

Mammalian Diversity and Matses Ethnomammalogy in Amazonian Peru. Part 1: Primates

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Probably many people are not more familiar with the Amazon than just knowing its name. How much do you know about the primates of these forests? Do you want to take a tour of the region? Are you interested in learning more about new world monkeys? If so, this book is for you.

Robert S. Voss, a systematic mammalogist, and David W. Fleck, an anthropological linguist, take readers on a journey through the Amazonian forest, one of the most intact rainforests on Planet Earth. The journey begins in the Peruvian department of Loreto, an inaccessible and biologically unexplored region, where four rivers encompass a dense forest. With descriptions of geography, natural vegetation, rivers and landscapes, Voss and Fleck introduce readers to the anthropology of Loreto. Then they teach readers about the natural history of Amazonian mammals, especially primates, between the Yavari and Ucayali rivers of northeastern Peru.

Voss and Fleck report on the taxonomic diversity of primates in their book which is the first issue published as part of a series on mammals in Amazonian Peru. Voss and Fleck collected 1145 mammalian specimens from Nuevo San Juan during their collaborative research. Moreover, they examined external and craniodental measurements of primates and also corrected the faulty categorization of some subspecies. The authors combined their ethnobiological observations with another amazing source of information: the collective knowledge of native Amazonian people about primates.

The indigenous Matses people who live in the Yavari-Ucayali interfluvium are the community of focus in this ethnobiological study. This native Amazonian tribe had their first contact with the outside world in 1969. Matses still obtain much of their nutritional needs from traditional activities such as hunting. Due to the

importance of hunting expertise for their daily lives, Matses are reliable observers of their surrounding fauna. Matses have a rich “vocabulary for accurately communicating relevant natural history information” (p. 9). For example, in addition to the principal name for a species, a monkey might have three hunting names and a ceremonial name. Voss and Fleck also compile Matses accounts of physical appearance, anatomy, sexual dimorphism, habitat preferences, troop size, social behavior, maternal behavior, vocalizations, communications, daily activities and sleeping patterns, predation and predator avoidance, eating and drinking resources for each of fourteen primate taxa that occur in that region. Furthermore, the authors incorporate these data with Matses terminology, classification, and hunting strategies for primates as well as the cultural significance of species. The authors, for example, describe Matses’ interesting methods of hunting, their traditions and taboos for eating different species of primates, and the way they use some species as pets and some others’ canines as necklaces.

An example is howler monkeys (*Alouatta seniculus* Atelidae L.); Matses believe only older people are permitted to eat their meat. If a young person ate these monkeys, they would become lazy. “For this reason, Matses do not hunt howler monkeys as frequently as they do other monkeys. The laziness induced by eating howler monkey meat can be cured with frog poison and by following a special diet” (p. 16). Matses hunt howler monkeys by following their calls. They know that these animals “can be found in any primary forest habitat, but they do not come to abandoned swiddens” (p. 17). Matses know that howler monkeys travel in male-led troops with fewer than ten individuals. And, as for howler monkeys eating behavior, Matses say, “one monkey stays in the trees as a lookout, while the others make a hole in the bank of the mineral lick and

eat inside the hole” (p. 17). Matses believe that if they hear the howls of these monkeys early in the morning, that day is going to be a nice day. Matses know that these monkeys are those who wake up earlier than other monkeys in the morning.

Voss and Fleck corroborate Matses observations with scientific literature and conclude that, although some differences occur, Matses knowledge of primate natural history seems to be accurate and consistent with scientific reports.

This book should be referred to as a “report” because it is mostly devoted to descriptive and methodological summaries and review of the literature. The “book” looks like an extended research article or one chapter in another book. Hence, it might seem to be for professional readers, but other individuals who would like to discover more about Matses or new world monkeys would enjoy reading this book. Indeed, this book is a great source for primatologists.