

## PRIMATE PROFILE

### AYE-AYE

*Daubentonia madagascarensis*

**SIZE** Head and body length: 16 in (40 cm); tail length: 16 in (40 cm); weight: male 6 lb (2.8 kg), female 5 lb 12 oz (2.6kg)

**APPEARANCE** Coarse, patchy, black-brown fur, edged in white; pale face; pointed nose; dark eye-rings; large hairless ears; elongated middle fingers; long, bushy tail

**HABITAT** Rain forest; dry forest; plantations; spiny desert

**DIET** Insect larvae, seeds, fruit, nectar

**LIFE HISTORY** Gestation: 6 months; sexual maturity: female's age at first birth 3–4 years; life span: not known

**BEHAVIOR** Nocturnal; tree-living; solitary; urine and scent marks; loud vocalizations

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the unsuspecting grub. A third eyelid (yet another feature that is unique among primates) protects this primate's eyes from the flying debris. Young Aye-ayes spend much time learning the percussive foraging technique, the first few clumsy attempts of which are made at around 10 weeks old. When an Aye-aye is eating juicy grubs or coconuts, the long finger is used to rapidly scoop out liquid contents.

During the day, Aye-ayes sleep in nests made from twigs woven together and lined with shredded leaves. As they are solitary, the nests are normally occupied by a single animal, although different individuals may use the same nest on different days. Aye-ayes emerge at around sunset to groom, but they sometimes wake up

a little earlier. Aye-ayes often hang upside down to groom, with the third finger being used to clean the eyes, ears, and nose. The majority of the night is then spent foraging, pausing occasionally to rest and groom some more. Aye-ayes clamber around the highest levels of the forest using four limbs, descending to lower levels to leap between trees. When climbing down a vertical trunk, they will sometimes go head first, gripping with their clawlike nails.

Males cover huge ranges of up to 500 acres (200 ha), which overlap the territories of other males and females. This may be a reproductive strategy, because Aye-ayes have no specific breeding season and therefore each female may be fertile at different times. Female ranges are much smaller, approximately 75–125 acres (30–50 ha), and never overlap with those of other females.

## Reproduction and social behavior

When a female enters a fertile period, she will call to males, which surround her up to six at a time and fight for the chance to copulate. In the end, she may mate with several males. Although

Aye-ayes traditionally have been described as solitary, they actually live in a social matrix, communicating mostly through vocal and olfactory means. Up to four Aye-ayes have been observed feeding near each other. Interactions between females are rare and always aggressive, but the males get along much better. Their vocal repertoire includes "eeps" and "creees" and a "ron-tsit" call to make contact and express distress and alarm. They give a contented "hoo-hoo" when feeding on a favorite food or grooming after copulation.

Until humans arrived on Madagascar, another, larger species, the Giant Aye-aye, *Daubentonia robusta*, lived in the dry southwest of the island. Its teeth have been found with holes drilled in them, so it may have been hunted for jewelry by the early settlers. The single surviving Aye-aye species now faces extinction, due to a combination of habitat destruction and human persecution. Its reputation as

a portent of death is not helped by its taste for coconuts and sugar cane, which brings it into conflict with farmers. In 1935, the Aye-aye was declared extinct, only to be rediscovered in 1957. The species is now known to have a wide but sparse distribution in eastern Madagascar. In an attempt to preserve the species, a few Aye-ayes were taken to Nosy Mangabe, an island just off the east coast of Madagascar, where the population has since thrived.

# The Aye-aye

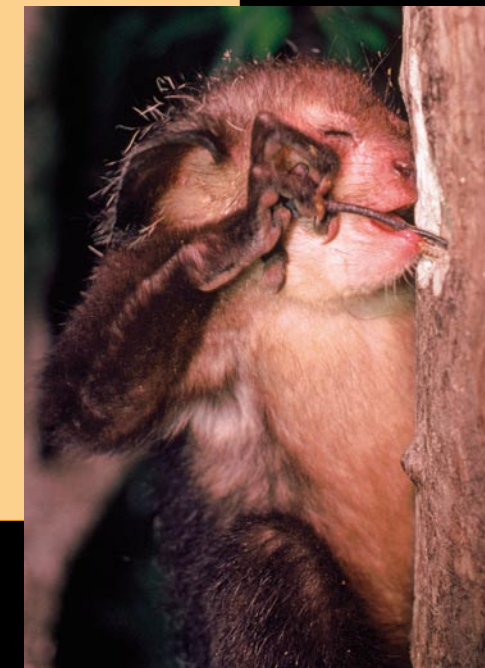
So strange that it baffled taxonomists for years, the Aye-aye was first classified as a rodent, then finally given its own primate family: Daubentoniidae. Its bizarre appearance and feeding habits make it probably the world's most unusual primate. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the people of Madagascar have long considered this weird-looking creature to be an omen of death.

The Aye-aye is the largest of the nocturnal primates. Its peculiar features have evolved to fit a specialized ecological niche usually occupied by woodpeckers and squirrels, both of which are absent from Madagascar. Huge "gremlin" eyes sit within the Aye-aye's ferretlike face, while its long and shaggy coat of white-tipped dark hairs give it a rather unkempt appearance. The paler face, with dark rings circling the eyes, is topped with huge black batlike ears capable of independent rotation. The animal's total length is almost doubled by the big, bushy tail, which is similar to a squirrel's, the hairs on which are the longest found in any prosimian. The Aye-aye's dentition is unique among primates—it lacks canine teeth, has small cheek teeth, and possesses a single pair of massive incisors that grow continuously. Strangest of all,

the Aye-aye is equipped with a very long, very thin third finger that it is able to move through 360°, independently of the other, shorter fingers.

When hunting at night, the Aye-aye moves along a branch, rapidly tapping the wood with its elongated fingers while listening intently with its huge ears cupped. If it detects the hollow sound of a cavity deep within the tree and hears an insect larva moving inside, it starts to gnaw, sending bits of wood flying in all directions, until it is able to insert a long bony finger to extract

**Above:** Resembling a cross between a bat and a giant squirrel, the nocturnal Aye-aye, with its bizarre elongated middle finger, strikes fear into the minds of people of its native Madagascar.



Above: An Aye-aye uses its distinctive elongated middle finger to probe for a favored meal of grubs under the bark of a tree trunk.