



PHOTO BY DIANE WHITE ROSIER

**A crowned lemur gazes at the camera (this page); Hale, a red-ruffed female, shows her luxurious coat while perched in a tree (opposite).**



# LEARNING FROM THE LEMURS

*A Myakka City foundation works to protect the playful primates from Madagascar*

by Gretchen F. Coyle



“Congested Area” said the sign near the only blinking-light crossroad in Myakka City. Cattle munching away on oranges, horses grazing, and a circa-1800s cemetery were about the only things that could be seen while driving west from Arcadia on Route 70.

Turning onto Myakka-Wachula Road, I witnessed a tranquil scene of small farms and homes. Another sign caught my eye: “Winter Home of Circus Pages.” In addition, out here in the middle of nowhere, there was a large wild animal rehabilitation center, a wild mustang reserve, and the Lemur Conservation Foundation (LCF).

Sure that Myakka City attracted the unusual and bizarre, my friend and I proceeded down a sandy road where a locked gate signaled our destination. Just past the gate, which program director Monica Hoffine

opened for us, were LCF’s ninety-acre grounds.

According to the theory of evolution, lemurs are supposed to have been our cousins some seventy million years ago. Most people have enough trouble keeping track of their second cousins, much less getting along with them; so why should anyone worry about these little critters from Madagascar? And what are they doing living in the wilds of Florida?

The Lemur Conservation Foundation was founded by Penelope Bodry-Sanders in 1996. She had visited Madagascar in 1993 and was moved by the environmental crisis there. The island has lost approximately twenty-seven million acres of forest through slash-and-burn technology and logging, and the scars on the earth are readily seen.

Fascinated by the island’s charismatic lemurs and influenced by a colleague, Dr. Ian Tattersall, Bodry-

Sanders decided to devote her life to studying and repopulating the lemurs of Madagascar. The foundation, which includes the Mianatra Center for Lemur Studies and the Myakka City Lemur Reserve, is carefully organized with a mission to research the primates, educate others about them, conduct captive breeding, and eventually reintroduce the lemurs back to Madagascar.

Hoffine came to the reserve in 2001 as assistant caretaker. She handles building and ground maintenance, reviews research proposals, supervises interns and researchers, and tends to the twenty-nine resident lemurs. “I also maintain animal records, participate in zoological and scientific conferences, and ensure that LCF remains in full compliance with the various state and federal regulations regarding the captive management of wild animals,” she says.

The first lemur enclosure we came upon was a ten-acre natural area surrounded by an eight-foot-high fence topped off with another three feet of electrified chain link. A sign indicated that only authorized personnel were allowed inside. Masks and gloves were given out (a precaution so people will not infect the lemurs, not the other way around), and we were instructed not to make any quick moves. Properly attired, we entered the enclosure.

Tyann Marsh, assistant program director, was cleaning pens and getting out food as we passed by. A lemur jumped on her back as she bent over. It was obviously her friend and seemed to be saying, “Let’s get this show on the road; we’re hungry.” Hoffine led us to the forested area within feet of these curious creatures. Constant lemur chatter surrounded us.

With their shiny fur, long whiskers, distinctive eyes, and long, funny tails, these critters charmed us at first sight. To the uneducated, lemurs look like an amalgamation of different monkeys.

**This ring-tailed lemur (main photo) and male red-ruffed lemur (inset) are two of the lemurs that reside at the Myakka City reserve.**



MAIN PHOTO BY BRIAN WATHEN; TOP PHOTO BY GRETCHEN F. COYLE



Most were bigger than large cats but with the same agility. With Hoffine's help, we were soon able to distinguish between the red-ruffed lemurs with their dark tails and the ring-tailed lemurs that looked like a raccoon relative. Eight types of lemurs inhabit the reserve: white-fronted brown, ring-tailed, red-ruffed, red-fronted brown, mongoose, Sanford's common brown, and bamboo.

Happy in their natural woody setting, the lemurs frolicked with each other, nibbled contentedly, and swung from blue plastic feeding stations hanging from trees. From time to time, they sniffed our shoes, posed for pictures (I swear this is true), and chased anything that moved. There was a feeling of witnessing first graders at recess.

Bewhiskered was the name of an appealing male bamboo lemur weighing about two pounds. He charmed us by eating "primate maintenance biscuits" out of a plastic bowl. Sitting down, he dug in with his "hands," held the biscuit gently, and nibbled away. Others scurried around, competing for our attention by showing us their tricks, interacting with other lemurs, and chomping away on native vegetation.

