

FIRST EVIDENCE OF THE GIANT ANTEATER
(*MYRMECOPHAGA TRIDACTYLA*)
IN HONDURAS

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The giant anteater (*Myrmecophaga tridactyla*) has a historical distribution from southern Belize through Central and South America to Bolivia, northern Argentina, and Uruguay (Fig. 1; Hall, 1981; Wetzel, 1982, 1985; Gardner, 1993; Emmons, 1997; Reid, 1997; Nowak, 1999). Although giant anteaters were more widely distributed across the Americas in the Pleistocene (Shaw and McDonald, 1987), their range contracted, presumably because of climatic and habitat changes associated with the retreat of the glaciers. The current distribution in Central America is based on a few specimens collected in the early 1900s or earlier from Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Panama (Lyon, 1906; Field Museum; United States National Museum), but the giant anteater was never recorded in Honduras (Goodwin, 1942; Reid, 1997). The northernmost report from southern Belize near Punta Gorda was based on an undocumented personal communication (Alston, 1879–1882). Modern records from Central America are rare, and giant anteaters are thought to be extirpated through much of their Central American range (Handley, 1950; Timm et al., 1989; Emmons, 1997; Reid, 1997; Nowak, 1999; Timm and LaVal, 1999). Only 2 relatively new sightings, 1978–1979, were reported by Timm et al. (1989) in the lowland tropical rainforest of Costa Rica, and Reid (1997) reported an unspecified sighting in northwestern Panama (Fig. 1). *Myrmecophaga tridactyla* is one of the least known mammals in Central America and one of the most endangered.

The first recorded giant anteater from Honduras is an adult of unknown sex captured in the lowland tropical rainforest of La Reserva de la Biósfera del Río Plátano (RBRP) in September 1996 by a Miskito Indian (Fig. 2). RBRP is located on the Mosquito coast of northeastern Honduras (Fig. 1), and protects

the third largest contiguous lowland tropical rainforest remaining in Central America. RBRP was internationally recognized in 1980 under UNESCO's (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) Man and the Biosphere Programme and placed on the World Heritage List in 1982. RBRP consists mainly of lowland tropical rainforest, but also includes seasonally flooded pine savanna, mangrove, and mountainous regions. The fauna of the region includes some of the most endangered vertebrates in Central America: jaguar (*Panthera onca*), Baird's tapir (*Tapirus bairdii*), harpy eagle (*Harpyia harpyja*), and scarlet and great green macaws (*Ara macao* and *A. ambigua*), among others. Other Xenarthra I observed in the RBRP during 1995 to 1996 were several silky anteaters (*Cyclopes didactylus*) including a mother with her half-grown offspring in February 1996, northern tamanduas (*Tamandua mexicana*) and numerous nine-banded armadillos (*Dasybus novemcinctus*; pers. obser.). The three-toed sloth (*Bradypus variegatus*) has been reported to occur in RBRP (McCarthy et al., 1999).

The giant anteater was captured within 10 km of Las Marías (15°40'N, 84°50'W), Departamento Gracias a Dios, in the heart of the reserve in lowland tropical wet forest between sea level and 50 m in elevation (Fig. 1). Las Marías is a small, isolated village of 100 to 200 Pech and Miskito Indians who survive on subsistence agriculture, hunting, fishing, and ecotourism (McCain, 1997). This particular animal was captured with the intention of keeping it alive for sale in Asia. In previous contact in the village, buyers paid hunters to trap giant anteaters, although the hunters were unsuccessful in locating anteaters on that occasion. The animal caught in September 1996 was set free because of the difficulty in locating enough food to sustain it. Traditional threats

