SCAVENGING OF A STRIPED SKUNK (MEPHITIS MEPHITIS) BY A RINGTAIL (BASSARISCUS ASTUTUS) IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

MAXIMILIAN L. ALLEN

Key words: Bassariscus astutus, California, Mephitis mephitis, Ringtail, scavenging, Striped Skunk

Ringtails (Bassariscus astutus) are omnivorous and are known to prey upon mammals and birds (Poglayen-Neuwall and Toweill 1988). There is limited information available, however, on their scavenging behavior, with evidence limited to scavenging on bats (Winkler and Adams 1972). Ringtail prey items commonly include arthropods and mammals, with the most common mammals being squirrels, rabbits, and rodents.
Skunks are occasionally taken by a number of predators (Wade-Smith and Verts 1982), including Great Horned Owls (Bubo virginianus), Bobcats (Lynx rufus), and Mountain Lions (Puma concolor). However, it is not believed that they are commonly eaten because they are not palatable to many species (Wade-Smith and Verts 1982). There are no previous records of Ringtail eating or scavenging skunks. This observation is among the first of a Ringtail scavenging a skunk, further demonstrating the wide flexibility in diet choice and opportunistic foraging behavior of Ringtails. DeVault and others (2003) point to the importance of scavenging in increasing individual fitness of some species, as well as its role in ecosystem regulation. The occurrence and extent of scavenging by Ringtails remains not well known, but it is not surprising that they may be willing to scavenge relatively large prey items when opportunities allow.

Acknowledgments.—I thank the US Forest Service and the staff of Mendocino National Forest for their cooperation. Heiko Wittmer, Mark Elbroch, Thomas Jung and an anonymous reviewer provided comments on earlier drafts.

Literature Cited


School of Biological Sciences, Victoria University at Wellington, PO Box 600, Wellington 6140, New Zealand; maximilian.allen@vuw.ac.nz. Submitted 8 May 2012, accepted 30 August 2012. Corresponding Editor: Thomas Jung.