

A most unusual mammal

1. Have you ever heard of an aye-aye (pronounced 'eye-eye')? Not only is its name unusual but its appearance is also very strange.
2. The aye-aye is found only in Madagascar, an island about 400 kilometres east of the continent of Africa. When scientists first discovered this bizarre mammal they thought it was a type of rodent. It has a large bushy tail like a squirrel's and a face similar to another rodent, the raccoon. Like rodents, the aye-aye has very large incisor teeth, which are used for biting and cutting and grow continuously throughout its life.
3. However, the aye-aye is a primate: an order of intelligent mammals with large brains that includes monkeys, chimpanzees, lemurs, apes and humans. Its torso, or main part of its body, is shaped like a monkey's. The aye-aye's thick fur is coloured black or dark brown, with flecks of white in the guard hairs around its neck. Weighing approximately two and a half kilograms, it is the largest nocturnal primate.
4. The aye-aye's face is paler than the rest of its body. It has large leathery ears and bright yellowish-orange eyes that are luminous in the night light. But the most peculiar feature of the aye-aye is its hands. Each hand has very long, thin fingers with curved, claw-like nails. The middle finger is so thin it resembles a bone and can be up to three times longer than the other fingers.
5. Why does it have such unusual hands? The reason is another aye-aye peculiarity. It uses its middle finger to tap on branches and listen to locate hollows where insect grubs will be hidden. A woodpecker uses its beak to tap in a similar way. The aye-aye then chews into the wood with its strong teeth and scoops out the grub with its elongated finger. Besides these juicy grubs, the aye-aye also uses its finger to extract the pulp of fruits such as coconuts and mangoes.
6. Although the aye-aye is a gentle creature, it is feared by many of the Madagascan people. They are frightened by its spooky facial appearance and especially its witch-like hands. Many believe they will die if the aye-aye's bony finger points at them. Its name 'aye-aye' is thought to be a cry to warn people that one is nearby.
7. Aye-ayes have been reduced in numbers and are now endangered due to people killing them out of fear and as a result of much of their habitat being lost when forests are cleared for logging and farming.

