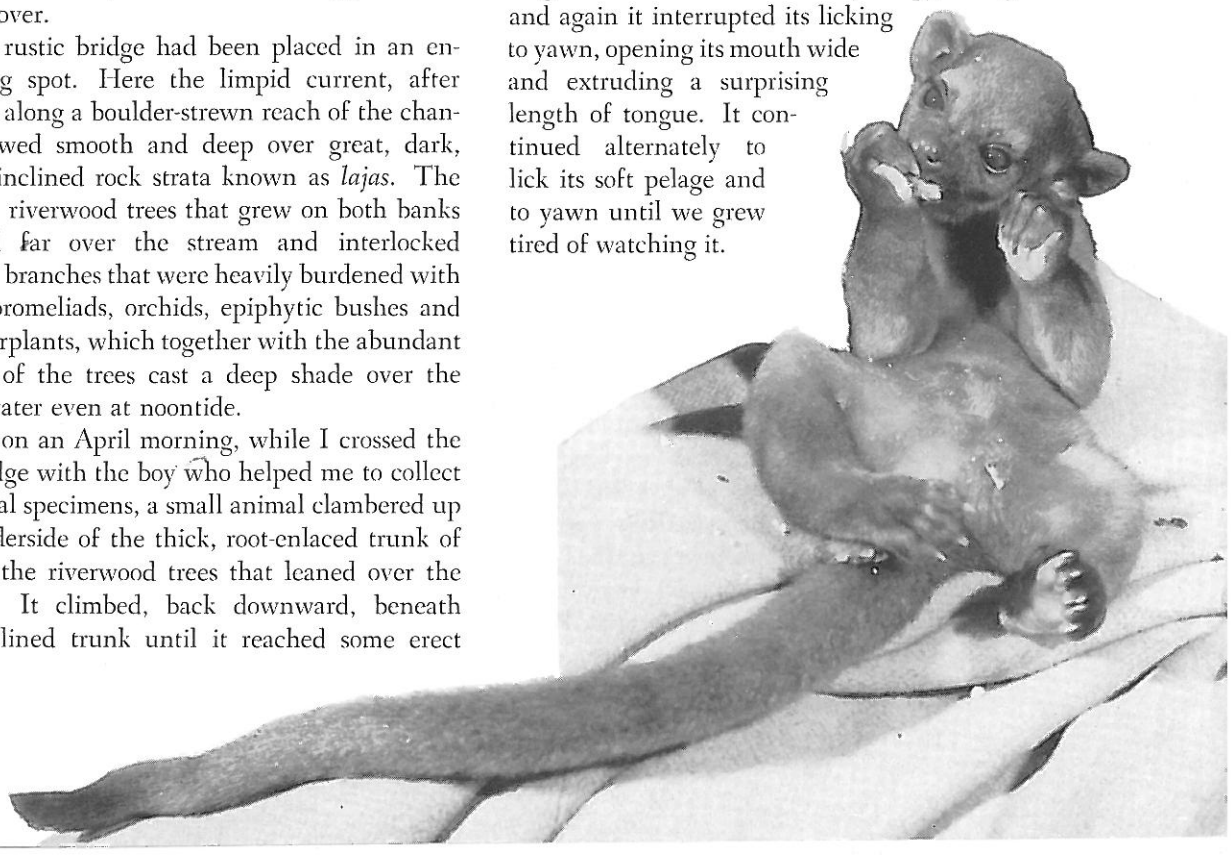
TWENTY YEARS AGO I settled down for a season's work in a cabin near the head of the Térraba Valley in southern Costa Rica. The tiny rustic dwelling, walled with rough, unpainted boards and roofed with red tiles, stood on a hillside close by a clearing that was still littered with the charred remains of the great trees of the rain-forest. To reach the unpaved road that led to the distant village, it was necessary to pass two broad streams which flowed through the pastures in front of the house. The larger of these rivers, the Pacuar, could be crossed with dry feet only on horseback at the ford. The smaller stream, the San Antonio, whose tree-lined course was closest to the cabin, could in the dry season, when the water was low, be traversed by jumping from stone to stone. There was also a footbridge, a slender log slightly flattened on top, adequate for the barefooted, although one who wore shoes preferred to steady himself with a long pole as he passed over.

This rustic bridge had been placed in an enchanting spot. Here the limpid current, after purling along a boulder-strewn reach of the channel, flowed smooth and deep over great, dark, gently inclined rock strata known as *lajas*. The massive riverwood trees that grew on both banks reached far over the stream and interlocked gnarled branches that were heavily burdened with ferns, bromeliads, orchids, epiphytic bushes and other airplants, which together with the abundant foliage of the trees cast a deep shade over the quiet water even at noontide.

