

Two-Toed Sloth *Choloepus didactylus*

Slow, Slow Motion - Sloths are the world's slowest mammals. Everything about them is slow! They move slowly along branches with a deliberate hand-over-hand motion. They have the lowest variable body temperature of any mammal, from 75 to 86 degrees F. (24-30 degrees C.). Their digestive system is so slow that they only come down from the trees about once a week to urinate and defecate.

Can You See Me Now? - Sloths are so sedentary that algae grow on their long fur. The greenish color of the algae provides camouflage that helps sloths blend into the rainforest canopy. Their fur actually has grooves in each strand that allow algae to grow and collect. They sleep 15-20 hours a day and often remain motionless even when awake. They feed at night when they are protected by darkness.

Classification

Sloths are in the same order as armadillos and anteaters.

Class: Mammalia

Order: Xenarthra

Family: Megalonychidae

Genus: *Choloepus*

Species: *didactylus*

Distribution

Central America and northern South America, including Columbia, Venezuela, Suriname, the Guianas, Brazil, and the upper Amazon basin of Ecuador and Peru. It ranges from sea-level up to 8,000 feet (2,438 m).

Habitat

Tropical rainforest canopies in lowland and montane forests. This species is strictly arboreal.

Physical Description

- Two-toed sloths are 20-26 inches (50-65 cm) long.
- They weigh from eight to 20 pounds (4-9 kg).
- They have short fine under fur and an overcoat of six-inch (15 cm) long more coarse hair that is grayish-brown in color.
- They have highly modified hands and feet with three to four inch (7.6-10 cm) curved claws on each appendage.
- The head is short and flat, with a snub nose, rudimentary ears, and large eyes.

Diet

What Does It Eat?

In the wild: Leaves, young shoots, blossoms and fruit.

At the zoo: Plant materials, fruits, monkey chow and vitamins.

What Eats It?

Jaguars, ocelots and other cats prey on the two-toed sloth.

Social Organization

Sloths are solitary except mating pairs and females with young. Groups of females sometimes will occupy the same tree.

Life Cycle

Sloths reach maturity at about two and a half years of age. Breeding occurs throughout the year and takes place up in the trees with the sloths hanging by their arms as they mate. After a gestation of five to six months, the female gives birth to a single young in the trees. The newborn sloth is 10 inches (25 cm) long and weighs 10-13 ounces (280-364 gm). The baby climbs onto the mom's belly and clings while nursing for four to five weeks. Hiding in the mom's fur provides protection for the vulnerable newborn. After 10 weeks the young begin to eat solid food. They remain with mom for nine months then move on to live on their own. Most of a sloth's life is spent hanging upside-down. They descend to the ground to change trees (food sources) or to defecate (which is not often!). Lifespan in the wild is about 20 years and 30 to 40 years in captivity.

Adaptations

Arboreal Lifestyle

Sloths are adapted for life in the treetops. Their long curved claws provide a powerful grip as they hang from branches. At night they move slowly through the trees eating leaves, shoots and fruit. They sleep hanging in the trees with their arms and legs close together and their head tucked between their limbs that makes them look like part of the tree. They mate in the treetops and give birth hanging upside down in the trees.

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Conservation Connection

IUCN Status: Least Concern.

Two-toed sloths are not listed as endangered but their numbers are declining mainly due to loss of their rainforest habitat. They are heavily hunted in Brazil for their meat. Their pelt is used for saddle covering and the curved claws are used to make jewelry. Two-toed sloths are present in many protected areas, which accounts for its IUCN status.

Fun Facts

- Sloths are good swimmers.
- Sloths have weak hind legs and are unable to stand or walk. To move on land they must crawl pulled along by their strong front legs.