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Scientific Article

Collared peccary [*Dicotyles tajacu* (Linnaeus, 1758)] record in the Caatinga: non-detection, recolonization, or release?

Registro de cateto [*Dicotyles tajacu* (Linnaeus, 1758)] na Caatinga: ausência de detecção, recolonização ou soltura?

Paulo H. D. Marinho[1]* , Lucas V. Toretto[2] , Jackson Gomes[3] , Rani P. de Sousa[4] , Cecilia Calabuig[5]

[1]Postgraduate Program in Development and Environment, Universidade Federal Rural do Semi-Árido, Mossoró, RN, Brazil. [2]Independent citizen scientist, Currais Novos, RN, Brazil. [3]Postgraduate Program in Ecology and Conservation, Universidade Federal Rural do Semi-Árido, Mossoró, RN, Brazil. [4]Postgraduate Program in Urban and Regional Studies, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte, Natal, RN, Brazil. [5]Department of Biosciences, Universidade Federal Rural do Semi-Árido, Mossoró, RN, Brazil.

ABSTRACT – Despite its recognized ecological importance, basic information on the natural history and behavior of the collared peccary (*Dicotyles tajacu*) remains scarce in many ecoregions, including the Brazilian seasonally dry tropical forest (Caatinga), where the species can be considered locally extinct across much of its historical range. This study reports the presence of *D. tajacu* in a semiarid area of the Northeast region of Brazil where it was considered locally extinct. It discusses the natural history and probable origin of a group of at least eight individuals recorded foraging in an intermittent river valley through a citizen science observation. The nearest confirmed records are approximately 130 km away, suggesting three hypotheses for the origin of this potentially new population: detection failure, natural recolonization, or human-mediated release. The cautious and evasive behavior of *D. tajacu*, partly observed here, is well known and may contribute to its persistence in disturbed environments. The recorded group size falls within the range described in the literature and exceeds group sizes observed in other biomes. This record expands the known distribution area of *D. tajacu* in the Brazilian semiarid region and provides novel information on its natural history and behavior in the Caatinga dry forest. Further research and effective conservation measures, such as establishing protected areas to ensure the persistence of the species' populations, are needed.

Keywords: Group size. Large mammals. Seasonally dry tropical forest. Semiarid. Tayassuidae.

RESUMO – Apesar de sua reconhecida importância ecológica, informações básicas sobre a história natural e o comportamento do cateto (*Dicotyles tajacu*) permanecem escassas em muitas ecorregiões, incluindo a floresta tropical sazonalmente seca brasileira (Caatinga), onde a espécie pode ser considerada localmente extinta em grande parte de sua área de ocorrência histórica. Este estudo relata a presença de *D. tajacu* em uma área semiárida da região Nordeste do Brasil onde a espécie era considerada localmente extinta. São discutidos aspectos da história natural e da provável origem de um grupo de pelo menos oito indivíduos registrados forrageando no vale de um rio intermitente por meio de uma observação de ciência cidadã. Os registros confirmados mais próximos estão a aproximadamente 130 km de distância, sugerindo três hipóteses para a origem dessa possível nova população: falha na detecção, recolonização natural ou soltura mediada por humanos. O comportamento cauteloso e evasivo de *D. tajacu*, parcialmente observado neste registro, é bem conhecido e pode contribuir para sua persistência em ambientes perturbados. O tamanho do grupo registrado encontra-se dentro da variação descrita na literatura e supera os tamanhos de grupos observados em outros biomas. Este registro amplia a área de distribuição conhecida de *D. tajacu* no semiárido brasileiro e fornece informações inéditas sobre sua história natural e seu comportamento na floresta seca da Caatinga. São necessárias novas pesquisas e medidas efetivas de conservação, como a criação de áreas protegidas para garantir a persistência das populações da espécie.

Palavras-chave: Mamíferos de grande porte. Semiárido. Floresta tropical sazonalmente seca. Tamanho de grupo. Tayassuidae.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the publication of this manuscript.

