

the kimkajou

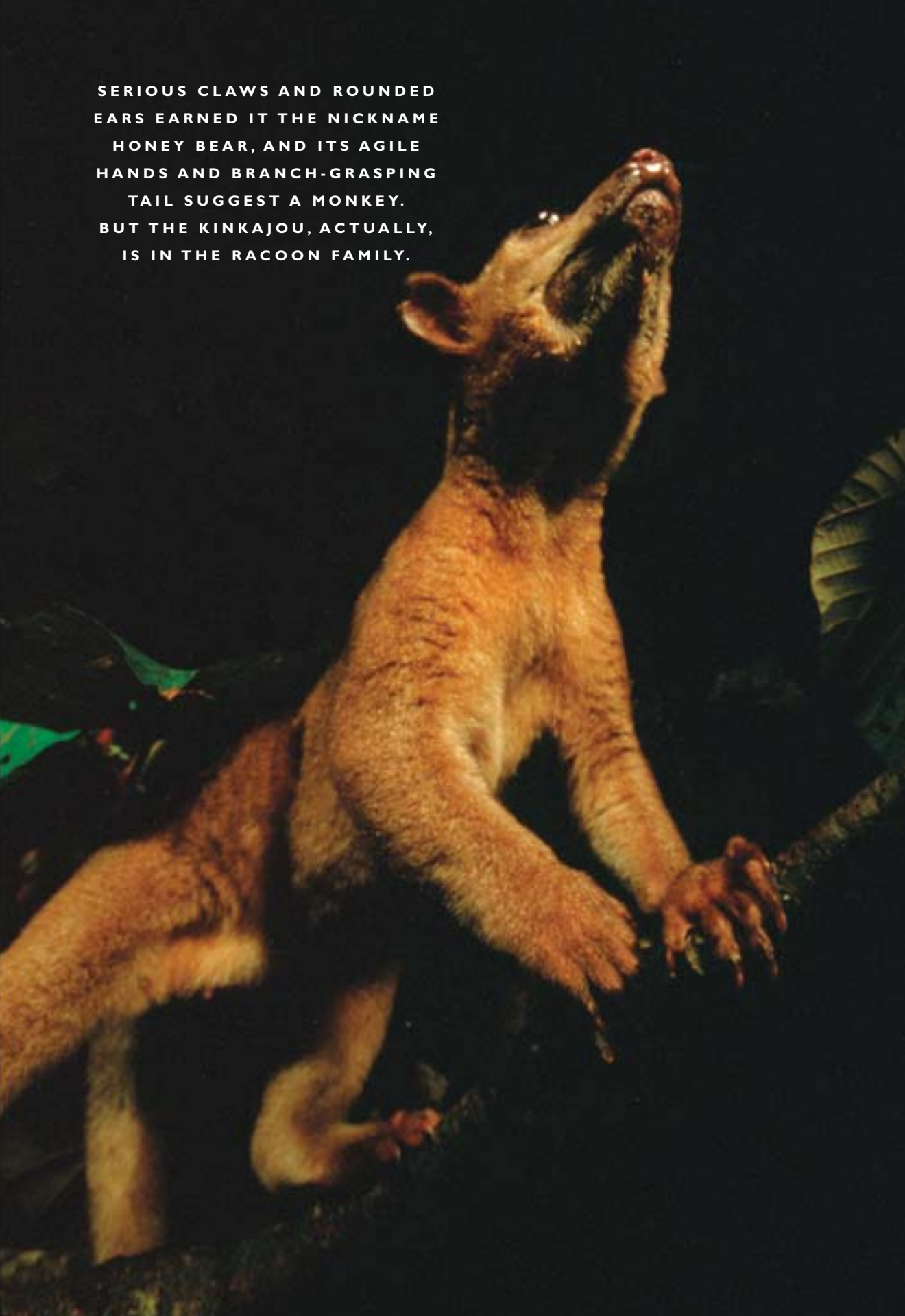
BY HOLLY MENINO
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATTIAS KLUM

