

# Endangered tapir captured on camera on Pulau Ubin

Ang Qing

A globally endangered Malayan tapir first spotted on Pulau Ubin in May could still be roaming the forested rubber plantations and fruit orchards of the island.

The animal was first detected on May 27 by camera traps at about 8.30pm in the eastern part of Ubin, according to a Nature in Singapore journal record published on Nov 29.

This marks Singapore's first photographic evidence in 2024 of a Malayan tapir, which is considered non-native for the island-state.

The nocturnal creature was caught by camera traps again in the night and wee hours of the morning on several occasions between July and August, which showed it feeding on fallen fruit and tree branches in western Pulau Ubin.

Researchers concluded in the Nov 29 record that it was the same adult female due to a curved scar on the creature's backside, the equivalent of a mark on a human's left buttock.

The tapir was filmed by chance in a study being conducted by George Mason University in the US, the National University of Singapore (NUS) and National Parks Board (NParks).

The study was to monitor the distribution and population of Pulau Ubin's greater mousedeer, a species once thought of as extinct here until 2009 when a breeding population was confirmed.

Researcher Marcus Chua told *The Straits Times*: "I was more than excited to see the Malayan tapir appear on my screen when checking the images after we retrieved them from the camera trap.

"To my surprise, she appeared in more than one site across the island."

By the time the study ended on Sept 23, five of 41 camera trap stations across the island had captured the monochromatic mammal.

The tapir was last recorded on Aug 12 moving through forest after midnight in the west of Pulau Ubin.

Said Mr Chua, who is also mammal curator at NUS' Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum: "It seems that Pulau Ubin is part of her home range (the area within which an animal normally lives) at least for this year, so she could still be there or may visit the island from time to time."

NParks group director of conservation Lim Liang Jim said the Pulau Ubin sightings, while notable, do not in themselves indicate the presence of a resident popula-

tion of the Malayan tapir in Singapore.

He added: "We will continue to monitor reporting of its sightings and note incidental records through camera traps and signs such as tracks or sightings."

Malayan tapirs, the largest of four tapir species, are known to grow up to 2.5m long and weigh up to 500kg.

The only kind of tapir found outside the Americas, they naturally live in the lowland forests of Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand.

However, their numbers have dwindled, largely due to the destruction of their forest homes for agriculture, mining and development projects. Only about 2,500 adult Malayan tapirs are estimated to be left in the wild.

In Singapore, the first documented record of the species was a carcass in a quarry on Pulau Ubin nearly 40 years ago in 1986.

The next sighting occurred some 30 years later in 2016, when a tapir was photographed swimming in the sea off Changi and subsequently on reclaimed land at Changi North.

In 2023, reported sightings of a tapir on Pulau Tekong, Pulau Ubin and Punggol unleashed a flurry of excitement online, with one user describing it looking like a wild boar wearing diapers. It is unclear if that tapir was the same one caught on camera in 2024.

The tapirs are likely to have wandered from forested sites in Johor, with all reported sightings taking place in the north-eastern part of Singapore's main island and Pulau Ubin, the researchers wrote in the Nov 29 record.

The presence of both the Malayan tapir and forest-dependent animals like the greater mousedeer spell a positive sign that wildlife can live in sites once extensively disturbed by humans.

Since 2014, the government has been working with the community to preserve Pulau Ubin's natural environment and rich biodiversity, including actively rehabilitating degraded habitats.

Said Mr Chua: "What seems certain is that Pulau Ubin's forests, which were formerly cleared for plantations and quarries, have regenerated to a stage where they can support a large mammal like the Malayan tapir.

"It is also home to nationally threatened native species like the greater mousedeer and straw-headed bulbul. It is yet another good sign that wildlife conservation efforts on the island are bearing fruit."

There could be more tapir sightings in future, according to the record's authors.

Research shows that adult Malayan tapirs can roam within an area that ranges from about 0.6 sq km to 12.7 sq km in Peninsular Malaysia.

This means that forested habitats on the offshore islands of Pulau Ubin and Pulau Tekong could support the residence of individual tapirs here.

Should one encounter a tapir, one should:

- Remain calm and quiet and not make any sudden movements.
- Not try to approach or feed the animal.
- Keep a safe distance and do not corner or provoke the animal, such as by using flash photography while taking pictures of it.
- Call the 24-hour Animal Response Centre on 1800-476-1600 to report any sightings of the tapir.

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## CONSERVATION EFFORTS

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**RESEARCHER MARCUS CHUA**, who is also mammal curator at NUS' Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum, on how wildlife conservation efforts on the island are bearing fruit.