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Golden Lion Tamarin (GLT)

Class: Mammalia

Order: Primates

Family: Callitrichidae

Genus & Species: *Leontopithecus rosalia*

About GLTs

Weight: about 1 pound or 500 grams

Head and Body Length: about 8 inches or 20 cm

Tail Length: about 14 inches or 36 cm

Golden lion tamarins (GLTs) are small, New World primates, primarily identifiable by their reddish-gold fur and characteristic lion-like mane. These monkeys have a long tail which they use to balance as they leap on all four limbs from tree to tree. Their slim fingers and claw-like nails aid their movements and help them to extract food from crevices and holes - a behavior known as micromanipulation. Like other marmosets and tamarins, they have claws instead of nails and do not have prehensile tails. There is no sexual dimorphism in this species, which means that males and females are similarly sized and cannot be easily distinguished by physical characteristics alone.

GLTs are social animals, living in family groups that consist of two to ten individuals, but average about five to six to a group. A family group is typically comprised of a breeding pair (mom and dad) and their offspring (usually twins) from one or two litters. The group may also include an aunt or uncle. Individuals in family groups share food with each other and frequently spend time grooming and playing. These are diurnal monkeys (awake during the day), seeking out tree holes within their range to sleep at night as a group. GLT family groups are territorial, protecting a home range that averages 123 acres or 50 hectares-- quite a large area for such small animals. Adults will scent mark, vocalize, and posture when confronted by another GLT group while the young of both groups may play together. Their natural predators are raptors, cats, large snakes, and tayras (large members of the weasel family). When noticing one of these predators nearby, GLTs will alert each other with specific alarm calls that help the group become aware of danger.

Habitat & Range

Golden lion tamarins are native to the lowland Atlantic Coastal Rainforest of southeastern Brazil, which reaches altitudes of up to 1600 feet or 500 meters. One of the most biologically diverse and threatened rainforests on the planet, this habitat is particularly rich in endemic species (species that exist only

there) of bromeliads, amphibians, birds, and monkeys. Some other native species that share this habitat include the maned three-toed sloth (*Bradypus torquatus*); howler monkeys (*Alouatta guariba*); capuchin monkeys (*Sapajus nigritus*); titi monkeys (*Callicebus nigrifrons*); buffy-tufted-ear marmosets (*Callithrix aurita*); southern tamandua (*Tamandua tetradactyla*); pumas, ocelots, and other smaller cats; porcupines; toucans and many species of parrots and parakeets; and many species of reptiles and frogs. Typically, GLTs occupy middle levels of the forest canopy, living 30 to 100 feet or 10 to 30 meters up in the trees, where they are protected from aerial and terrestrial predators. GLTs are most often found in forests with lots of bromeliads and tangles of vines, where they forage for small fruits, insects, and occasionally a small frog.

Historically, golden lion tamarins occurred throughout the coastal region of Rio de Janeiro State. However, after centuries of deforestation within this range, just two percent of the original habitat remains - 189 square miles, or 49,000 hectares, divided into small fragments. The largest remaining fragments of GLT habitat are located in the São João River watershed, approximately 62 miles or 100 km from the Rio de Janeiro metropolitan area, which is also home to a population of 13 million people. The two largest areas of protected GLT habitat are located in two federally-managed biological reserves: Poço das Antas and União. The other habitat fragments are scattered over more than 600 private farms.

Diet

These primates are omnivores, feeding on a variety of food items including fruits, nectar, insects, and small vertebrates. Fruits and insects make up the bulk of their diet.

Reproduction

Mating takes place between June and July, the dry and cool season for the Southern Hemisphere. Infants, usually twins, are born after a gestation period of about 130 days. Most births take place between September and November, at the beginning of the rainy season when fruits are most abundant. Usually only one female breeds in a group; however, in about 15% of groups, the oldest daughter produces a litter in the same year as her mother. Infants remain with their mothers initially but, after they are one week old, all members of the family help carry and feed them, with the father taking on the largest portion of the responsibilities. Young are typically exploring their surroundings by five weeks, weaned at three months, and become sexually mature at 18 months.

Lifespan

Depending on the rate of predation, GLTs live five to 15 years in the wild. In captivity, they may live longer.

Conservation Status and Threats

Endangered (IUCN, 2020) | CITES Appendix I | Included as “endangered” on the Brazilian Official List of Species Threatened with Extinction

The wild population of GLTs dipped to around 200 individuals in the early 1970s, primarily due to habitat destruction and capture for the pet trade. Deforestation within the GLT range began in the 1500s and was driven by several factors, including timber harvest and production of charcoal, sugar cane, and coffee, and, later, conversion of forest to cattle pasture. Today, the most serious threat is urban development. In 1973, 43 zoos and breeding facilities stepped in to help save these critically endangered animals through a comprehensive breeding program, which resulted in the reintroduction of 146 zoo-born GLTs back into their native habitat in Brazil between 1984 and 2000. Today, 52% of the wild GLT population are descended from those reintroduced individuals. The wild population has recovered thanks to significant conservation efforts in Brazil and from supporting zoos around the world. In 2003 GLTs were “uplisted” from critically endangered to endangered.

Despite these efforts, golden lion tamarins are not yet safe from extinction. Threats to this species still remain; notably, habitat fragmentation, unplanned urban development, and, very recently, an outbreak of yellow fever. Research has determined that, in order for GLTs to be considered saved from extinction, there needs to be a population of at least 2,000 tamarins living in a habitat of 62,000 acres or 25,000 hectares of protected and connected forest. Today, approximately 2,500 GLTs live in 120,000 acres (49,000 hectares) of habitat. However, the habitat consists of 13 forest fragments, none with a GLT population large enough to be viable in the long term. Most GLT habitat is privately owned and less than 17,300 acres or 7,000 hectares are connected and effectively protected.

Priority conservation actions include the planting of forest corridors to connect the habitat fragments and working with local landowners to assure permanent protection of the forest remaining on their farms.