IT ROAMS ONLY AT NIGHT, HIGH
IN THE RAIN FOREST CANOPY.
HOW IT GOES ABOUT ITS LIFE IN
THE TREETOPS HAS NEVER BEEN
SEEN LIKE THIS BEFORE.

flower-
powered
carnivore



SERIOUS CLAWS AND ROUNDED EARS EARNED IT THE NICKNAME HONEY BEAR, AND ITS AGILE HANDS AND BRANCH-GRASPING TAIL SUGGEST A MONKEY. BUT THE KINKAJOU, ACTUALLY, IS IN THE RACCOON FAMILY.



| MEET THE “KINKS” |

“At night you hear them call,” says photographer Mattias Klum. “It’s a short, barking *wee-wee-wee* that seems to say ‘This is my tree, stay out of it.’” But after an initial suspicion, kinkajous had no problem sharing their trees with a human willing to camp on their own level, a hundred feet above the ground in Panama’s rain forest canopy. Klum and his assistant spent night after humid night perched on branches of flowering balsa trees, wearing camouflage clothing and scanning the forest with night-vision goggles. “At first we stayed at least ten feet from the blossoms where they came to feed,” says Klum. “Once they accepted us, we moved closer and closer. There was a real connection.”

Klum was working in the research territory of zoologist Roland Kays of the New York State Museum. When Kays began his study in Panama ten years ago, little was known about the behavior of kinks (as he affectionately calls them) in their New World tropical habitat. About the size of a small housecat, they have few predators. “If you can find them,” says Kays, “They don’t run away.”



DRINKING DEEPLY, A FEMALE NAMED LOTUS
EXCAVATES THE NECTAR OF A Balsa BLOSSOM.
POLLEN COATS HER FACE AND MAY FERTILIZE
THE NEXT TREE ON HER ROUTE. "SOMETIMES
SHE'LL VISIT ALL THE FLOWERS IN A TREE,"
SAYS ROLAND KAYS, "THEN SIT DOWN AND
CHILL OUT, THEN GO VISIT THEM ALL AGAIN."





| SWEET BEAKS |

IN CERTAIN Balsa buds photographer Mattius Klum noticed holes he thought too small to come from kinkajou bites. Later he nabbed the culprits: orange-chinned parakeets sipping nectar. Kinks come along and lick up the leftovers (above), a side dish to the main, face-dusting meal (below).



Not rare, but hard to find. That's the dilemma Roland Kays faced when he began to study *Potos flavus* in Soberania National Park near the Panama Canal. "Everyone assumed they were solitary, because you usually find them alone," he explains. But no one knew what was actually going on up in the canopy at night. Kinkajous rarely come to ground, and they sleep all day in tree holes. So how to fit them with radio collars for tracking? Kays devised a system for hoisting traps into trees. Next problem: How to lure kinks into the traps? They're classified as carnivores because of their skull structure and teeth, so Kays tried chicken as bait. No takers. He'd heard reports of pet kinkajous raiding owners' liquor cabinets, so he tried fruity peach schnapps. The kinks abstained. Then he considered the novelty of bananas, which don't grow in this forest. The kinks bit.

Kays's research, partly funded by the National Geographic Society, shows that kinkajous here live almost entirely on fruit, mainly figs. They lap supplemental balsa-flower nectar with a long tongue. "Ecologically, they aren't carnivores," he says. Using DNA and radiotracking—and following the kinks for neck-craning hours with flashlight and binoculars—Kays discovered an unusual social structure. A female, two males, a subadult, and a juvenile typically make up a family, sleeping together but usually foraging separately. They groom one another. Unlike any other carnivore, and few mammals, it's the female that leaves home when sexually mature, at about two and a half years. The turf passes from

father to sons, and males develop stronger bonds than females. "Once I saw a father and young male playing in a fig tree," says Kays. "They were hanging by their tails and boxing each other in the head."

WEBSITE EXCLUSIVE

Find field notes from author Holly Menino and photographer Mattias Klum—plus more kinkajou photos—at nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0310.



"I TRACK BY NIGHT AND TRAP BY DAY," SAYS ROLAND KAYS, BAITING A CAGE WITH BANANAS A HUNDRED FEET UP IN A FIG TREE. LOWERED BY ROPE TO THE GROUND, TRAPPED KINKS ARE ANESTHETIZED AND EXAMINED, THEN RELEASED ONLY WHEN FULLY CONSCIOUS.



