

Paradise found for Latin America's largest land mammal

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Wildlife Conservation Society scientists have documented a thriving population of lowland tapirs -- the strange forest and grassland-dwelling herbivore with the trunk-like snout -- living in a network of remote national parks spanning the Peru-Bolivia border. Credit: Mileniusz Spanowics/WCS

Wildlife Conservation Society scientists have documented a thriving population of lowland tapirs – the strange forest and grassland-dwelling herbivore with the trunk-like snout – living in a network of remote

national parks spanning the Peru-Bolivia border.

Using a combination of camera traps, along with interviews with park guards and subsistence hunters, WCS estimates at least 14,500 lowland tapirs in the region. The population bridges five connected [national parks](#) in northwest Bolivia and southeastern Peru.

The WCS findings were described in the December issue of the journal *Integrative Zoology*. Authors include Robert Wallace, Guido Ayala, and Maria Viscara of WCS's Greater Madidi-Tambopata Landscape Program.

The study synthesizes 12 years of research on lowland tapirs in the region. Together with WCS studies on jaguars, the results underscore the importance of this protected area complex for the conservation of Latin America's most charismatic terrestrial [wildlife species](#).

"The Madidi-Tambopata landscape is estimated to hold a population of at least 14,500 lowland tapirs making it one of the most important strongholds for lowland tapir conservation in the continent," said the study's lead author Robert Wallace. "These results underline the fundamental importance of protected areas for the conservation of larger species of wildlife threatened by hunting and habitat loss."

The lowland tapir is the largest terrestrial mammal in South America, weighing up to 300 kg (661 pounds). Its unusual prehensile [proboscis](#) or snout is used to reach leaves and fruit. Tapirs are found throughout tropical forests and grasslands in South America. However, they are threatened by [habitat loss](#) and especially unsustainable hunting due to their large size, low reproductive rate (1 birth every 2-3 years), and ease of detection at mineral licks in the rainforest. Lowland tapirs are considered Vulnerable by the IUCN.

WCS collected and systematized 1,255 lowland tapir distribution records in the region. These records came from research observations and camera trap photographs as well as interviews with park guards of Madidi, Pilón Lajas and Apolobamba National Parks in Bolivia, and Bahuaia Sonene and Tambopata National Parks in neighboring Peru, and subsistence hunters from 19 Takana and Tsimane' communities.

Camera trap data revealed that lowland tapir abundance was higher at sites under protection than sites outside protected areas. At one site sampled over time, the Tuichi River, camera trapping has revealed that lowland tapir populations have been recovering following the creation of Madidi National Park in 1995. Prior to the creation of the park, loggers had hunted heavily in this area.

Madidi National Park contains 11 percent of the world's birds, more than 200 species of mammals, 300 types of fish, and 12,000 plant varieties. The 19,000 square-kilometer (7,335 square mile) park is known for its array of altitudinal gradients and habitats from lowland tropical forests of the Amazon to snow-capped peaks of the High Andes.

Working with government partners in Bolivia and Peru, the Greater Madidi-Tambopata Landscape Conservation Program aims to develop local capacity to conserve the landscape and mitigate a variety of threats to biodiversity and wildlife including lowland tapirs, including road construction, logging, unsustainable natural resource use, and agricultural expansion.

Julie Kunen, WCS Director of Latin America and Caribbean Programs said: "WCS commends our government and indigenous partners for their commitment to the Madidi-Tambopata Landscape. Their dedication is clearly paying off with well-managed [protected areas](#) and more wildlife."

Provided by Wildlife Conservation Society

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