



## COTTON TOPPED TAMARIN

Phylum: Chordata, Class: Mammalia, Order: Primates, Family: Callitrichidae  
*Saguinus oedipus*

**Weight:** 1-1.5 pounds (400-600 grams)  
**Body length:** average = 8 inches from head to base of tail  
**Tail length:** 12-17 inches  
**Lifespan:** 10-15 years  
**Habitat:** tropical forests  
**Range:** northwest Colombia in South America



### Status:

- **ENDANGERED**
- The cotton-top tamarin is one of the most endangered primates in the world. Today, only 2,000-3,000 of these animals survive in the wild.
- Cotton-top tamarins are also listed by CITES (Appendix I), an international agreement that restricts trade in wild animals and their parts.

**Threats to survival:** Cotton-top tamarins, like many tropical forest animals, are threatened by **habitat loss** due to deforestation for agriculture, firewood collection, and flooding for hydroelectric power projects. Each year, an estimated 3,000 square miles of tropical habitat are destroyed in Colombia, the only place in the world where cotton-top tamarins are found.

An estimated 20,000-40,000 cotton-top tamarins were imported into the United States for **biomedical research** during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Exportation was banned in 1973 when the animal was declared endangered. Today, cotton-tops are still threatened by **capture for the local pet trade**.

**Diet in the wild:** Cotton-top tamarins feed primarily on insects and fruits. Their light weight allows them to utilize food sources on the outermost tree branches which are inaccessible to other larger primates. They may supplement their diet with small lizards, birds, eggs, or sap, which they lick as it drips from trees.

### Special features:

- These remarkable little primates derive their common name from the striking **shock of white hair** on their heads. Each individual has his or her own unique "hairdo"; some longer, some shorter, some sleeker, some fluffier.
- Cotton-top tamarins are **arboreal**, meaning they live in the trees. They are excellent climbers and jumpers.
- Cotton-top tamarins belong to a family of Central and South American primates (**Callitrichidae**) which includes marmosets, another tiny, arboreal monkey, and several other tamarin species. This family of pint-size primates includes the smallest monkey, the pygmy marmoset, which weighs less than five ounces. The largest member of the family, the lion tamarin, usually weighs less than two pounds.
- Captive cotton-top tamarins are the only primate that spontaneously develops colon cancer. Therefore, cotton-top tamarins are of interest to the human medical community for cancer research.

### Social behavior:

- Live in groups of 2-12 individuals
- Cotton-tops are **territorial** and use scent marking to define territories. When a group of cotton-tops comes into contact with another group, rather than have a physical battle, they will threaten the other animals with a territorial display.



- Cotton-top tamarins have a vocal repertoire of over 30 vocalizations, including chirps, shrill calls, squeaks, and other bird-like calls.
- **Predators** of cotton-top tamarins: birds of prey, snakes, small cats

### **Breeding & Care of young:**

- Puberty = 15-17 months
- Estrous cycle = 20 days
- Cotton-top tamarins generally form **monogamous** pairs. Many times, **only one reproductively active female and male** are present within a group. Reproductive activity of subordinate animals in the group is usually suppressed by the presence of the dominant breeding pair.
- In the wild, most young are born at the onset of the rainy season, during April through June. (SSP Manual)
- **Gestation period** = 180 days
- Cotton-top tamarins typically give birth to **twins**.
- The average birth weight of an infant tamarin is 40-50 grams, almost 20% of the female's weight. "That is equivalent to a human female giving birth to two 10 pound infants!" (Savage)
- **All members** of a cotton-top tamarin family **help care for the young**. Young cotton-tops are usually carried by their family members for 70-80 days.
- **Parenting behavior is learned** in cotton-top tamarins and in many other primates. "In a captive study, females with no experience rearing younger siblings had 100% mortality of their first infants." (Rowe 75)
- **Weaning** begins at 4-5 weeks

### **Efforts to save Cotton-top tamarins:**

Fortunately, steps are being taken to save cotton-top tamarins. **Field studies** are being conducted to learn more about the cotton-top tamarin's distribution within its habitat, its reproductive patterns in the wild, and its diet. The problems inherent in studying tiny, fast-moving primates in dense forests have challenged scientists to come up with some creative solutions. For example, biologists have designed tiny backpacks to hold radiotransmitters and dyed some of the tamarins' white "mohawks" with brightly colored human hair dyes so that individual animals could be monitored.

However, successful, long-term conservation programs for cotton-top tamarins, and many other species, must go beyond just scientific studies. Several **innovative programs involving local people** have been implemented. Schoolchildren in the village of Coloso have learned more about their local forests. Older students have acted as mentors to help younger students paint murals of the cotton-top tamarins on a main street wall in the village. As the illegal capture of cotton-top tamarins for the pet trade is still a threat, conservationists started a program in which sling shots, a weapon commonly used to hunt and capture wildlife, are traded for stuffed cotton-top tamarin toys. The toys have become a prized possession among village children, and the hunting of tamarins for the pet trade has decreased in the area. In a third program, alternatives to open-fire wood cooking are being developed, to cut back on the amount of trees harvested for firewood.

Innovative programs such as these have increased awareness and helped the people develop a sense of local pride about the special creatures which are found only in their area. By helping native people realize that there is value in such animals, beyond short-term economic gains, and by finding practical alternatives to the over-consumption of natural resources, conservationists are helping to ensure the preservation of the cotton-top tamarin and many other species which share its forest home.

