



SPIDER MONKEY FACT SHEET



KINGDOM: Animalia

PHYLUM: Chordata

CLASS: Mammalia

INFRAClass: Eutheria

ORDER: Primates

FAMILY: Atelidae

SUBFAMILY: Atelinae

GENUS: Ateles E. Geoffroy, 1806

Spider monkeys are New World monkeys of the family Atelidae, subfamily Atelinae. Found in tropical forests from southern Mexico to Brazil, spider monkeys belong to the genus Ateles; the closely related woolly spider monkeys, are in the genus Brachyteles.

As they require large tracts of undisturbed forest and specialize on ripe fruits, spider monkeys may be considered an indicator species; the monkeys are threatened by habitat destruction through continued growth in South American agriculture. Disproportionately long, spindly limbs inspired the spider monkey's common name. Their deftly prehensile tails, which may measure up to 89 centimeters, have highly flexible hairless tips 20 inches and a weight of 6.4 cm.

Spider monkeys have hook-like, narrow and thumbless hands; the fingers are elongate and recurved. The hair is coarse, ranging in color from a ruddy gold to brown and black; the hands and feet are usually black. Heads are small with hairless faces. An unusually long labia in females may be mistaken for a penis; it is used to attract the males. A female will urinate and that scent will stay on her labia with the scent attracting the males.

Forming loose groups of 15-25 individuals, spider monkeys are highly agile; they are said to be second only to the gibbons in this respect. During the day, spider monkey groups break up into smaller subgroups of 2-8 individuals; this social structure ('fission-fusion') is found in only one other primate, the chimpanzee. The size of subgroups and the degree to which they will avoid each other during the day is determined by food competition and the risk of predation. Also less common in primates, females rather than males disperse at puberty to join new groups. Males tend to stick together for their whole life. Hence males in a group are more likely to be related and have closer bonds than females. The strongest social bonds are formed between females and young offspring.

Spider monkeys are diurnal and spend the night in carefully selected sleeping trees. Groups are thought to be directed by a lead female who is responsible for planning an efficient route for the day's feeding activities. Grooming is not as important to social interaction, due perhaps to a lack of thumbs.

Spider monkeys mate year round. The female monkey chooses a male from her group with whom to mate. Both male and female spider monkeys sniff their mates to check their readiness for copulation. This process is known as "anogenital sniffing." On average, only one offspring at a time is produced from each female. The gestation period for spider monkeys ranges from 226 to 232 days. For the first four months of life, baby spider monkeys cling to their mother's belly. Soon after, they climb to her back, eventually developing enough independence to travel on their own. Male spider monkeys have nothing to do with the raising of offspring.

At 107 grams, the spider monkey brain is twice the size of a howler monkey's of equivalent body size; this is thought to be a result of the spider monkeys' complex social system as well as their diet, which consists primarily of ripe fruit from a wide variety (over 150 species) of plants. The slow rate of development in spider monkeys may also play a role, females giving birth once every 3-4 years. Spider monkeys may live for 20 years or more.

PETS:

Although they may appear to be friendly and nice and can resemble human babies for some people, monkeys should not be kept as, or seen as, pets. While baby monkeys are usually as easy to keep clean as a human infant (by diapering), monkeys that have reached puberty usually remove their diapers and cannot be toilet trained. They require constant supervision and mental stimulation. They usually require a large amount of attention. Monkeys cannot handle being away from their owners for long periods of time, such as family trips for example, due to their need of attention. Bored monkeys can become extremely destructive and may even go so far as to smear or throw their own feces. There needs to be a lot of time set aside for cleaning up whatever mess the monkey might make. Most adolescent monkeys begin to bite unpredictably and pinch adults and children. Any surgical means to stem this behavior (such as removing the teeth or fingertips of the monkey) is widely considered cruel, and it is usually difficult to find veterinarians who will treat them: even exotic animal veterinarians may not be familiar with them. Monkeys eventually have to grow up, and in most cases become wild and not easy to control. The monkeys may also become aggressive even to their owners. They can change from one minute to the next without warning, making it hard for the owner to fully understand them. The majority of monkey owners have to find other homes for them, such as zoos and monkey rescues. Monkeys are known to get attached to their first owner so it is not easy for a monkey to get used to their new environment. Monkeys need to be placed in social areas. It might be bad for the monkey to place them in non social areas which could lead to problems. It is not cheap to bring up a monkey. It becomes very costly when it comes to buying food and housing them. Some monkeys may even have special needs such as diets. In most large metropolitan areas in the U.S. it is illegal to keep monkeys in the home; even in places where they are legal, a Department of Agriculture permit is usually required. Their legal status as pets varies in other countries. Permits may be issued to those who qualify in the caring of monkeys.

LAB MONKEYS:

Monkeys are widely used in animal testing facilities. This is primarily because of their relative ease of handling, their fast reproductive cycle (compared to apes) and their psychological and physical similarity to humans. In the United States, around 50,000 non human primates, most of them monkeys, have been used in experiments every year since 1973; 10,000 monkeys were used in the European Union in 2004. Highly sociable animals, monkeys are kept in many different environments. Use of monkeys in laboratories is cruel and produces little information of value.

ENTERTAINMENT:

Animal acts and exhibits are designed to provide "entertainment" to patrons. Kept in small, barren cages, forced to sleep on concrete slabs, and imprisoned behind iron bars, performing animals often suffer from malnutrition, loneliness, the denial of all normal pleasures and behaviors, loss of freedom and independence, even lack of veterinary care, and filthy quarters. Attracting customers is the first consideration and the animals' welfare is often the last. Even when the mere display of the animals themselves is the "draw," the animals rarely receive proper care--and almost never the socialization and stimulation they crave. Animals used for entertainment are subjected to rigorous and abusive training methods to force them to perform stressful, confusing, uncomfortable, and even painful acts; training methods can include beatings, the use of electric prods, food deprivation, drugging, and surgically removing or impairing teeth and claws. Confined to tiny cages and gawked at by crowds, animals in exhibits and acts endure constant stress. They may suffer from temperature extremes and irregular feeding and watering. Without exercise, they become listless, their immune systems are weakened, and they become prone to sickness; many resort to self-mutilation in reaction to stress or boredom. Mental illness is rampant among confined animals. Torn from their families and deprived of all dignity, every part of their lives is controlled by their captors. While zoos and aquariums may appear to be educational and conservation-oriented, most are designed with the needs and desires of the visitors in mind, not the needs of the animals. Many animals in zoos and aquariums exhibit abnormal behavior as a result of being deprived of their natural environments and social structures. When the facility breeds too many animals they become "surplus" and often are sold to laboratories, traveling shows, shooting ranches, or to private individuals who may be unqualified to care for them.