Late on an April morning, while I crossed the footbridge with the boy who helped me to collect botanical specimens, a small animal clambered up the underside of the thick, root-enlaced trunk of one of the riverwood trees that leaned over the stream. It climbed, back downward, beneath the inclined trunk until it reached some erect branches, up which it easily scrambled into the foliage where it stopped and gave us an excellent view of itself. About as large as a raccoon or a tayra, but more slender than the former, it was nearly everywhere clothed with brownish-gray fur that appeared thick and soft. Despite its low, flattened crown, the animal had an attractive little face, with a short, blunt, black muzzle, large dark eyes and small rounded ears set far down on the sides of the head and expressively mobile. Its legs were short, and each foot had five toes and a prominent bare sole. There was a graceful curve near the end of its long tail. I took it to be a Kinkajou, but never before had I enjoyed such a good view of one.

Paying little attention to the two onlookers not far below it, the Kinkajou settled down comfortably amid the branches and began to wash its limbs with its tongue, which was remarkably long and slender. It seemed very sleepy, for again and again it interrupted its licking to yawn, opening its mouth wide and extruding a surprising length of tongue. It continued alternately to lick its soft pelage and to yawn until we grew tired of watching it.



All the warm afternoon, the Kinkajou drowsed above the river in the epiphyte-laden boughs of the riverwood tree. Soon after lunch I found it lying supine in a crotch, its arms thrown over the branches for support, its head bent forward and resting on its upturned abdomen. Later in the afternoon it changed its position, resting now with its hindquarters on a thick horizontal bough, its foreparts curled forward, and its head between its upturned legs. When aroused by a noise, it yawned sleepily and soon resumed its slumbers.

Returning again an hour after nightfall, I found the Kinkajou moving off through the top of the riverwood tree. When it glanced down at me, its eyes gleamed like bright stars in the beam of my electric torch. Soon it went off through the dusky foliage where I could not follow. It seemed an attractive creature and I wished to learn more about its ways. But like many of the mammals of the tropical forest, it went about its business under cover of darkness and was even more difficult to study than the elusive birds that flitted through the high treetops.

I have never seen a Kinkajou hunting in the daytime, as the nocturnal opossum sometimes does. Even to find a Kinkajou licking itself and drowsing in an exposed position is unusual, for these mammals prefer to hide away in holes in trees while the sun is in the sky. It has long been my habit, as I pass through the woods, to tap on trunks containing holes, for at times something of interest is thereby discovered. In this way I have found the nests of woodpeckers, trogons, toucans, ant-thrushes, and other birds, and less frequently a mammal has come forth at my summons. Not long ago, my hammering brought from the dead top of a small living tree a Woolly Opossum with three or more little ones, as big as mice, clinging to her nipples, their pink tails curled up like tendrils. I recall at least three occasions when I found Kinkajous passing the day in holes high up in dead or dying trees.

One of these Kinkajous took possession of a hole thirty feet up in a massive dead trunk in the midst of the forest, which when first found by me was the dormitory of a male Pale-billed Woodpecker. It was doubtless the powerful chisel-beak of this largest of the Central American woodpeckers that had carved the wide round doorway and the deep chamber to which it gave access. For at least two months the woodpecker lodged here alone, and in the evening or at daybreak I often saw his high-crested, bright red head framed in the neatly rounded opening. After he abandoned this hole, probably to sleep in a new one that he had prepared for himself, his mate used it for a while as her nightly lodging.

After the female woodpecker ceased to sleep in this cavity, it remained for several months without a tenant and I lost interest in it. But one day as I passed by, I noticed a twig with some brown dead leaves protruding from the hole. When I clapped my hands, the sleepy little face of a Kinkajou appeared in the doorway and looked inquiringly down at me. I tried to make the animal come out and give me a better view of itself, but no amount of noise, nor hammering and scraping on its trunk, would drive it from its snug bedroom. When it had seen enough of the obstreperous biped far below, it backed down into its dark retreat and stayed out of sight. I continued on my way, leaving it to round out its day

Not as young as the baby Kinkajou the author saw being carried by its mother, this is the youngest we have had in the collection. It is less than a year old, slow-moving but a fearless and restless climber.

– or should I say "night"? – in peace. I am not sure whether the leafy twig had been carried into the hole by the Kinkajou or some other animal, possibly a squirrel. But I am certain that the woodpecker was not responsible for this addition to its former dormitory.

Early on a sunny morning in May I went into our small coffee plantation to cut some garden stakes from branches that had been pruned from the coffee bushes. My machete struck ringingly against the hard wood. After I had cut a few stakes, I heard a shrill note, like the call of the Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, a bird which I have not seen on this farm. Looking up, I espied a small animal climbing a tall, blasted trunk that stood at the edge of the plantation, at the brink of a high precipice that rose above a rocky watercourse. In the side of the stub was a long, narrow opening that led into a central hollow, and at the top grew a slender, upright sprout.