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***Corresponding author**:
<paulo.marinho@temporarios.ufersa.edu.br>

INTRODUCTION

Despite the recognized ecological importance of Tayassuidae species in maintaining and regenerating tropical ecosystems (KEUROGHLIAN; EATON, 2008; TABER et al., 2011), basic information on their natural history and behavior remains scarce in many ecoregions. The collared peccary *Dicotyles tajacu* (Linnaeus, 1758) is a large mammal (15–28 kg) with flexible activity patterns, often exhibiting diurnal and crepuscular habits, and forms social groups of up to 30 individuals (TABER et al., 2011; DESBIEZ et al., 2012). It feeds mainly on plant parts, including roots, bulbs, tubers, fruits, and seeds (TABER et al., 2011), and acts as an important seed disperser and predator (DESBIEZ et al., 2012). The species occurs from the southern United States to northern Argentina and parts of southern Brazil (GONGORA et al., 2011; DESBIEZ et al., 2012). It is considered tolerant of environmental changes and inhabits diverse ecosystems (TABER et al., 2011; DESBIEZ et al., 2012); therefore, its absence suggests strong anthropogenic pressure (KEUROGHLIAN et al., 2023).

Dicotyles tajacu is classified as Least Concern (LC) globally and in Brazil (GONGORA et al., 2011; KEUROGHLIAN et al., 2023); however, overhunting and habitat loss have led to population declines and local extinctions (GONGORA

et al., 2011). Its distribution is also fragmented in ecosystems subject to intense anthropogenic disturbance, such as the Caatinga, the seasonally dry tropical forest in the Northeast region of Brazil (FEIJÓ; LANGGUTH, 2013; MARINHO et al., 2018; MARINHO; SILVA; LISBOA, 2019). The Caatinga is a semiarid ecosystem severely defaunated by overhunting and affected by natural habitat loss, overgrazing, and climate change (ANTONGIOVANNI et al., 2020; CANASSA et al., 2025). Little is known about the distribution, natural history, and behavior of large herbivorous mammals such as *D. tajacu* in this ecosystem (CARMIGNOTTO; ASTÚA, 2017). Meanwhile, commercial and scientific interest in *D. tajacu* has generated knowledge about its physiology, behavior, and morphology, particularly from *ex situ* populations maintained in the Brazilian semiarid region (BORGES et al., 2023).

In Rio Grande do Norte state, in the far Northeast of Brazil, the presence of *D. tajacu* was confirmed only in the last decade, based on an animal killed by hunters in the eastern part of the state (MARINHO; SILVA; LISBOA, 2019) and an apparently small, isolated population in Furna Feia National Park (FALCÃO; MARINHO; VENTICINQUE, 2025). Given the limited knowledge of the species' distribution and conservation in the region, this is the first record in a semiarid region characterized by advanced desertification, where it was considered locally extinct. The record is based on a passive citizen science observation of a group of collared peccaries. This report also discusses group size, escape behavior, and the possible origins of this potentially new population, which requires conservation efforts.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The record was made in the Picuí River valley, which forms a canyon known as Apertados that cuts through the Umburanas mountain range, in the municipality of Currais Novos, in the south-central part of Rio Grande do Norte state, also known as the Seridó region (6°19′53.21″S, 36°29′16.01″ W; Figure 1). The area is of considerable ecological, cultural, and tourism importance and lies on private property designated as a geosite within the Seridó UNESCO Global Geopark, which covers six municipalities and 2,802 km^2 of the Seridó region. The climate is tropical semiarid, with low mean annual rainfall (600 mm) and mean annual temperatures of 27.5 °C (DANTAS et al., 2024). The vegetation is typical of the Caatinga dry forest, with abundant shrubs, cacti, and bromeliads, mainly on rocky outcrops, whereas trees occur along the banks of the intermittent river, benefiting from soil moisture (Figure 2) (DANTAS et al., 2024). Although Cânion dos Apertados contains relatively well-preserved vegetation remnants, the surrounding area is considerably degraded by cattle farming, agriculture, and mining, and many areas in the Seridó region are undergoing desertification (PEREIRA NETO; OLIVEIRA; SILVA, 2024). Furthermore, the area has been considered for wind energy development (MARON AMBIENTAL, 2022).

