10 FASCINATING THINGS YOU MAY NOT KNOW ABOUT SLOTHS ©Dr. John Freedman 2026

1. *Where and when did sloths first evolve?*

Sloths evolved around 36 million years ago from a branch of the mammalian order Pilosa (which includes and sloths and anteaters) in South America. They spread to the Caribbean via land bridges about 33 million years ago and much later to Central and North America via the isthmus of Panama which was only created as a continuous mass about 3 million years ago.

2. *Where are sloths found today?*

Sloths are only found in South and Central America today despite their being very wide-ranging throughout North America until about 11,000 years ago. Two-fingered sloths (genus *Choloepus*) range most broadly, all throughout Central America and deep into the South American Amazon. Three-fingered sloths (genus *Bradypus*) are found in tropical rainforests of Central America and just the very northern part of South America. So despite the classic smiley 'poster sloth' usually being a 3-fingered species, the 2-fingered fellows are actually more common overall. One species of *Bradypus*, the pygmy three-fingered sloth, is restricted to a single tiny island (Isla Escudo de Veraguas of Panama).





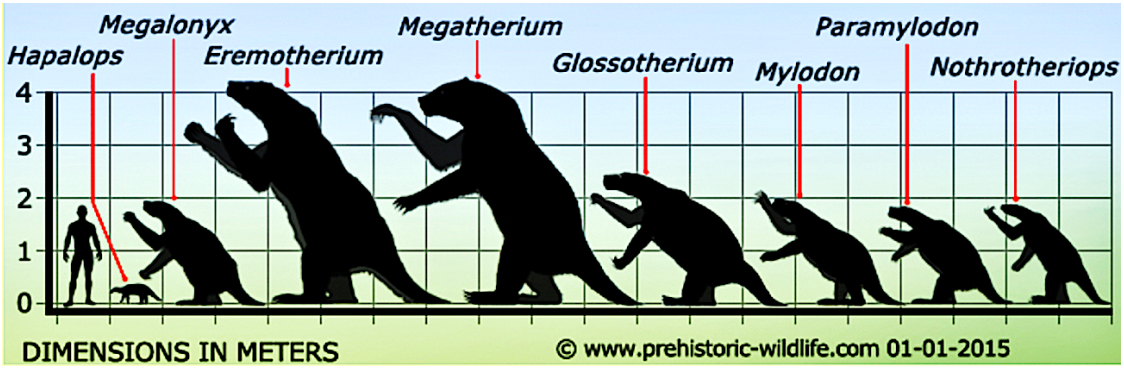
There are only 6 species of sloths extant today, all arboreal (tree sloths), and 3 of which can be found in Central America: the brown-throated 3-fingered, the Hoffman 2-fingered, and the rare pygmy 3-fingered noted above. These are noted with a red border in this infographic:



By the way, you'll often see 'toes' rather than fingers used to classify sloths (*e.g.,* 'the brown-throated three-toed sloth') but in fact ALL sloths have 3 toes on their hindlimbs and it is actually the forelimbs that differ in number of digits. So technically it is the number of fingers and not toes that correctly differentiate, and that is the classification scheme I use here.

3) *How many species of ground sloths are extant today?*

None. Only tree sloths have survived evolutionary pressure. The amazing giant ground sloths were once very numerous and ranged from Patagonia to Alaska. But climate change and human predation did them in.



A great place to see some giant ground sloth fossils is at the La Brea Tar Pits Museum in Los Angeles.













You can also see a life-sized giant ground sloth at the Sloth Sanctuary just south of Puerto Limon, Costa Rica (L) or in the wonderful BIOMUSEU in Panama City, Panama (R).





4. *Are sloths the sleepiest animal?*

No. Although sloths sleep about 20 hours per day, they only win the silver in the sleep olympics. The gold goes to.... the koala - which averages about 22 hrs/day. But sloths do move much slower than koalas.