The animal was a Kinkajou, and in her mouth she held a baby the size of a squirrel. She

ascended the trunk to the top, then continued up the slender sprout, which appeared hardly stout enough to bear her weight. Reaching beyond this, she grasped the end of a branch of one of the trees that shaded the coffee bushes. Although the twig that she held was not much thicker than a lead pencil, the Kinkajou carefully climbed across to it with the baby dangling from her mouth, much as a Howling Monkey might have done. Scrambling up to a thicker part of the bough, she paused to survey her situation. The clean-limbed Inga tree offered her neither cavity nor concealment, and it stood isolated, so that she could not have reached another tree without first descending to the ground. Doubtless recognizing her error, after a minute's pause she carefully returned to the top of the stub where I first saw her. As she hesitated here, evidently perplexed, I hurried back to the house for my binoculars. I returned just in time to see her climb head first down the trunk and enter the opening in its side.

After the Kinkajou had disappeared in the hollow trunk, I resumed my task of cutting stakes. But before I could cut another, she emerged from the cavity with her baby still in her mouth and started up the trunk again. I stood quietly watching; and after ascending a few yards she paused, looked around, then returned to the cavity. Whenever I chopped loudly, she came out; when I stopped making a noise, she went back to her retreat. I decided to postpone my work and leave her in peace.

As the Kinkajou climbed, she kept the end of her long tail resting lightly over any convenient branch, with a half turn at its end to prevent its slipping off. This seemed to be done merely as a precaution, as I did not see her support herself with her tail. She held her baby with its neck in her mouth. When she climbed downward head first, the little one's body dangled limply, its four pink paws waving feebly in the air. As she passed over an obstructing branch, the baby seemed a great impediment, and she dragged it

clumsily over the obstacle. But whenever she found a crotch where she could support herself adequately with her hind legs, she used both arms to fold the infant against her breast like a human mother. The cub's long tail had a half turn at its end like its dam's.

For the next ten days, the Kinkajou and her baby continued to live in the hollow stub at the edge of the precipice beside the plantation. Becoming accustomed to the noise of chopping, she merely looked from her doorway when I wielded my machete among the coffee bushes. I could also make her reveal herself by clapping my hands. Then her puckish face peered out from the dimly lighted hollow, and often she stuck forth her long tongue, yawning or licking something. I did not again hear the shrill note, like that of the Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, which first drew my attention to her.

About this time an urgent matter took me to the distant city. As I returned to the farm after an absence of several days, I heard voices and loud noises coming from the coffee plantation. Suspecting trouble, I dropped my bag in the path and hurried into the grove, to find a group of men and dogs in front of the Kinkajou's hole. They had driven the mother into the top of the neighboring shade tree, where she climbed along a slender branch with her baby dangling from her mouth. One of the men was aiming a gun at her. My timely shout saved her. My caretaker, fearing that the Kinkajou would catch his chickens, had called in these neighbors to kill her while I was away. I explained that in the daytime, when the chickens are abroad, the Kinkajou is inactive, while at night, when the Kinkajou hunts, the chickens roost in a tree equipped with a metal band which prevents small animals from climbing up the trunk. Hence it is unlikely that a Kinkajou ever catches a properly attended chicken.

After I had sent the men off with a scolding, the Kinkajou passed over to the trunk where she slept by day and climbed rapidly downward. But instead of returning to her hole as I expected, when halfway down the stub she took a great leap, passing over the creek and landing in the far lower boughs of the trees on the opposite shore. It was a bold and hazardous jump that would have won admiration for the most agile monkey. From the boughs overhanging the channel, she passed into the adjoining second-growth thicket and soon vanished. I could not see whether she still carried her cub, but doubtless she did.

A few days later, I was delighted to find that, despite her narrow escape, my Kinkajou had returned to her old home. When I clapped my hands in front of the doorway, the youngster now looked out on its own and made little peeping, bird-like noises. One evening I watched for the mother and her cub to sally forth for the night. Before going to my observation post among the coffee bushes, I made a noise to assure myself that they were still at home. Peering out of the narrow opening to see what was happening, the mother yawned repeatedly, sticking her slender tongue several inches beyond her widely opened mouth. The sun had not yet set; it was far too early to arise; and she was still very sleepy! After I stepped behind a coffee bush, she disappeared into the bottom of her hole. I watched until it grew dark without seeing her emerge. Before leaving, I threw the flashlight's beam against the opening, where it picked out two brightly gleaming eyes. Evidently, after her long day's fast, the Kinkajou went late to hunt for breakfast.

After the end of June, I found only a young Kinkajou in the hollow tree at the edge of the coffee plantation. If this was indeed the baby that I first saw in its mother's mouth on May 23, it had grown rapidly. Had the mother voluntarily relinquished the cavity to her offspring and found another for herself, or had some mishap befallen her? I know too little of the Kinkajou's habits to hazard an answer to this question. Difficult as it is to work out the life histories of the birds of the tropical forest, to obtain similar information about the mammals is still harder. Many of them are nocturnal; many rear their families in deep hollows of various sorts rather than in accessible nests; and since they depend on scent no less than sight to warn them of danger, the observer cannot so easily conceal himself from them as in the case of birds, for studying which blinds are profitably used. It is only by piecing together scraps of information that we glean slowly over the years that we begin to understand the manner of life of some of these animals.