



Tamarin (Golden Lion)

Golden lion tamarin:

Leontopithecus rosalia



Distribution:

Found only in a stretch of coastal rainforests, southwest of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, mainly in the Poco das Antas Reserve.

Habitat:

Areas of primary forest, that is forest that has not been affected by human interference.

Description:

Squirrel-sized monkey with long, silky reddish-brown fur. A lion-like mane frames its face. Bare face with pinky-purple skin. Large round eyes and a snub nose.

Life-span:

10-15 years in captivity.

Size:

length: head and body 34-40cm, tail 26-38cm. weight: 630-710g.

Food:

Fruit, flowers, gums and nectars of plants, insects, snails, frogs, lizards and birds' eggs.

Tamarins and marmosets are the smallest monkeys (primates) in the world. There are 8 marmosets and 14 tamarins in the family. The pygmy marmoset is the smallest monkey of all and is 14cm long, weighing only 90g. The golden lion tamarin is the largest and related to the golden headed and golden rumped tamarins - all are among the most endangered of all mammals.

Family life

The golden lion tamarin lives in extended family groups high up in the tree tops. During the hottest part of the day the family usually hides in dense foliage, out of the direct sunlight. The tamarins spend much of the day playing with each other in a quarrelsome fashion, jumping easily through the trees, using their very long and partly webbed fingers to grip the branches. Grooming is an important daily activity and helps to bond the family together. They even pick and clean each others teeth.

Tamarins within a family are very sociable but they are extremely aggressive to intruders. If excited or frightened a tamarin raises its mane, bares its teeth and calls out with high-pitched shrieks. Adults of the same sex sometimes fight to the death. When not playing or resting, the tamarin searches for food. It is an omnivore, eating both meat and plant material, collecting it from tree tops.

Breeding

Golden lion tamarins breed at any time of the year and keep to one partner. The gestation period is 5 months and usually twins are born. The male, as is usual in marmosets and tamarins, helps with the birth and takes the babies from the female and washes them. The new-born baby looks just like its parents but with shorter hair. It clings to its parent's body tightly with its hands and feet. The male is an excellent father, carrying his babies around for most of the time, handing one over to its mother every 2 to 3 hours; she suckles it for about 15 minutes and then hands it back to the male.

At about 3 weeks old, the youngsters start to explore their surroundings, darting back to their parents if alarmed. They will ride on the parents' backs until they are 6-7weeks old. At 4 weeks, the babies begin to eat soft food. The father may even peel and mash a banana in his hands to feed to them. They are capable of

looking after themselves at 3-5 months but for some time they continue to run to their parents if danger threatens, and will beg food from them.

At 15 months of age, the tamarins are sexually mature and many young stay with their parents and live as extended families. The older youngsters often help with care of younger brothers and sisters.

Golden Lion Tamarins and Man

The attractive appearance of the golden lion tamarin has been its downfall in the past. The species has been known to Europeans since they first explored Brazil and it has been popular as a pet since the seventeenth century. European ladies used to keep one, as was the fashion, in their muffs. Later, the pet trade was joined by a trade in the animals for zoos and research.

In 1967, Brazil finally passed a law regulating the export of tamarins (although the practice is known to continue illegally) but by then the forests were being felled at an alarming rate and the little monkeys seemed doomed. It has been estimated that only two or three per cent of the golden lion's original wild habitat is still in existence. Unlike some of its relatives, the golden lion tamarin will not move to and settle in disturbed forest. Forest destruction is the main reason why it has become an endangered species. Probably less than 150 survive in the wild - no-one knows the exact number - and these are mainly restricted to the only remaining coastal rainforest in a 5,000 hectare reserve known as Poco das Antas, which was created in 1974 by a dedicated Brazilian biologist, Dr. Ademar Coimbra Filho, who had been studying tamarins for many years.

Return to the wild

Dr. Ademar also set up the Rio de Janeiro Primate Centre where captive marmosets and tamarins breed successfully. In 1972, Washington, USA, the first conference was held to discuss the fate of the golden lion tamarin. As a result of this, 15 captive-bred tamarins were sent over to the Rio Primate Centre from American zoos and after they had been acclimatised to the local sounds, smells and climate, they were finally released into the Poco das Antas reserve in May, 1984. This was an historic occasion as it was the first time that any captive-bred primates had been introduced into the wild. More tamarins have been introduced since then,

making a total of over forty.

The future

Although the reintroduction scheme appears to have been successful so far, it will be several years before anyone can be certain that the effort involved has been worthwhile. Since 1984, part of the Poco das Antas reserve has been destroyed by fire and flood.

Mature forest now covers less than 10 per cent of the reserve. Habitat improvement is essential if the wild and captive-bred tamarins are to survive. Education is important too and a programme has been set up to help the local people to understand the importance of conserving the remaining forest.

Several zoos around the world co-operate in the breeding of the golden lion tamarin, moving individuals among the various zoos to prevent inbreeding. Over 50 tamarins a year are born in captivity. Hopefully, it will be possible to introduce many of these to the wild in future years.

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