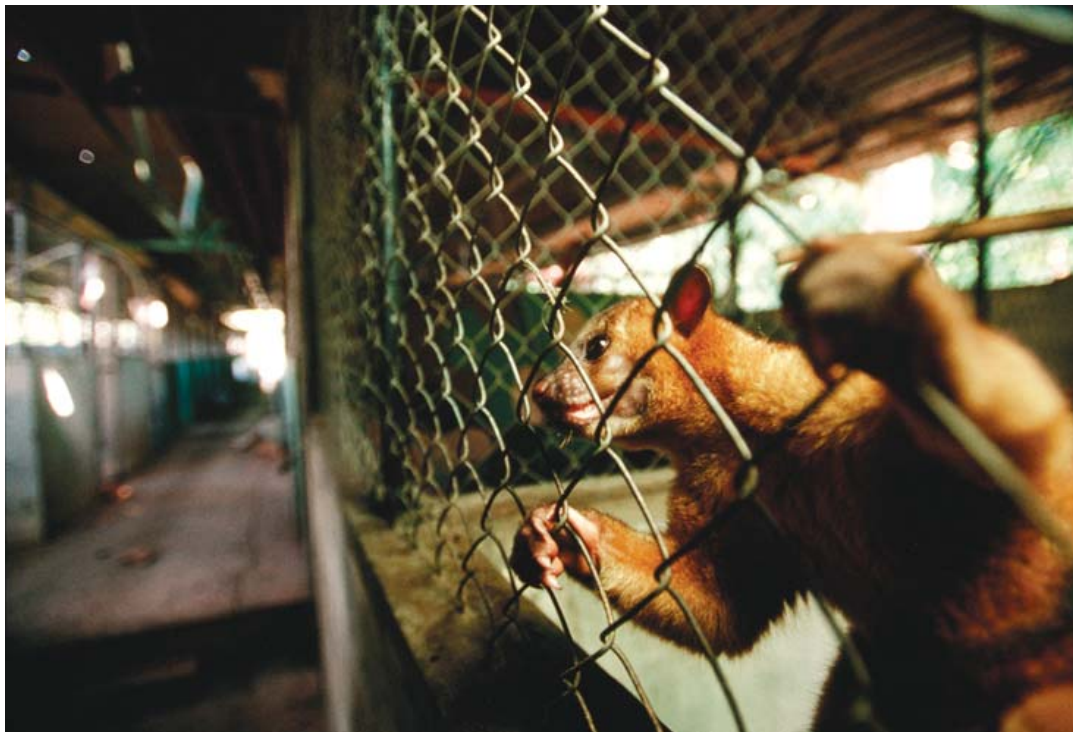


A FACE ANY MOTHER COULD
LOVE NUZZLES FOR ATTENTION.
"I OFTEN SEE MOM GET KIND OF
FED UP," SAYS KAYS. KINKS
USUALLY BEAR ONE PUP EVERY
YEAR OR TWO, NURSING IT FOR
AS LONG AS TO FOUR MONTHS.



