

Episode 6: Ruffed Lemurs



Alanna: Hi! I'm Alanna, and that sound you're hearing is the sound of ruffed lemurs calling to each other. If they'll quiet down for a minute, I'd love to tell you about ruffed lemurs!

There are two different species of ruffed lemur here at the Duke Lemur Center: We have the black and white ruffed lemurs and red ruffed lemurs. These two species are closely related, but have a few differences between the two of them.

Even though the black and white ruffed lemurs and the red ruffed lemurs live in very similar habitats and have very similar diets, because they live in two different parts of Madagascar and look very different from each other, they are considered to be two separate species. Here at the Lemur Center, we've also seen in their gut microbiomes that they have very different types of bacteria in their digestive tracts, even when living in the same habitats here at the Center.

Both species of ruffed lemur live along the eastern coast of Madagascar in the tropical rainforest. The red ruffed lemurs live in Masoala peninsula, and the black and white ruffed lemurs live in fragmented habitat just south of that peninsula.





The primary role of both species of ruffed lemur is as seed dispersers. They eat a wide variety of fruit every single day, and they will eat the entire piece of fruit all in one go, including the seeds. Those seeds will pass very quickly through their digestive tract—sometimes in as little as two or three hours—before those seeds wind up back on the forest floor in a fresh pile of fertilizer. These seeds then grow to form new fruit trees, creating a symbiotic relationship between the ruffed lemurs and their favorite fruit trees.

They are also the world's largest pollinators. One of their favorite flowers is from the Traveler's palm, because it has nice big flowers that they can fit their entire faces in. And as they fit their entire faces inside that flower, all of the pollen in that flower gets stuck to that lovely ruff of fur around their faces, and as they move from one flower to the next they're spreading all that pollen around. But seed dispersal is definitely their most important job in the rainforest.

Ruffed lemurs have very thick, fluffy, beautiful fur, but this is not to keep them nice and warm during the winter months in Madagascar; instead, it's to keep them nice and dry in the rainforest where they live. Lemurs really don't like getting wet, and so this thick, fluffy fur helps prevent that water from making it down towards their skin.

Now, unlike other species of lemurs, these lemurs do not carry their babies on their bellies or on their





backs. Instead, mom will build a nice, big, round nest up in the very tops of the trees, and she will park all of her babies inside that nest. Both species of ruffed lemur moms will build nests up in the canopy of the rainforest because they can have upwards of six babies at a time, and that's too many babies for mom to carry on her back.

After mom has parked her babies in the nest, she and the rest of the family members will go out and forage for their favorite food: fruit! If mom and dad and the other family members see any potential threats to themselves or to the little ones, they will sound off their alarm call. Our ruffed lemurs have one of the LOUDEST alarm calls out of all different species of primates, and will echo up to a half a mile in every single direction!

Both species of ruffed lemurs are listed as critically endangered. The Duke Lemur Center is doing our part working on various conservation projects over in Madagascar, but you can also help out with conservation in your own backyard. Pollinators in general, not just our lemurs, are very important for the health of the planet that we live on. By planting flowers and plants that your local pollinators might enjoy, you are going to help them and your local community.

We have lots of different plants here in our silo area, and we've got bees and butterflies flying around. We have a special butterfly waystation (visit monarchwatch.org to learn more and create your own) and a butterfly house. We have milkweed planted, and we see a variety of butterflies—including monarchs—every single summer. If you decide to plant native flowers in your own backyard, you'll get to see some of these really fascinating creatures as well!