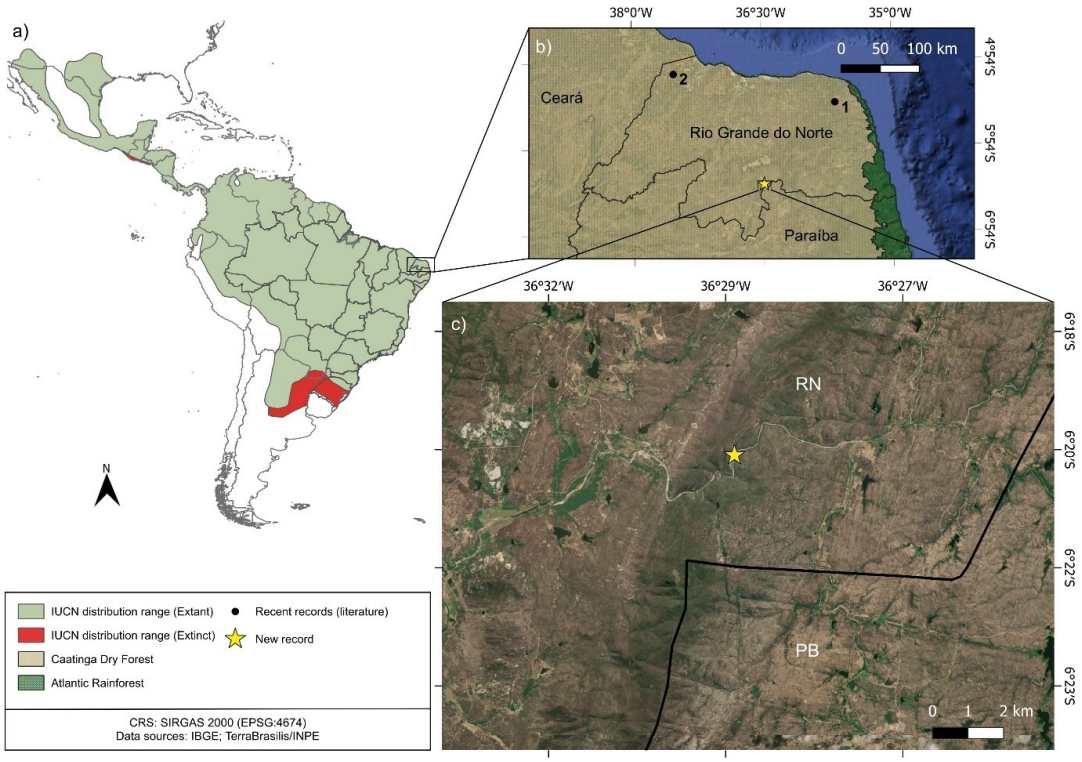


Figure 1. Distribution area of the collared peccary (*Dicotyles tajacu*) according to the IUCN (GONGORA et al., 2011) (a); recent records from the literature (less than 10 years old) closest to the new record of *D. tajacu* in the Caatinga of Rio Grande do Norte (RN) state, Northeast region of Brazil: a private area in the Caatinga–Atlantic Forest transition zone (1; MARINHO; SILVA; LISBOA, 2019) and Furna Feia National Park (2; FALCÃO; MARINHO; VENTICINQUE, 2025) (b); and the recording location at Cânion dos Apertados, in the municipality of Currais Novos, near the border with Paraíba state (PB) (c).



Figure 2. Landscape of Cânion dos Apertados, State of Rio Grande do Norte, Northeast region of Brazil, where a group of collared peccaries (*Dicotyles tajacu*) was recorded, showing the vegetation during the rainy season.

The record was obtained opportunistically at around 9:00 h on December 6, 2025, when a group of *D. tajacu* was spotted foraging in the dry riverbed, at a site with sandy soil and herbaceous vegetation (Figure 3; TORETTO, 2026). The observer (LT) subsequently posted the video on his personal social media account. The post attracted attention on local news pages on social media and subsequently came to the attention of the other authors, who analyzed the record. This is an example of passive citizen science, defined as the use of non-systematic observations posted on social media to improve knowledge of biodiversity (NASCIMENTO et al., 2024). The animals were identified by two authors (PHDM and CC) and other specialists consulted, based on diagnostic characteristics of *D. tajacu*, including generally dark brown fur speckled with yellow, darker coloration on the limbs and dorsal crest, and an incomplete whitish collar across the chest and shoulders, which is the species' main distinguishing feature (Figure 3) (TABER et al., 2011; FEIJÓ; LANGGUTH, 2013). A second site visit was conducted on February 4, 2026, to characterize the habitat; no animals were observed during this visit.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After watching the animals for a few minutes without them appearing to notice his presence, the observer approached, at which point they appeared to notice him (see TORETTO, 2026). While some individuals moved away, others continued foraging or watching the observer from approximately 10 m away (Figure 3a). After a few seconds, all individuals retreated with their dorsal fur bristling; one initiated flight by running and leaping, triggering the group to flee along the riverbed away from the observer (Figure 3b). Subsequently, two individuals turned toward the observer (Figure 3c), and one apparently displayed defensive behavior before running past him at a distance of approximately 4 m (Figure 3d). The entire interaction lasted about a minute and a half. Video analysis (Toretto, 2026) indicated that at least eight animals fled along the dry riverbed.

