



(from left to right) Capybara, Beaver,  
Baby Pacarana, Adult Pacarana

# oh rats!

They're big, they're bold (well, sort of) and they're beautiful (depending on your definition of beauty)—welcome to the wonderful world of big rodents. Your Zoo is home to the three largest species of rodents in the world: pacarana, beaver and capybara.

Most people have never heard of the pacarana (*Dinomys Branickii*), a 20-pound South American rodent. "They are rare in zoos" according to Alan Sironen, Curator of Mammals. "Pacarana are endangered in some countries and little is known about them, but successful breeding in captivity has helped us learn to care for them. Rodents are popular in multi-species exhibits—when we put together animals that would normally coexist in the wild, visitors get a variety of different species to see in a single exhibit." In the Zoo's **Primate, Cat and Aquatics** building, you can see a group of four pacaranas living with squirrel monkeys and a huge bird called the currasow.

"The pacaranas are most active when we open at 10 a.m.," says keeper Dave Winkler, tossing a chunk of sweet potato to the rodents. The animals sit up, squirrel-like, munching the treats. "Corn on the cob is another favorite,"

Winkler adds. "They also like to eat the squirrel monkeys' food. We had to hang that food up where the pacaranas wouldn't get it."

The Zoo's beavers (*Castor canadensis*) make their home in **Wolf Wilderness** where, thanks to the close-up viewing area, you can get a good look at those famous rodent teeth! Strict vegetarians, beavers use their huge teeth to cut down trees and branches which are then used for food and building materials, according to keeper Steve Gove. Building dams and creating ponds is only part of what keeps these animals as "busy as beavers." They also harvest branches to store in an underwater larder for winter dinners; the near-freezing water helps to maintain nutrients. Just think—a rodent that uses architecture and refrigeration for its own benefit!

Beavers weigh 30–70 pounds and their tails are huge, wide and flat. The pair at the Zoo swim with native fish and share their exhibit space with five gray wolves. "Very few exhibits in the world show predator and prey in such close quarters," notes Gove. "Since we supply other food to the wolves, they don't bother the beavers, but they do get curious."

The exhibit design keeps the beavers safely off-shore. If the wolves ever get too close, the beavers smack their tails and dive to the safety of their den.

The world's largest rodent, the capybara, is native to northern South America. Look for *Hydrochoeridae Hydrochaerus* in **The Rain-Forest** in an exhibit with monkeys, macaws, and a Malaysian tapir. Capybaras resemble overgrown guinea pigs—very overgrown as they can weigh almost 150 pounds!

Capybaras have no tail, small claws and webbed feet and spend much of their time in the water. "Missionaries actually classified capybara as an aquatic creature, and therefore considered them legitimate Lenten fare," keeper Deb Copeland says. Eat a rodent? Al Sironen agrees: "In certain areas of the world, capybaras are ranches and semi-domesticated."

The Zoo is a great place to meet new creatures and expand your understanding of what a zoologist means when they talk about rodents. As Copeland says whenever asked about rodents' dubious reputation, "You've never met a capy! ... or a beaver, or a pacarana!

—SARAH BARTASH MARKETING SPECIALIST