The squirrel monkeys are the New World monkeys of the genus Saimiri. They are the only genus in the subfamily Saimiriinae. Squirrel monkeys live in the tropical forests of Central and South America. Their range extends from Costa Rica through central Brazil and Bolivia. Squirrel monkey fur is short and close, colored olive at the back and yellowish orange on its belly and extremities. Their throat and the ears are white and their mouths are black. The upper part of their head is hairy. This black and white face gives them their German name, "death's head monkeys". Squirrel monkeys grow to 25 to 35 cm, with a 35 to 42 cm tail. They weigh 750 to 1100 g. Remarkably, the brain mass to body mass ratio for squirrel monkeys is 1:17, which gives them the largest brain, proportionately, of all the primates. Humans have a 1:35 ratio.

Like most of their New World monkey relatives, squirrel monkeys are diurnal and arboreal. Unlike the other New World monkeys, their tail is not used for climbing, but as a kind of "balancing pole" and also as a tool. Their movements in the branches are extremely speedy. They live together in multi-male/multi-female groups with up to 500 members. These large groups can, however, occasionally break into smaller troops. They have a number of vocal calls, including warning sounds to protect themselves from large falcons, which are a natural threat to them. Their small body size also makes them susceptible to predators such as snakes and felids. For marking territory, squirrel monkeys rub their tail and their skin in with their own urine. Squirrel monkeys are omnivores, eating primarily fruits and insects. Occasionally they also eat nuts, buds, eggs and small vertebrates.
The mating of the squirrel monkeys is subject to seasonal influences. Females give birth to young during the rainy season, after a 150 to 170 day gestation. The mothers exclusively care for the young. Saimiri oerstedti are weaned by 4 months of age, while S. boliviensis are not fully weaned until 18 months old. Female squirrel monkeys reach sexual maturity at age 3 years, while males take until age 5. They live to about 15 years old in the wild, about 20 years in captivity.

Three squirrel monkey species are in danger of extinction. S. o. oerstedti is listed as “endangered,” S. o. citrinellus is listed as “critically endangered” and S. vanzolinii is listed as “Vulnerable.”

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. Some zoos and aquariums do rescue some animals and work to save endangered species, but most animals in zoos were either captured from the wild or bred in captivity for the purpose of public display, not species protection. The vast majority of captive-bred animals will never be returned to the wild. 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.