| GROUNDED |

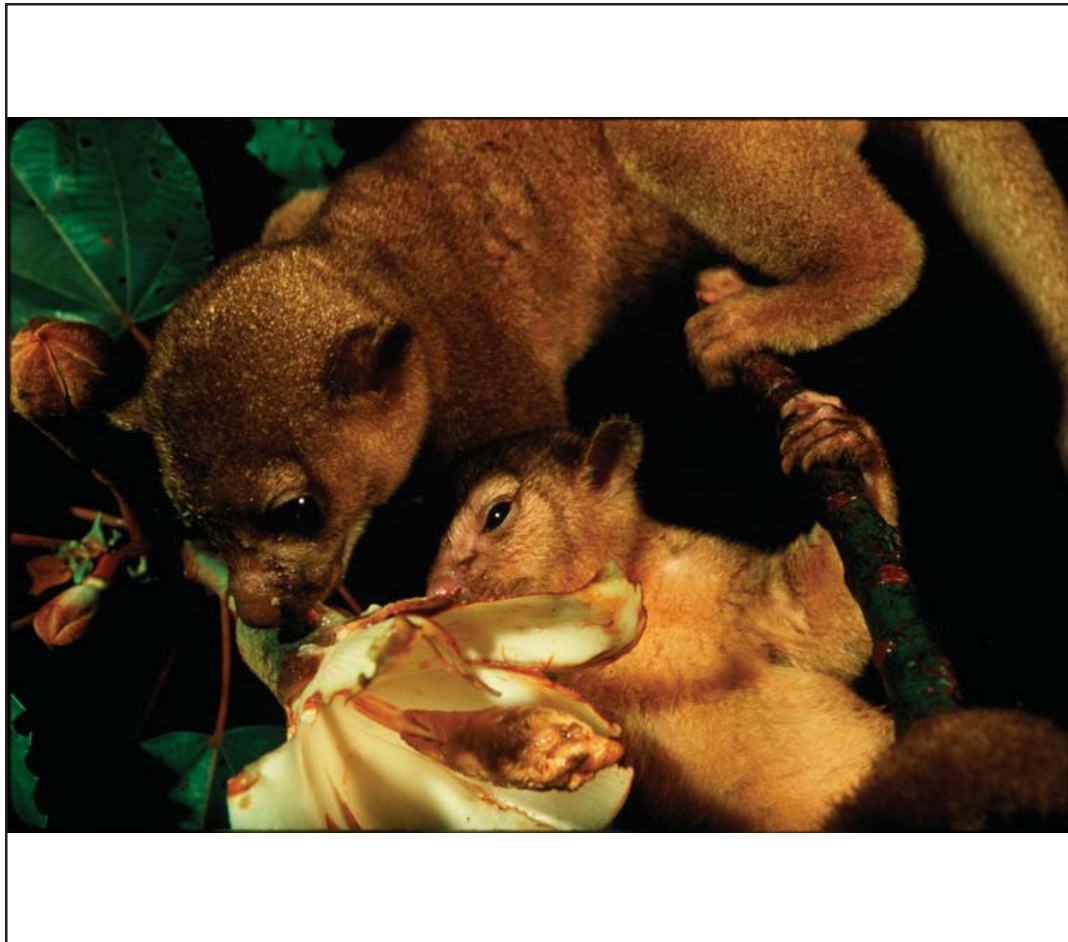
A SMOOCH FROM MARRON TICKLES A VISITOR AT PANAMA CITY'S PARQUE NATURAL METROPOLITANO. GIVEN UP BY A PET OWNER WHO HAD UNDERESTIMATED A KINKAJOU'S NEEDS, MARRON RELISHES THE TOUCH OF CHILDREN AND IS KEPT OUTSIDE HIS PARK CAGE (BELOW) AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE. AS FOR KINKS AS PETS, KAYS CAUTIONS: "UP ALL NIGHT, CAN'T BE HOUSEBROKEN."



“KINKAJOUS HAVE A NETWORK OF ROADS INVISIBLE TO US BUT VERY CLEAR TO THEM,” SAYS KLUM. “WE CATCH GLIMPSES,” SAYS KAYS, “BUT THERE ARE STILL PLENTY OF QUESTIONS.”



WEB: Picture Information
STORY NAME: KINKAJOUS
MONTH/YEAR: OCT 2003



ILLUSTRATION'S INFO:

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LEGEND:

Floral Feast
Branching out in the family tree, a kinkajou called Lotus brings her three-month-old cub along for a meal of bal-sa flower nectar high in the canopy of a Panama rain forest. Photographer Mattias Klum notes that the kinkajous actually chewed flower parts too, including petals. He claims that unlike other animals he has photographed—like orangutans who will deny food to their young until mom has eaten heartily—kinkajous are very inclusive and nurturing.

