

THE HISTORY OF THE ST. KITTS VERVET MONKEY



In Sir Thomas Warner's records there is no mention of monkeys living on St.Kitts. After having spent a good part of his time settling the island, Sir Thomas Warner died in 1648. At that time it estimated that there were 12,000 Englishmen on the island, a seemingly large number, perhaps explained by the fact that English criminals were sent to island as forced labour. Burdon estimates that an equal number of slaves then existed on St.Kitts. This estimate has possible historical significance, for if accurate, it suggests an exceedingly active Africa- West Indies slave trade would increase the chances for the introduction of the Vervet monkeys.

It is not known if slaves were brought directly from Africa to St.Kitts or first to other islands and subsequently dispersed. No doubt both routes were used. This detail may be important, for if monkeys followed slaves and plantation owners from island to island, one would reason that a hearty monkey arrived in St.Kitts, one which had been able to withstand the rigors of original capture, a long Atlantic trip, adaptation to a new environment, recapture, a short trip to St Kitts, and again adaptation to a new environment.

While the date of the arrival of the vervet in the areas remains unknown, there can be no doubt that it was in the West Indies by the late 1600's. In 1682, it was officially declared a vermin in Barbados and a bounty was offered for each monkey killed. To be declared a vermin; presumably the monkey was at large and rapidly multiplying for at least 30 prior years. Only then could it have established a population sufficiently large to irritate local plantation owners. Thus, sometime around 1650 can be taken as the last possible date for its arrival in the New World. Unfortunately it is not known if after becoming a vermin importation was discontinued. One would assume that it was. By this reasoning, it also seems likely that prior to 1682 the monkey was in St.Kitts, because it would seem unlikely that the English would knowingly import a vermin.

In 1700, Father Labat a French priest visited St.Kitts, and he was the first person to report the existence of monkeys on the island. According to Labat, the monkeys were already '*wild*' and

well established at the time of his visit. Labat also reports that they escaped from the homes of French settlers during one of the local wars between the English and the French, which suggest they had been pets and that the French were primarily responsible for their presence. The most vicious battle of this period took place in 1666 and this appears to be the most likely date for such an escape. Moreover, 1666 would fit well with what Labat saw in 1700: *'wild troupes' roaming the island and actively crop raiding, so much so that the crop guards were necessary.*" Until 1666 the French had occupied the two ends of the island the middle half being under English control. Provided that the monkeys were limited to the area of French occupation, two separate populations may have initially existed, one at each end of St. Kitts.

That the St.Kitts Vervet was brought from West Africa seems highly likely for several reasons. One is that the Caribbean slave trade was essentially limited to West African coast during the mid-17th century. Another reason is found in the recent studies in the geographical distribution of this animal.

Assuredly many monkeys did not survive the trans-Atlantic trip and the rigors of a new life in the Caribbean. That some survived, however, is not surprising, for C.aethiops may well be the most adaptable of the African monkeys: it is located in nearly all of the non-arid areas of Africa it is known to live in a wide variety of habitats, although typically it is found in strips of trees and scrub growing along the banks of the streams near savannah; it has been described as being in a 'traditional status' between forest and savannah adaptation. Its 'traditional status', plus its ability to live in a variety of biotic niches makes it a likely animal to survive in new habitat, as indeed it does today on three West Indian islands Barbados, Nevis and St.Kitts.



Although we lack all the desired details, it seems clear that by 1700 monkeys were roaming the island in 'troops', raiding crops avoiding hunters and outwitting guards. The next known mention of monkeys is found in the writings of an English churchman named Smith, who visited St.Kitts in 1719 and describes *'swarms'* of monkeys involved in such activities as night time potato stealing. One suspects that such stories are begun by one's untrustworthy neighbors, but their existence speaks to the fact of monkey's presence. The next is given by Lady Andrews also English, who visited St.Kitts in 1774. She particularly mentions the *'pest'* like qualities and crop stealing activities of the monkey. One gathers from colourful account that by 1774 a responsible mythology surrounded these animals.

“Their frolics are mischievous, their thefts dexterous. They are subtle enemies and false friends. When pursued, they fly to the mountain and laugh at their pursuers, as they are little ashamed of a defeat as a French admiral or general. In short, they are the torment of planters; they destroy whole cane pieces in a few hours and come in troops from the mountain, whose trees afford them shelter. No methods to get the better of them has yet been found out.”

(This article is believed to have been authored written by Professor Frank Ervin or a member of his team at the Behavioral Science Foundation located at Estridge Estate on St. Kitts in response to a request from the St. Christopher Heritage Society.)

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