5. *What is the Spanish name for sloth?*

Perezoso - which means lazy.

6. *Can sloths swim?*

Yes! - faster than they can walk.



7. *Are sloths are herbivores*?

Yes and no - three-toed sloths are indeed strict herbivores and are almost exclusively folivores (leaf-eaters).



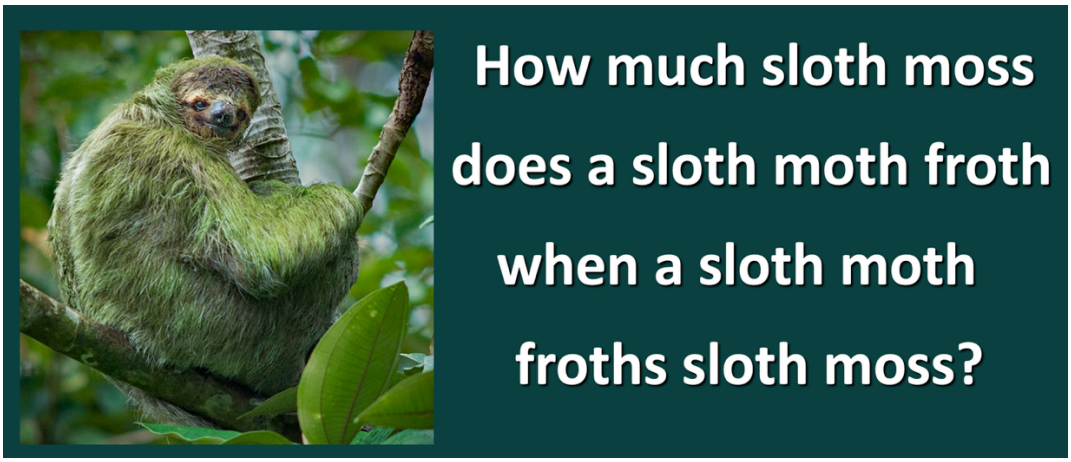
But two-toed sloths are omnivorous. They'll supplement their plant matter diet as needed with insects, small lizards, bird eggs, or carrion.

8. *Why do sloths often have a greenish tinge to their fur?*

Sloths live tri-symbiotically with an algae known as **'sloth moss'** (the 'moss' part is a misnomer - it's algae). The algae gets a nice warm, moist home in the sloth's fur. The sloth gets 2 major benefits from the algae: (1) it can lick and feed off of the nutrient-rich algae when food is scarce, and (2) the green tinge can help with camouflage from predators (eagles, jaguars and ocelots). But there's a third member of the symbiotic team - see below.

9. *What are sloth moths?*

Sloth moths play a critical role in the life cycle of sloths and interact with the sloth/sloth moss symbiotic loop. The sloth moths live in the sloth's fur and they secrete a **froth** which promotes a moist environment for algae growth. The moths' waste also promotes algae growth by acting as fertilizer. Late in their life cycle the moths fly down to the ground and lay their eggs (in the sloth's poop) which then hatch into larvae and eventually fly back up to live their adult lives in the sloth's fur and begin the cycle anew. So there is a 3-way symbiosis between the sloth, the 'sloth moss' algae, and the sloth moths. Who knew.



10. *What is the greatest threat to sloths today?*

Deforestation is by far the greatest threat. Not only does it destroy habitat, it forces sloths to migrate via roads or power lines, which results in deaths by motor vehicles or electrocution.

BONUS QUESTION for trivia fans: *What do you call a group of sloths?*

Although there is no formally agreed upon dictionary term for a group of sloths, the Sloth Conservation Foundation recently held a contest to name a group of sloths, and the 2 finalists had a runoff with the results: 79% for A SNUGGLE of sloths, 21% for A SMILE of sloths. So A SNUGGLE it is.

You can learn more about sloths from the SLOTHOPEDIA: https://www.slothconservation.org/slothopedia

