

Episode 9: Ring-tailed Lemurs

Hi, my name is Alanna! Before we go and see some lemurs, I am going to be putting on this mask to ensure my safety and the lemurs' safety.

I'm here with the ring-tailed lemurs. These guys are probably the most popular species of lemur. They are known for their very distinctive black-and-white striped tails. It looks like they have little individual rings going from top to bottom. These guys are the most terrestrial of any lemur species. As you can see, these guys are snuggled up on the ground behind me.

The two lemurs we have here are Onyx and Hibernia. They are an aunt-nephew pair living together. And they get along very nicely, as you can tell!

Ring-tailed lemurs live in the southern tip of Madagascar in a dry spiny desert. All of the trees and plants down there have very large spines protecting the small little leaves that they have, to hopefully prevent the ring-tailed lemurs from eating them. But these guys are very nimble and they're good at climbing through those spines to munch on those yummy crunchy leaves.

These guys are also **opportunistic omnivores**, so pretty much whatever they can find—or whatever they can catch—they will eat. They will eat anything from fruits, leaves, nuts, flowers, and seeds all the way up to bugs, insects, grubs, and occasionally a small lizard or two if they can catch them.

Ring-tailed lemurs are very tricky to tell apart because they are *not* sexually dichromatic. So these guys, the males and the females, have the exact same fur coloration and they are just about the same size as well. We have to look for small individual characteristics to help us tell who's who.

Lemurs communicate primarily through olfactory communication, or **scent marking**. What you and I would *talk* about, lemurs are going to *stink* about! Different species have a different array of scent glands on their bodies. The ring-tails behind me, the males will have scent glands on their wrists, their shoulders, and around the base of their tails. The females will just have scent glands around the base of their tail. They will use these scent glands to mark their territory and to flirt with each other and compete for territory.

A behavior unique to ring-tailed lemurs is **stink fighting**. The males will mix their scent glands from their wrists and their shoulders into their tail, and then they'll flick that tail over their heads and at the other males. And whoever is stinkier is the one that wins! When a male is interested in a female, he will flick his stinky tail at the female and then she gets to decide which male ring-tailed lemur smells the best. For her, that's probably the stinkiest one.

Like most species of lemur, ring-tailed lemurs are **female dominant**. So the girls are in charge of the family group. Unlike other lemurs who live in smaller family groups, ring-tailed lemurs can live in groups as large as 30 individuals. So you will have one female who is in charge, the other females are going to rank below her and at the very bottom of that pyramid are the males. They are usually hanging out on the edge of the family group, not too close to the girls. Because if they look at the girls in a funny way, the girls might decide to come chase them around.

Females can have between one and three infants every single year, but they most commonly have either a single infant or twins.



Ring-tailed lemurs are endangered. They are, unfortunately, victims of the illegal pet trade. Lemurs do not make great pets. These guys are wild animals and, as we talked about before, they are very into scent marking... and scent marking on *everything*! So you definitely don't want one in your home.

When people keep lemurs as pets, they may not live as happy and as long lives as they would in the wild. We are a hands-off facility here with our lemurs, so we do not touch them. We do not pet them or play with them. The only time we have any sort of physical interaction with them is for any animal care or medical concerns that we might have. And those are trained behaviors that are performed by our veterinary team.

Lemurs are wild—they do not want to be touched or petted or played with. They would prefer to hang out with their own family and their own species. They don't want to come and snuggle with us.

One thing you can do to help ring-tailed lemurs is, if you see videos or photos of people interacting with them, please *do not* share those photos or videos. People tend to see those and think that because lemurs are so fluffy and cute that they might make good pets. For more information on the Duke Lemur Center's policy on pet lemurs, please see our website: lemur.duke.edu/not-a-pet.