According to *Ny Aiaz Ako (Ako the Aye-Aye Lemur)*, a small paperback book of artwork sold for fund-raising purposes by LCF, the foundation's lemurs spend their days in a natural forest area: "[They] behave as they would in the wild, leaping through the tall trees and living with other wildlife, such as birds, squirrels, opossum, raccoons, tortoises, rabbits, and snakes. The lemurs are so adaptable that they eat many of the native Florida trees, plants, and flowers as well as the food they are given."

Most of the lemurs are free ranging



**Monica Hoffine, program director at the Lemur Conservation Foundation, gives a primer on different types of lemurs.**

and are put inside only in case of hurricanes or extreme cold. They are trained to come inside for food rewards. Much as in Madagascar, living in the wild can be precarious at times. One lemur at the reserve was eaten by an owl, and another fell to its death. A few are housed in heated and air-conditioned shelters for their own safety because of antisocial behavior or illness.

We were aware that we were in the presence of wild animals, closer than most people had ever been. Hugs, and even pats on the head, were out of the question. Nor did we want to attempt to make contact; someone had been scratched a few weeks before causing a cut that required stitches.

Related to monkeys and apes, lemurs

are found only in Madagascar and at zoos. An incredibly poor island country located off the east coast of Africa in the Indian Ocean, Madagascar is politically unstable, and most of its population of sixteen million people is starving. So instead of being on an endangered list, lemurs are hunted for food.

From the first lemurs that miraculously crossed the Mozambique Channel fifty-five million years ago, seventy different types evolved into animals ranging in size from as small as a mouse to as large as a gorilla. Madagascar will never be able to protect its large number and variety of lemurs, so the task has fallen to dedicated people and organizations like LCF. "The government of

**Lemur paws are used for everything from eating biscuits to scrambling among the trees.**



TOP PHOTO BY GRETCHEN F. COYLE BOTTOM PHOTO BY HAGIT BERKOVICH

A red-ruffed lemur rests on a branch; a feeding station hanging in a tree captures the lemurs' attention (inset).



MAIN PHOTO BY JERYL TAN; INSET BY GRETCHEN F. COYLE



**Guinness, a ring-tailed lemur, finds a treat (top); Bewhiskered, a bamboo lemur, enjoys a snack (bottom).**

Madagascar is doing all it can to ensure the long-term preservation of its unique flora and fauna,” says Bodry-Sanders. “But the country needs as much international assistance as it can muster, including [from] organizations like LCF.”

“Madagascar is considered one of the highest priorities for biological conservation in the world because the widespread and escalating destruction of its ecosystems endangers its remarkable species diversity,” writes former LCF program manager and current veterinary student Brian Grossi in an LCF brochure. “Lemurs are among the most diverse groups of animals from common ancestry. We focus on species that other captive programs choose not to propagate.”

Scientific research on lemurs is being conducted with specific rules that assure the animals are being studied in an exclusively natural environment. A Scientific Advisory Council and Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee work closely with students and employees.

It is now known that lemurs are smarter than anyone thought; for example, they can do simple arithmetic and perform certain skills.

According to Hoffine, research is showing that lemurs are giving other types of primates “a run for their money” when it comes to intelligence. This research has generated a lot of response and enthusiasm. Students and researchers from schools such as Rutgers and Yale universities, University of Miami, and New College of Florida have taken part in experiments to gauge the lemurs’ intelligence. Obviously there is much more between their ears than those appealing eyes.

LCF has formed a working relation-

ship with the Department of Forests at the University of Antananarivo in Madagascar, where education and research efforts are conducted at Tampolo Forest Station. Hopefully the education outreach conducted there will help the people of Madagascar understand the animal and plant treasures that surround them. But that will likely be an uphill battle for such an impoverished nation, where survival is accomplished by any means and half the population is under the age of eighteen.

People might ask, why should anyone care about lemurs? “All animals and plants are part of the wondrous web of life, and, as such, all are to be respected and protected from wanton destruction,” says Bodry-Sanders. “Lemurs are valuable not only for their position in the natural order of living beings but as research subjects that can teach us a great deal about primate evolution. Lemurs are the living representatives of the ancestors of all primates, having evolved to the present along a more direct path than monkeys, apes, and humans, and [they] have much to teach us about our most ancient ancestors.”

*For more information about the Lemur Conservation Foundation, call 941-322-8494 or visit [www.lemurreserve.org](http://www.lemurreserve.org).*

*Freelance writer Gretchen F. Coyle has written for Times of the Islands since its inception. A part-time resident of Useppa Island, she writes about Florida history, out-of-the-way destinations, and the environment.*



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