

All about the Aye-Aye

What is an Aye-Aye?

The endangered aye-aye (*Daubentonia madagascariensis*) is the largest nocturnal primate on earth. This mammal is closely related to prosimians (includes lemurs and tarsiers), and is also related to apes, chimpanzees, and humans. It appears to have features found in a variety of other animals, such as its ever-growing incisors (front teeth) that resemble those of rodents and its nictitating membrane (like a third eyelid) for moistening dry eyes and offering protection from debris like those found in birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish. Aye-ayes have the largest brain sizes among the prosimians, a bushy tail longer than their bodies, big eyes and ears, and large hands that aid in foraging for food and gripping a perch in a tree. In captivity, adults average 5 pounds (2.5 kg) in weight and have lived as long as 24 years. The only non-human predator of the aye-aye is the fossa (*Cryptoprocta ferox*), a larger mammal.

Mothers in captivity have been observed carrying their offspring around in their mouths when they want to move them. Infants have been observed playing with their parents and around three months old starts jumping and tapping its middle finger.

Where does the aye-aye live?

Like 75 percent of the species found on the island, aye-ayes are only found on Madagascar and nowhere else. They live in a variety of habitats, such as rain forests, deciduous forests, and plantations, but all require trees because this is where they spend all of their lives. Aye-ayes sleep during the day over 17 m (58 ft) high in trees in ball-like nests of leaves and branches with only one hole for entry and exit. Each aye-aye uses several nests, though not in a single day. Females don't typically interact with one another or live near one another, but males interact with males and females and can have home ranges that overlap.

Although protected by law, aye-ayes are threatened due to habitat loss and hunting, as some natives kill any aye-aye they encounter because they believe it brings bad luck. Human population growth and expansion and rainforest destruction cause the loss of aye-aye home ranges. Additionally, over three dozen aye-ayes are living and being studied in captivity.

What does the aye-aye eat?

What the aye-aye eats is determined by what foods are available in their specific niche. Aye-ayes are omnivores, meaning they eat multiple types of foods, including seeds, coconuts, nectar, fungus, and insect larvae. Interestingly, they make use of percussive foraging as a form of echolocation to sense the movement of their insect prey inside trees at a depth of up to 12 feet. This method involves tapping the tree bark with their notably long bony middle finger to listen for the insects' movement. They also use this finger to drink liquids by rapidly (3.3 strokes per second in studies) moving the finger back and forth from the liquid to their mouths.

Sources:

- Aye-ayes on National Geographic <http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/aye-aye/>
- Primate Info Net, Univ. of Wisconsin – Madison <http://pin.primat.wisc.edu/factsheets/entry/aye-aye>
- The Real Animals of Madagascar <http://www.wildmadagascar.org/wildlife/animals.html>