



Left: The large eyes and nocturnal habits of the Douroucouli, or Northern Night Monkey, are typical of all monkeys in this family.

Night Monkeys

It is after dark in the New World. The only primates awake in the region's forests are the night or owl monkeys—and a few dedicated primatologists. While the monkeys leap skilfully between the trees, the scientists have to stumble through the thick vegetation, trailing radio-tracking equipment and night-vision binoculars. Despite these difficulties, a handful of researchers have stuck it out in the dark to learn more about the world's only nocturnal monkeys.

Family groups

Night monkeys live in family groups of between two and six members, consisting of a male and a female and their offspring. It had long been assumed that these monogamous families were stable and long-lasting, but new studies have revealed a frequent turnover of adults in the pairs, so the social system is now described as “serial monogamy.” New pairs are formed as, following a few days of aggressive interactions, newcomers displace a partner of the same sex.

When the single infant is born, the mother will carry it for the first week, but then the male takes over completely. He will pass the youngster to its mother to be suckled, but as soon as the infant has had its fill she will bite it until it returns to the male. He carries out every aspect of parenting, including carrying, play, grooming, and sharing food once the juvenile has been weaned.

PRIMATE PROFILE

NIGHT MONKEYS

SIZE Head and body length: 9½–14½ in (24–37 cm); weight: 1 lb 5 oz–2 lb 4 oz (600–1,000 g)

APPEARANCE Coat color variable—usually gray above and pale below; black-and white markings around eyes; large eyes; some groups have red neck coloration, others have gray necks

HABITAT Rain forest; dry forest; montane forest

DIET Fruit, leaves, flowers, sap, insects, small animals

LIFE HISTORY Gestation: about 4 months; sexual maturity: not known; lifespan: up to 20 years

BEHAVIOR Active at night; monogamous; lives in small family groups; marks territories with urine and scent; makes owl-like hooting calls

Night monkeys are very peculiar primates. Also called owl monkeys, they are the only monkey species to specialize in foraging in the dark. Moreover, they are also among the few monogamous primates, and it is the father that looks after the young. With the exception of nocturnal prosimians, primates are not well adapted for life at night: they rely mainly on vision for many aspects of their lives, such as finding food and moving around. Night monkeys, however, have evolved features to equip them for a successful night life. Their huge eyes are specially adapted to capture as much light as possible, and although they can't see much color, this trade-off gives them better vision in low light levels.

Night monkeys have not always been nocturnal—they evolved from an ancestor that was active during the day. They may have chosen this nocturnal lifestyle to avoid predators or competition with other primates. Attempts to explain this evolution are complicated, however, by the Southern Night Monkey. This species is cathemeral—it is active at varying times throughout the day and night. Although it shows a preference for nocturnal activity, long-term research has revealed that it spends more time awake during the day if the night is particularly cold or dark.

Until 1983, night monkeys were thought to consist of a single species that was widespread across Central America and northern South America. Then it emerged there were in fact two groups—gray-necked monkeys in the north and red-necked monkeys in the south, differing both in their coats and genetics. The total number of species is yet to be resolved; it is thought that up to 11 species may exist, but until further genetic studies have been completed, scientists cannot be sure.



KEY TO RANGE MAP
■ *Aotus nigriceps*
■ *Aotus trivirgatus*

MAIN NIGHT MONKEY SPECIES

Scientific name	Common name	Where they live	Red list	CITES
■ <i>Aotus nigriceps</i>	Black-headed or Southern (Red-necked) Night (or Owl) Monkey	Brazil, Peru	LC	II
■ <i>Aotus trivirgatus</i>	Douroucouli or Northern (Gray-necked) Night (or Owl) Monkey	Brazil, Venezuela	LC	II

RED LIST: CR = Critically Endangered EN = Endangered VU = Vulnerable NT = Near Threatened LC = Least Concern DD = Data Deficient NE = Not Evaluated 📍 = Best place to watch



This high level of paternal care is seen in no other primates with the exception of titi monkeys (page 84). Young night monkeys generally leave their parents at around three years of age, and set off in search of a mate.

Feeding and communicating

Despite living in dark forests, night monkeys are, impressively, able to snatch insects out of the air as they fly past or grab them from branches. However, fruit makes up the main element of their diet. At around sundown, each family of night monkeys wakes up and emerges from the tree hole or thicket that the group shares during the day. The monkeys do not travel far during the night, but go further on brighter nights, and up to twice as far under a full moon. Night monkeys are territorial, and if other groups are encountered, severe fights may break out. The monkeys run on all fours along branches, leaping across gaps.

Group members keep in contact with each other by uttering sounds rather like belches, hoots, and whoops. In common with some prosimians, night monkeys practice “urine washing,” covering their hands and feet in urine so that their scent is laid down on the branches that they walk along. When two night monkeys meet for the first time, they will spend a long time curiously sniffing each other. There are still many gaps in our knowledge of night monkeys, but continuing research promises more answers in the future.

Left: Night monkeys not only look like owls, but hoot like them too, uttering low-frequency calls that travel far through the forest. A captive Southern Night Monkey from Peru is seen here.