This record confirms the occurrence of *D. tajacu* in a region of the dry forest of the Northeast region of Brazil where this large frugivorous mammal was considered locally extinct (MARINHO et al., 2018; MARINHO; SILVA; LISBOA, 2019). The nearest confirmed records are approximately 130 km to the northeast and 180 km to the northwest, both in Rio Grande do Norte. They refer, respectively, to an animal killed by hunters in the Caatinga–Atlantic Forest ecotone in 2013, with footprints recorded in 2017 in the same area (MARINHO; SILVA; LISBOA, 2019), and a small population persisting in Furna Feia National Park (FALCÃO; MARINHO; VENTICINQUE, 2025). Closer records in Paraíba state are based on interviews and are considered historical, with nearly 25 years having elapsed since the last report of an animal killed by residents in the municipality of São José do Sabugi (FEIJÓ; LANGGUTH, 2013). Marinho, Silva and Lisboa (2019) provide an overview of sites with relatively recent and historical occurrences of *D. tajacu* in the Caatinga and emphasize the need to investigate the species' presence in areas with old records or gaps in

sampling. One of the few records of the species in the Caatinga published in recent years comes from Sergipe and, according to the authors, may reflect a release or a relict population (CARNELOSSI; SARTOR; RUIZ-ESPARZA, 2025). This reinforces the need to better understand the possible origins and dynamics of *D. tajacu* populations in the Brazilian semiarid region.



Figure 3. Collared peccaries (*Dicotyles tajacu*) recorded in Cânion dos Apertados, State of Rio Grande do Norte, Northeast region of Brazil. One individual looking at the observer while another forages in the dry riverbed (a); individuals fleeing (b); two individuals turning toward the observer (c); and one individual approaching to within approximately 4 m of the observer (d).

Thus, three scenarios, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive, may explain this finding: a) the species has always occurred in the region at low densities but has remained undetected; b) the recorded group recently recolonized the area from populations in other regions; or c) the group originated from possible releases of captive animals and became established in the area relatively recently.

Over the past 10 years, mammal surveys in the study area (MARON AMBIENTAL, 2022) and the surrounding region (MARINHO et al., 2018) have failed to detect this species. Likewise, although the region is densely populated, local residents were apparently unaware of the species' presence, suggesting that its occurrence may be recent or that it may have persisted at low densities and remained undetected. Given the cryptic and cautious behavior of *D. tajacu* and the limited long-term monitoring in the region, failure to detect a small resident population cannot be ruled out. This may reflect limitations in sampling effort or temporal variation in habitat use. Another plausible explanation is that ongoing landscape changes have altered regional distribution patterns. In particular, the rapid expansion of wind energy infrastructure, often established in relatively well-preserved areas that serve as important wildlife refuges (PEREIRA NETO; OLIVEIRA; SILVA, 2024), may contribute to animal displacement toward less disturbed environments, as suggested for other regions of the Caatinga (ESTEVES; CAMPOS, 2022). In this scenario, the Picuí River may have served as an ecological corridor, facilitating dispersal between habitats in Rio Grande do Norte and Paraíba, where historical reports suggest that the species was present approximately 50 km from the study area 25 years ago (FEIJÓ; LANGGUTH, 2013). If natural recolonization occurred, individuals from remnant populations in Paraíba would therefore be more likely to have dispersed through the better-preserved habitats along the mountain ranges and river valleys bordering the two states. Another possibility is that unknown populations exist between the study area and the known populations in Rio Grande do Norte, reinforcing the need for systematic surveys with substantial sampling effort in poorly studied or unsampled areas.

The recorded group may also have originated from captive or semi-captive animals released into the wild, as suggested for other parts of the species' range (TABER et al., 2011; PISSO-FLOREZ; SARRIA; RAMÍREZ-CHAVÉS, 2025). Historical information indicates that *D. tajacu* was kept in captivity on farms in the semiarid region of the state at least until the 1970s, as shown in a national television program featuring a large farm approximately 80 km from the study area (07:50 min:sec; GLOBOPLAY, 2026). Although *D. tajacu* may be kept in captivity for scientific and commercial purposes in Brazil with the appropriate environmental and sanitary permits (BORGES et al., 2023), no captive breeding for these or other purposes is known in the region, making this hypothesis difficult to confirm. Therefore, none of these hypotheses can be ruled out.