PHOTO FACTS

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Time of Day:
Lighting Techniques:
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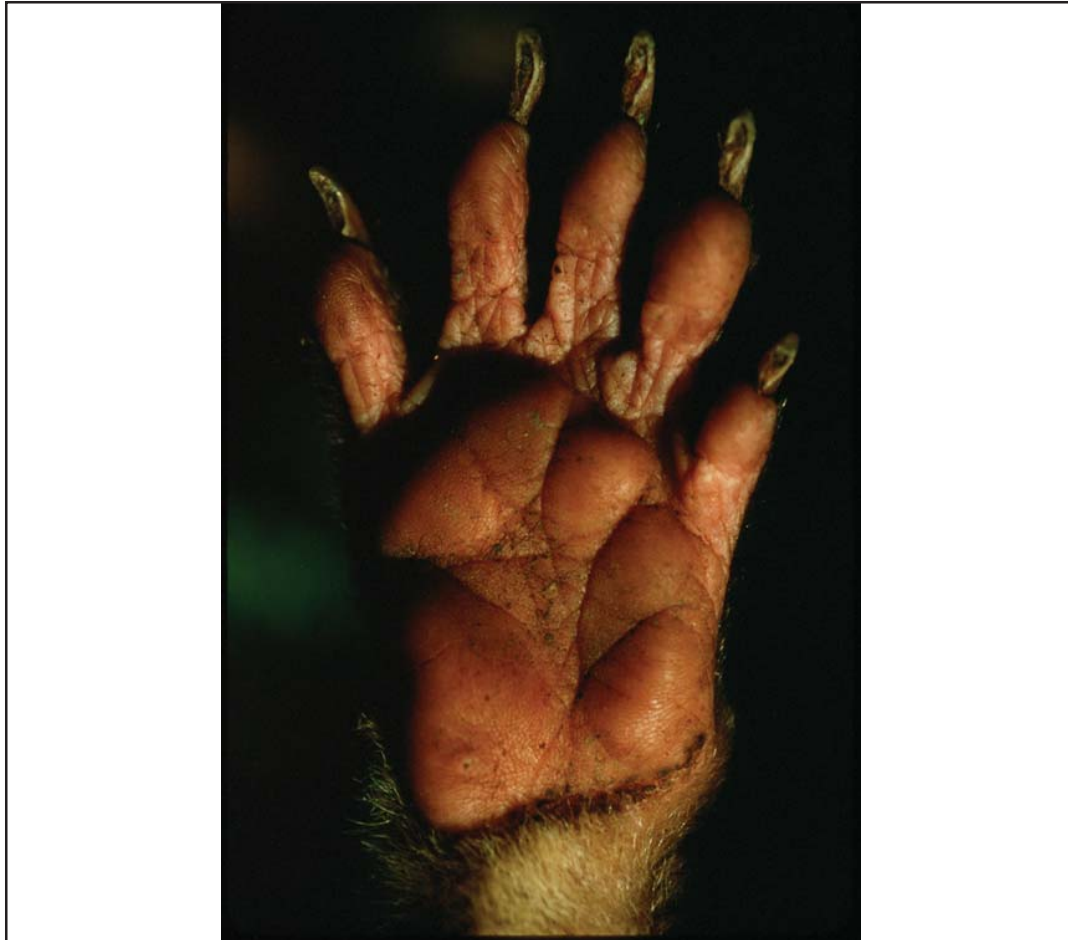
LEGEND:

In Good Hands
Biologist Roland Kays of the New York State Museum gently removes Lotus from a trap in Panama's rain forest after giving her a sedative, his fingers sinking into her thick coat. "It's closer to velvet than to wool," he says. Kays suspects that the animal's dense fur is key to repelling water—it contains an oily substance called squalene that is found in the pelts of beavers and otters. While the kinkajou is tranquilized, Kays affixes a radio collar,

