

Episode 13: Aye-ayes



Megan: Let's learn about the strangest and most unique lemur, the aye-aye! Aye-ayes are the largest nocturnal primates in the world, with big, bushy tails that are even longer than their bodies. They are found in the northern and eastern forests of Madagascar as well as a smaller range of habitat on the west coast of the island.

The combination of adaptations that aye-ayes possess makes them unlike any other animal in the world! These nocturnal creatures have gigantic brains and ears compared to their body size, claws instead of fingernails, teeth just like a beaver's, and of course, that famous tapping finger. Aye-ayes use this unusual set of adaptations to hunt their favorite food: the bugs and grubs hiding inside trees.

When aye-ayes are looking for a tasty bug treat, they use the middle finger on their front hands to rapidly tap along the bark of a tree, angling their large ears down to listen to the echoes. This is called **percussive hunting**, and aye-ayes are the only primates that do it! Once the aye-aye finds a good spot to go bug hunting, she puts her teeth to work. Aye-ayes have teeth just like a rodent's, with two incisors on the top and bottom of their mouths that grow continually throughout their lifetimes and need to be worn down by chewing on hard surfaces—like the bark of trees where bugs are hiding.





Once the aye-aye has chewed a hole in the outer layer of the tree, she puts her tapping finger back to work. This thin, flexible finger is missing the tiny bones that keep our tendons in place and make our fingers go up and down in just one direction, so the aye-aye's tapping finger can bend in any direction as it slips inside the tree, feeling around in a full 360-degree circle for any unsuspecting bugs. Once a bug is located, the aye-aye hooks it onto their claw and pulls it out to snack away.

Aye-ayes tend to be pretty solitary in the wild, and this plus their nocturnal activity patterns makes them incredibly difficult to spot in their natural habitat. Because aye-ayes are much larger than other nocturnal lemurs, they can't use the same small tree holes to hide in during the day, so they build large, elaborate nests out of branches and leaves so that have somewhere safe and comfortable to sleep during the day.

The Lemur Center's aye-ayes are spoiled with nesting supplies like fleece blankets and large reams of paper, so they can make extra comfy nests to sleep in. They also receive their food in specialized feeders so that they can practice chewing through hard surfaces and extracting tasty treats like mealworms.

Their large brains result in higher levels of intelligence, which means they enjoy having plenty of enrichment in their environment to stimulate their bodies and their minds. Allowing them engage in natural behaviors like foraging and nest-building is incredibly important for their welfare.

Because aye-ayes are rare and highly intelligent, they are not found in most zoos or other institutions. They require an exceptionally high level of care, and even more dedicated work to manage a healthy





breeding program. The first aye-aye ever born in human care was born right here at the Duke Lemur Center, and we continue to work hard to ensure a healthy population here and at partnering institutions from the Association of Zoos and Aquariums to ensure we have a healthy genetic safety net for this species.

In the wild, aye-ayes face the severe threat of deforestation that all lemurs do, and their unusual appearance and habits can also create superstition and folklore that is detrimental to conservation efforts in some areas. It is important to note that recent studies into the attitudes toward aye-ayes amongst Malagasy people has found a wide variation not just between regions, but even between villages less than a day's walk from each other. Some villages view aye-ayes as evil omens that may even be killed, while others appreciate them as a natural pest control for the bugs eating their crops; and many Malagasy scientists and conservationists are working with local communities to protect these incredible animals.

Our attitudes and feelings toward animals can have a huge impact on the success of conservation efforts: charismatic, beloved animals like pandas, tigers, and gorillas tend to receive a lot of attention and financial support, whereas smaller, spookier animals such as spiders and snakes are more likely to be ignored, or even outright hated. We hope that this introduction to the weird and wonderful world of aye-ayes can inspire us all to take a second look at some other overlooked critters who are equally deserving of awareness and support.

