

Cyclopes didactylus (Silky Anteater)

Family: Cyclopedidae (Silky Anteaters)

Order: Pilosa (Anteaters and Sloths)

Class: Mammalia (Mammals)



Fig. 1. Silky Anteater, *Cyclopes didactylus*.

[<http://www.itsnature.org/trees/mammals-trees/pygmy-anteater/>, downloaded 20 October 2011]

TRAITS. The silky anteater is referred to by various different names such as “pygmy anteater”, “dwarf anteater” and “two-toed anteater” (Nowak, 1999). In Trinidad, it may also be called “poor-me-one”. The silky anteater is the smallest of all anteaters with a size similar to that of a squirrel. Its total body length usually ranges between 36 to 45 cm. Its tail measures 18 to 26 cm in length (Eisenberg and Redford, 1999). They typically weigh between 175 to 500 grams (Nowak, 1999). The fur or outer covering of the silky anteater is golden yellow in colour but may vary between golden yellow to a grey in some individuals. This thick coat always appears to be soft and shiny. The silky anteaters found in Trinidad may have brown chests (Emmons, 1990). In *C. didactylus*, the eyes are black, nose tip is a pink colour and the undersides of their feet are a dark pink or reddish colour (Fig. 3). On each of their forefeet, silky anteaters have two large, curved, sharp claws which they use for gripping onto branches of trees or for defence against predators. Its rear feet are flexible, similar to hands of a human (Tarbox, 2009). They have a long prehensile tail (Fig. 4) that is used for grasping braches and for swinging from one tree to another

(Nowak, 1999). The tail is also used for balance or to seize a branch as an “emergency brake” if it slips (Tarbox, 2009).

ECOLOGY. *C. didactylus* inhabit moist and wet tropical forests (Henderson, 2010) ranging from southern Mexico to some parts of Brazil. This small anteater can also be found on the Caribbean island of Trinidad. The silky anteater’s most common habitat is that of the silk cotton trees (*Ceiba*) (Nowak, 1999) but may also be found in mangrove forests (Henderson, 2010). The silk cotton trees offer a substantial amount of concealment for these golden coloured mammals. They mostly reside in the treetops at a height of 5 to 30 feet above ground. They stay below the uppermost canopy to avoid detection by birds of prey (Nowak, 1999).

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION. The silky anteaters are solitary, usually spending time alone except when caring for young. They may be found singly or moving in pairs made up of a mother and her young. A female usually has a strictly spaced home range (Eisenberg and Redford, 1999) of about 3 hectares, with almost no overlap with the home ranges other females occupy. The home range of a male is larger and may be up to 11 hectares. There is generally overlap with the territory of a few females (typically 3) and he may go wherever he pleases. *C. didactylus* is polygamous and males may mate with all the females within its home range (Tarbox, 2009). Neither males nor females of this species tolerate individuals of the same sex within their home ranges (Wainwright, 2002). In Panama, the silky anteater occurs at a density of 0.77 per hectare (Eisenberg and Redford, 1999).

ACTIVITY. The pygmy anteater as it is also called, resides in trees and rarely ever leaves the heights of the treetops to move down to the forest floor. They spend almost all of their waking and sleeping hours in the trees (Tarbox, 2009). *C. didactylus* is nocturnal, sleeping during the day and foraging for food at night. They move very slowly and are not very offensive animals (Schober, 2009). They spend their daytime curled in a ball, approximately twenty metres off the ground (Fig. 2). The silky anteater almost never sleeps in the same tree for more than two days consecutively (Shabel, 2011). They rest in a hollowed out area of a tree in a nest of dry leaves (Nowak, 1999). During a night of foraging, the silky anteater barely meets its energy requirements so during the day; while it is resting, this anteater enters a torpid state. During this condition they are able to lower their body temperature and metabolic rate to an extent where they appear to be almost comatose. While they sleep, they curl themselves up into tight balls which along with their thick fur help to conserve body heat while they sleep (Wainwright, 2002). They are light sleepers and are easily awakened, in the event that they need to defend themselves against predators (Cavendish, 2008). While moving on the forest floor, their long claws obstruct them so they move very slowly (Nowak, 1999).