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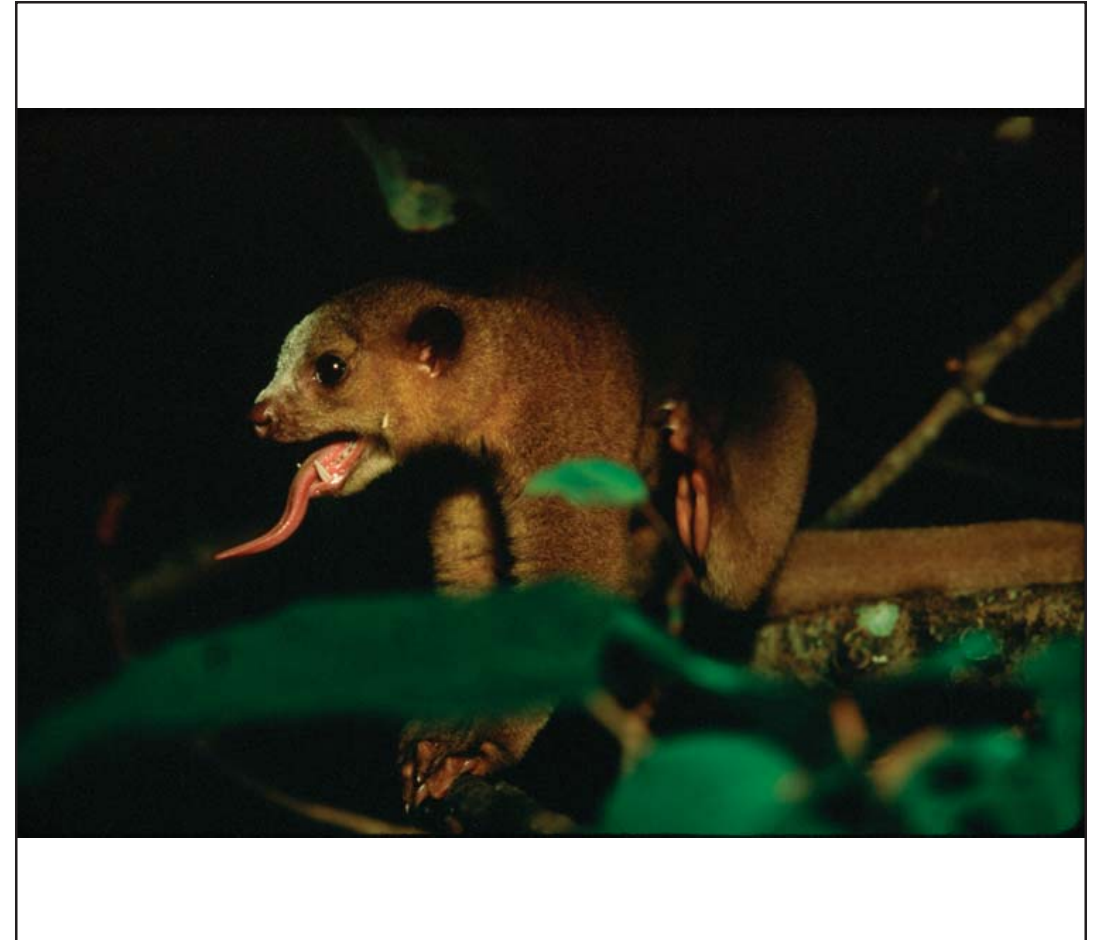
LEGEND:

Jungle Palm
It's hauntingly human, yet a kinkajou's paw lacks an opposable thumb. This hardly inhibits performance. "They can grab a fig just like you can grab an apple," says Roland Kays. "They often use just one hand when they eat." While claws help them climb trees, the soft pads give good traction for moving horizontally along branches. And, Kays notes, "The folding patterns in their hands give them life lines, just like humans."

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LEGEND:

Eating Utensil
A serpentine tongue emerges from a yawning kinkajou while a hind paw scratches, suggesting the animal may have just awakened for a night of feeding. The long tongue helps kinkajous retrieve nectar from deep within balsa flowers. First described by the German biologist Johann Schreber in 1774, and thought to belong to the lemur family due to their tree-loving ways, kinkajous are now known to be cousins to raccoons.

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Caption:

LEGEND:

Wide-eyed Curiosity
Its face moist with flower nectar, a kinkajou cub prowls to within feet of the photographer's lens. "It's such a personal little creature," says Klum. "The eyes seem to be asking, 'What is this? Is it dangerous?' This shot is like a gift from the forest. A blessing, you know? The animal comes to you, not the other way around."

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Special Equipment/ Comments: