

Linnaeus's
Two-toed Sloth
Choleopus didactylus



Physical Characteristics

- **Physical description:**
 - The head has a short snout with a flat nose, small ears, and large eyes. It has a short neck with only 5 cervical vertebrae (as compared to 7 of nearly all mammals).
 - Its arms and legs are long and of equal length.
 - Two-toed sloths get their name from the two, long claws on their fingers. All sloths have 3 toes on their back feet. Their curved claws are well adapted to hang upside down on branches.
 - The soles of a two-toed sloth's front feet and hind feet are leathery.
 - It has a short tail about 1 inch in length.
- **Coloration:** While the hair of sloths is typically brown to gray in color, they often appear green. Each hair has a groove that collects moisture and encourages green algae to grow. This allows the sloth to essentially turn green and camouflage with the leaves of the trees.

Size

- **Length:** 21-29 inches
- **Weight:** 10-20 pounds

Lifespan

- **Wild:** 15-20 years
- **Zoos:** up to 30 years

Behaviors

- **Activity Cycle:** Primarily nocturnal, although recent evidence suggests that given their minimal movement, their activity period may span the period of 24 hours equally.
 - Sloths sleep about 15-18 hours per day.
- **Lifestyle:** Arboreal
 - They spend about 6 hours per day foraging in the trees.
 - Sloths do almost everything upside-down hanging from the trees (eating, sleeping, mating, and giving birth).
- **Locomotion:** Very slow
 - While typically very slow moving (0.15 mph), they can move along a branch or vine at about 6-8 feet per minute, although they may move only 125 feet per day. Their speed on the ground is much slower at less than 1 foot per minute, or just 53 feet per hour.
 - Sloths are not accustomed to locomotion on the ground, but they are great swimmers.
- **Social Structure:** Solitary
- **Vocalizations:** The sounds made by a sloth can include squeals, grunts and be like the hiss of a deflating balloon. When in distress, it can make a low bleating sound.

Diet

- **Wild:** Primarily leaves and some fruit
- **Zoo:** Leaf eater biscuits, branches with leaves, fruits, vegetables
- **Digestion:** Sloths have a complex 4-chambered stomach which allows for digestion of plant matter which can take up to one month to digest. They climb down to the forest floor about once per week to defecate.

Reproduction

- Gestation Period: 6 months
- Parenting: Baby sloths cling onto their mother's belly like in a hammock. At just over 20 days old, the baby can hang on its own. The baby nurses from its mother for about one month before converting to eating leaves. Young sloths will stay with their mother for 9-12 months.
- Litter Size: 1, sometimes twins occur
- Breeding Behaviors:
 - Females that are in estrus have been found initiating mating behavior. She alerts a male by making a screaming sound at night. If two males arrive, they will hang upside down from their back legs and have a really slow fight with their arms.

Habitat and Range

- Habitat: Living in the tropical rainforest canopy, they are arboreal, meaning they live in the trees. Sloths prefer the crowns of the trees that have lianas (woody vines) because they provide better protection from predators.
- Range: South America throughout eastern Peru and Ecuador, southern Columbia and Venezuela, the Guianas and Brazil north of the Amazon River.



Conservation

- IUCN Status: Least Concern
- Threats:
 - **Habitat Loss** - Logging of rain forests poses a serious threat to sloths and their habitat. The rainforest is the only habitat in the world that can support sloths.
 - **Tourism and Selfies** – Sloths are being exploited and harmed for the sake of tourism as well as for people to hold and take photo selfies. Sloths do not show typical signs of stress as their natural fear response is to hold still. Therefore, it is difficult to tell when a sloth is scared or stressed. Those places that allow people to hold sloths while getting their picture taken are not helping sloths, rescuing sloths, or conserving sloths. They are harming sloths and promoting the trafficking of sloths.
 - **Pet Trade** – Traffickers will poach sloths, especially in recently deforested areas, and sell them through an international pet trade. Baby sloths, even captive raised, are from wild caught parents and are taken from the mother long before the baby can be independent. Sloths are not pets.

Classification

- Kingdom: Animalia
- Phylum: Chordata
- Subphylum: Vertebrata
- Class: Mammalia
- Order: Pilosa
- Family: Megalonychidae
- Genus: *Choleopus*
- Species: *C. didactylus*

Interesting Facts

- **No poo on you**: If walking through the rainforest, you would not need to worry about sloth poo falling down on you from the branches above. Sloths will climb down to the ground to defecate once every 5-7 days. Waiting to go for that long results in quite a build-up and they will poop up

to 1/3 of their body weight at once. Such a sizeable pile is sure to be noticed and it likely helps to communication with other sloths.

- **Not a pain in the neck:** Nearly all mammals have 7 neck (cervical) vertebrae. Sloths are a different sort of animal. Two-toed sloths have 2 less neck vertebrae with a total of 5. Three-toed sloths have 2 more neck vertebrae for a total of 9. While one might ask how does a species delete or add vertebrae, the answer is that sloths technically still have seven cervical vertebrae. However, the ribs, shoulders and pelvis have developmentally shifted up or down the vertebral column due to adaptation over time to their upside down lifestyle and slow metabolism.
- **What strange teeth you have:** These sloths do not have incisors (front teeth) or true canine teeth. With no enamel (hard outer surface), their teeth are made only of dentin which is softer than the enamel but harder than bone. Sloth teeth are constantly growing as they wear the surfaces down while eating. While they may have soft teeth, they have hardened lips, which help them tear through leaves.
- **Ice Age Relatives:** Prior to the last ice age, giant ground sloths were bigger than grizzly bears and as large as elephants. They meandered across the lands of North America eating plants. Fossils have been found in caves and tar pits. These giant sloths went extinct about 10,000 years ago.