FORAGING BEHAVIOUR. These animals are nocturnal so their foraging is done during the night time (Nowak, 1999). This anteater consumes strictly insects on the wild, but has been observed to consume fruits while in captivity. This species of anteater usually feed almost exclusively on ants. They may occasionally feed on termites and accidentally on larger insects. They also have different preferences of ant varieties as compared to other species of anteaters. They favour smaller ant varieties (Wainwright, 2002) and those varieties which reside in tree branches located far above the ground and on lianas. Lianas are plants which dangle from tree branches (Johnson and Kraucunas, 2002). Studies done by Best and Haranda show that the silky

anteaters are opportunistic feeders meaning that they track the relative abundance of the ant species they consume, eating species that are found everywhere more frequently rather than species which are rarer (Eisenberg and Redford, 1999). They never consume an entire colony at one time. Instead, they only take about 1% or less of the available ants, then finds another nest to feed on. To obtain ant colonies inhabiting trees, *C. didactylus* cuts the tree bark with their shark front claws (Tarbox, 2009). They coat their long tongues with saliva that is very sticky and search the insides of the nests of prey. The anteater removes its tongue from the nest, back into its mouth and swallows the ants stuck on it (Johnson and Kraucunas, 2002). In Panama, the adult silky anteater was observed to visit up to 38 trees (Wainwright, 2002), encounter up to 18 species of ants (Tarbox, 2009) and may consume between 3000 to 8000 individual ants (Schober, 2009) in a single night of feeding. They limit their feeding time on each ant nest as the ants may begin to attack (Tarbox, 2009). This anteater hardly ever leaves the treetops so they acquire their water from the dew or rain water present on leaf surfaces (Nowak, 1999).

COMMUNICATION. The silky anteater makes very few sounds. Communication usually occurs between mothers and their offspring or during altercations (Shabel, 2011). The sounds that are produced consist of soft whistles, snorts, sniffs and hisses. The juvenile pygmy anteater has a high pitched grunting noise which it uses to attract its mother's attention (Cavendish, 2008). Young silky anteaters may also produce loud, scratchy distress calls. A series of dry clicks are quickly repeated when it feel threatened. This becomes a continuous, prolonged, scratchy noise over time if the threat persists (Wainwright, 2002). Little has been published on communicative behaviours of this species, other than vocal communication.

SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR. Typically, silky anteaters are solitary but they occasionally nest with a mate. Summer or between May to August is the regular mating period (Wilson and Reeder, 1993). The gestation period of the silky anteater ranges from 120 to 150 days (Schober, 2009), or about five months. One cub is usually produced by the female during each pregnancy (Tarbox, 2009). The female gives birth on in a nest made in a hole of a tree and filled with dry leaves, usually high up in a tree (Schober, 2009). Little else is know about the sexual behaviour, as this animal is difficult to maintain and study in captivity and particularly tricky to study in the wild.

JUVENILE BEHAVIOUR. From birth, the young is cared for by both the mother and the father (Schober, 2009). Some studies state that the father is not present for a long period after the young is born. The father may carry the young on its back at times. Both parents feed the young on regurgitated, semi-digested insects (Wilson and Reeder, 1993). Before the young can forage on its own, it nurses on its mother's milk (Emmons, 1990). At nights, the mother goes foraging for food for about eight hours and leaves the juvenile alone on a tree. The cub may explore the tree branch for ants and maybe termites. The mother returns at dawn everyday and relocates to another tree where they rest for the day. She carries the young from tree to tree either on her back or her tail (Tarbox, 2009). The juvenile silky anteaters are usually able to walk at about a month after birth (Cavendish, 2008). The young silky anteaters venture out at the age of about nine months and is said to be fully grown at about 12 months (Wilson and Reeder, 1993). At this age, the young usually leaves its mother and its mother's territory to find its own home range. *C. didactylus* has an estimated lifespan of three years in the wild (Tarbox, 2009). The longest one ever lived in captivity was two years and four months (Wainwright, 2002).

ANTIPREDATOR BEHAVIOUR. Its small size makes silky anteaters vulnerable to predators. If intimidated, it hangs on a branch by its tail and holds its front claws to cover its face (Fig. 3) (Johnson and Kraucunas, 2002). It leans forward and pounces, claw first at the attacker. If this is successful, it bends its claws in to flesh of the attacker. They are very slow, (Wainwright, 2002) however, so fall prey to many predators such as the harpy eagle, eagle hawks and the spectacled owl (Schober, 2009).

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Fig. 2. A silky anteater curled up in a ball, asleep.

[<http://wondersoftheanimalkingdom.com/animals/silky-anteater-prettier-than-the-polyester-anteater/>, downloaded 19 October 2011]



Fig. 3. Silky anteater in defence position and brown chest visible.

[<http://www.art.com/products/p13519221-sa-i2262131/pete-oxford-pygmy-silky-anteater-south-america.htm>,
downloaded 18 November 2011]



Fig. 4. Silky Anteater with its long, prehensile tail wrapped around a branch.

[<http://muchacostarica.com/blog/2009/10/13/how-i-came-to-know-a-silky-anteater-part-2.aspx>,
downloaded 10 November 2011]

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