A Tamandua Tale from the Zoo

An orphaned tamandua got very lucky last month when a well-meaning family found it in a cattle pasture near Spanish Lookout and brought it to the Belize Zoo. Still attached was the umbilical cord, meaning giving the baby anteater was just a few days old, and had a high chance of being predated if it wasn’t found.

A feeding regime was immediately established following guidelines used by other zoos and rehab centers to successful rear baby tamanduas. Thanks to our dedicated Zookeepers, the little orphan is doing well, going from 270 grams to over 400 grams in a short period of time, and getting stronger every day!

Northern Tamanduas are one of 4 species of anteaters found in the world. Locally, they are known as the “antsbear,” and are identified by their tan bodies with black “waistcoats,” and long heads. Their long tongue is also well known, and was the basis of the old myth that tamanduas could reach up dogs’ nostrils and eat their brains. Such an unfair reputation for an animal which much prefers termites, and, of course, ants! They are only dangerous when cornered or attacked, at which point they use their sharp claws to defend themselves. Their stomachs can hold over a pound of insects easily, which they often seek out from nests high in the forest canopies at night, then sleep off a good meal during the day. Their grasping tail gives them
extra support on tree branches.

Due to habitat loss, tamanduas are often forced to leave their territories in search of new forest areas to survive. Many never make it, as they are constantly knocked down crossing our highways, or wander into communities and are confronted by dogs, and sometimes people.

After consultations with the anteater experts and the Belize Forest Department, it’s clear that the young, orphaned tamandua won’t be able to return to the wild and survive without its mother. TBZ plans to continue caring for it, and eventually provide an exhibit where our visitors can encounter a living, healthy tamandua and learn about its natural history and threats.