

# TAMARINS



notes

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Tamarins are small squirrel-like monkeys of the South American tropical rainforests. By comparing them to other primates, for example the Orang-utan, Spider Monkey and Mandrill, you will be able to observe many features that they share. Look especially for the shape of the hands and feet, and the direction in which the eyes face. However Tamarins have a number of features which are unusual among primates. Many primates have obvious differences between the sexes but it is almost impossible to tell the male and female tamarins apart by observing them from outside the enclosure.

Family groups, of up to 15 members, consist of a single breeding pair and their offspring. Usually non-identical twins are born. Both parents devote much time to the care of the babies, as do the older brothers and sisters. Babies are often passed from one group member to another. It is thought that this period of helping to care for the babies is an important step for young tamarins. When they leave the group to pair and breed they will be experienced in rearing the babies.

Tamarins in the wild eat fruits, flowers, nectar and small animals (frogs, snails, lizards, birds, spiders and insects). They rarely eat leaves, unlike many other primates. In the Zoo the tamarins are fed 'primate cake', fruits and occasionally insects. "Primate Cake" consists of a nutritious mix of a protein, mineral and vitamin rich powder and fruit and vegetable pulp. Live insects, such as crickets, are released into the exhibit to encourage foraging behaviour.

Tamarins are ideally suited to life in the dense forest. They have good eyesight and hearing. Their eyes are positioned to look forward, enabling them to accurately judge distance and direction.

Communication within the family group is very complex. Shrill cries, facial expressions, posturing and hair-raising help to defend the groups territory. Mutual grooming is another obvious and frequent form of communication which is beneficial in reinforcing the social bonds between members.

However, unlike the more advanced primates (humans and apes), tamarins mark their territory with scent. The scent glands are located on the chest and near the genitals.

The Black Lion Tamarin (*Leontopithecus chrysomelas*) is restricted to a reserve in the southern rainforests of Brazil but it is poorly protected. The total population numbers in the few hundreds.

The Golden Lion Tamarin (*Leontopithecus rosalli*) is a stunning ambassador for conservation. Like many animals and plants on Earth, this species is fighting to survive. A native of Brazil, the Golden Lion Tamarin inhabits the middle to lower canopy of the rainforest.

The Cotton-top Tamarin (*Saguinus oedipus*) with its long white crest and patches of black, is no less attractive than its black and golden 'cousins' are. These tamarins are found in the tropical rainforests of Colombia, South America.

All three species of Tamarin have been classified by conservation authorities as being amongst the most endangered species in the world. The massive destruction of their habitat due to rainforest clearance is the major cause of their decline. Also in the past, tens of thousands of Cotton-top Tamarins were used for biomedical research. These species have also been taken from the wild, legally and illegally, as pets. This is now banned, but smuggling still occurs.

In the early 1980's it was estimated that less than 300 Golden Lion Tamarins, 200 Black Lion Tamarins and an unknown number of Cotton-top Tamarins were left in the wild. To save them, international conservation and breeding programs were begun.

The program to save the Golden Lion Tamarin was initiated by the National Zoo in Washington DC, USA and Brazilian scientists. A captive-breeding program was essential and as a consequence of research into the species' biology and behaviour, the worldwide captive population has increased from 69 animals in 1972 to now over 1000. The preservation of the tamarins' remaining rainforest habitat and the establishment of reserves was also critical to their survival. Education programs heightened the local peoples' awareness of Tamarins and also the importance of the rainforest.

80 captive born Golden Lion Tamarins were reintroduced into the wild in 1984, financially supported by foreign donations. These animals have produced young and boosted the wild population to 500-600 animals.

Adelaide Zoo has long been part of this international program, our colony of Golden Lion Tamarins being established in 1980 with five pairs from the National Zoo, Washington DC. This is the only breeding colony in Australia. Virtually all of the world's tamarins, including ours, are now the property of the Brazilian Government. Young from this breeding colony have been distributed to co-operating zoos in this region. The Adelaide Zoo has also provided financial support for the monitoring of wild populations.

The future of these tamarins is much more secure than it was 10 years ago. The efforts to preserve this species can act as a model to conservation groups showing how international and local communities can work together for a common goal. It is hoped that the tamarin story will also make people more aware of the plight of the many threatened species in the world, and highlight the fact that without seriously and immediately addressing the causes of their decline, then many may be doomed.

