

All About the SILKY ANTEATER

Scientists Call It

- *Cyclopes didactylus* (species name)
- Silky anteaters are insectivores.
Insectivores are mammals that eat insects.

Other Names

- Pygmy Anteater
- Golden Anteater
- Two-toed Anteater



Physical Characteristics

- Adult silky anteaters are 12 to 21 inches long. They weigh 6 to 13 ounces.
- Their long, wavy, soft, silky fur can be silvery gray to golden-yellow. A brown stripe goes down the middle of their bellies.
- Silky anteaters have prehensile tails, useful for holding onto objects.
- They have short snouts and pink noses. Their ears are small and hidden in fur.
- They have tubular mouths; long, sticky tongues; and sticky saliva. Their tongues are covered with thousands of tiny hooks, which are called "filiform papillae." They can move their tongues in and out of their mouths quickly.
- Their stomach muscles are hard and contract strongly to digest insects. Silky anteaters sometimes swallow bits of sand and dirt. These remain in their stomachs and help grind up insects' hard exoskeletons.
- Silky anteaters have two toes with large, curved, sharp claws on each forefoot. They have four toes with smaller claws on each hind foot. Their hind feet are flexible, and they use them to hold onto branches and vines.

Habitat and Range

- Silky anteaters live in moist tropical forests in Mexico, Central America, Brazil, Peru, and Bolivia.
- When they are not eating, they spend almost all of their time in the crowns of silk-cotton trees (kapok trees, *Ceiba* genus). They travel to other kinds of trees and vines in search of food. They rarely descend to the ground.

Behavior

- Silky anteaters are nocturnal, slow moving, and relatively "peaceful." When attacked, they will defend themselves by slashing with their claws.
- They rarely spend more than 24 hours in the same silk-cotton tree.
- Silky anteaters are extremely hard to find in the wild because they are quiet, nocturnal, arboreal, and protected by camouflage.* For this reason, scientists know very little about their behavior.

Food

- Silky anteaters eat insects—mostly ants—that colonize in trees. An adult anteater may eat as many as 5,000 ants per day.
- Silky anteaters are good tree climbers because they have flexible hind feet and prehensile tails that can hold onto branches. Because they don't weigh much, they can reach even the small, weak branches at the tops of trees. This is where many insects make their nests.

Predators

- Harpy eagles, eagle-hawks, and spectacled owls hunt and eat silky anteaters.

Reproduction

- Female silky anteaters bear one offspring at a time.
- Mothers make nests in depressions or holes in trees that are partly filled with dry leaves.
- Young are raised by both parents. Mothers carry their babies on their backs. Sometimes male anteaters also carry young on their backs.
- As they are weaned, young anteaters are fed by both parents. Young eat semi-digested insects that are regurgitated by their parents.

Status

- Silky anteaters are not listed as threatened or endangered.
- It is hard to estimate silky anteater populations because they are hard to find and thus hard to count.
- Scientists know of no silky anteater that has survived more than 30 days in captivity.
- Sometimes humans hunt anteaters for food.

*CAMOUFLAGE: Silky anteater fur looks very much like the silky strands—called kapok—that line the seed pods of silk-cotton trees. When silk-cotton pods mature, they burst and extrude kapok and seeds. The kapok clings to branches and leaves. Because silky anteaters look so much like kapok, it is hard to see them among the burst seed pods and kapok hanging from tree branches. This “camouflage” provides anteaters with protection from their primary predators: harpy eagles, eagle-hawks, and spectacled owls.