The reintroduction of large mammals is a particularly important management and conservation strategy in defaunated ecosystems such as the Brazilian Caatinga (CANASSA et al., 2025). However, it requires planning that addresses legal and technical factors before, during, and after reintroduction (HURTADO et al., 2020). Captive breeding for scientific purposes has the potential to contribute to the *ex situ* and *in* situ conservation of large mammals such as *D. tajacu* (BORGES et al., 2023). Similarly, keeping animals in captivity for commercial purposes must follow legal and sustainable practices that do not harm wild populations (BORGES et al., 2023).

The cautious and evasive behavior of *D. tajacu*, including a rapid escape response to perceived risk (NOGUEIRA et al., 2017), its flexible diet (KEUROGHLIAN; EATON, 2008; GONGORA et al., 2011), and its small social groups and home ranges (24 to 800 ha) (KEUROGHLIAN; EATON; LONGLAND, 2004; GONGORA et al., 2011) are commonly cited as factors explaining its survival in disturbed environments or sites subject to hunting pressure. In 132 observations of solitary animals or groups in the Peruvian rainforest, Kiltie and Terborgh (1983) reported that the animals always fled upon detecting the observer, but in almost half of the cases, they vocalized loudly or snapped their jaws before fleeing. In the record reported here, most animals appeared to adopt escape behavior after detecting the approaching observer. However, some remained alert or continued foraging for a time, and at least two turned toward the observer after the group began to flee, apparently adopting a defensive posture. To some extent, this appears to differ from the cautious and evasive behavior reported for the species in the literature (KILTIE; TERBORGH, 1983; NOGUEIRA et al., 2017).

Groups of *D. tajacu* rarely exceed 10 individuals (PERES, 1996) and can range from five to 25 individuals (KILTIE; TERBORGH, 1983), depending on hunting pressure and resource availability (PERES, 1996; BRICEÑO-MÉNDEZ et al., 2016). The group recorded in Cânion dos Apertados, comprising at least eight individuals, is of average size relative to groups reported in the literature and is larger than many previously studied groups, including those in ecosystems more productive than the Caatinga: five to eight individuals in the Amazon (PERES, 1996), eight to 13 in the Atlantic Forest (KEUROGHLIAN; EATON; LONGLAND, 2004), and five to 10 in the Pantanal wetland (DESBIEZ et al., 2009). The recorded group may be larger, since groups of this species generally divide into temporary foraging subgroups throughout the day (KEUROGHLIAN; EATON; LONGLAND, 2004). In the Argentine Chaco, an ecoregion with a climate and vegetation similar to those of the Brazilian semiarid region, reported group sizes range from five to 10 individuals (ALTRICHTER; BOAGLIO, 2004). The few studies of this species conducted in the Caatinga to date do not report group sizes, limiting comparisons and reinforcing the importance of this record.

Furthermore, this record underscores the need for conservation actions and additional studies of mammalian fauna in the Brazilian semiarid region to better understand species persistence in an extreme environment characterized by intense hunting pressure and advanced desertification. Such efforts are essential to support conservation policies and management actions that consider the potential for natural recolonization of areas where the species was previously absent or lacked recent records, as well as rewilding initiatives aimed at restoring ecological functions (CANASSA et al., 2025). If subsequent monitoring confirms the establishment or persistence of a resident *D. tajacu* population in the study area, ensuring its persistence and that of other species will require effective measures to combat hunting and habitat degradation, including monitoring programs, environmental education, and, crucially, the establishment of a legally

protected area. The state public prosecutor's office has already recommended this last measure, given the site's biological and geological significance, particularly to prevent the installation of wind energy projects that would threaten the ecosystems and their services. Although the region lies within a Global Geopark, this form of territorial governance does not guarantee legal protection of the landscape against threats such as the expansion of renewable energy infrastructure.

CONCLUSIONS

The record described here expands the known distribution area of *D. tajacu* in the Brazilian semiarid region and provides novel information on its natural history and behavior in the Caatinga dry forest, based on opportunistic observations by a non-specialist. It highlights the potential contribution of observations posted on social media to improving knowledge of biodiversity in understudied ecosystems. However, because this record is based on a single opportunistic observation, it is currently impossible to determine whether the observed individuals represent a previously undetected resident population, transient dispersers, or animals recently released by humans. Long-term monitoring using methods such as camera traps and interviews with local communities will be necessary to evaluate these alternative hypotheses and establish the population's status. Conservation strategies are also needed to promote suitable conditions for the persistence of *D. tajacu* in Cânion dos Apertados, including the creation of a protected area, environmental education, and measures to curb hunting and deforestation.

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