

One of the seven silky anteater species drowsing in a tree, which is where it spends its life when not actually dining on ants Credit: Pedro Da Costa Silva, Karina Molina and Alexandre Martins

# Scientists Astonished to Find Six New Species of Silky Anteater Hiding in Plain Sight

It was hard to identify silky anteater types because they're tiny, nocturnal and live in treetops, but somebody took the trouble and had quite the surprise

By **Ruth Schuster** | Dec 15, 2017

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Scientists had thought that the silky anteater was a single species. Now having actually looked at the tiny animals, who spend most of their lives asleep in trees in remote parts of Central and South America, they realize there are seven species. At least.

Following a decade of expeditions and analysis, a Brazilian team reports on the validation of three previously suspected silky anteater species and the addition of three more in the [Zoological Journal of the Linnean Society](#). Altogether with the originally known one, that makes seven silky anteaters.

There could be dozens of species of silky anteaters – who knows. Not a lot of zoologists live in rain forest treetops and these things are strictly nocturnal, and small. Not that the animals, also called pygmy anteaters, are easy to see in broad sunlight. During the day, they find a shady spot in the canopy and curl their length of 35 centimeters, of which 20 centimeter is tail, into a tight ball. Their average weight is about 300 grams, the size of a hamburger.



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**Closeup of a wild silky anteater** Credit: Pedro Da Costa Silva, Karina Molina and Alexandre Martins

The characterization that this little anteater isn't one species but seven (if not more) followed a lot of climbing into the canopy to find the rare animals during 10 expeditions, and genetic analysis of more than 287 deceased ones found in museums.

One species or seven, they have this in common: They don't do much and their metabolic rates are slow. Also, the living animal has very soft fur, Miranda tells Haaretz.

They are not known to eat anything but ants – for instance they aren't known to eat termites. Also, like cousin the giant anteater, their claws are really long, to dig ants out of things. (The Safari Park in Ramat Gan has two giant anteaters, which spend their days avoiding visitors. It's very hard to see them.)

#### **So now we know there are:**

\* The common silky anteater, *Cyclopes didactylus*, which lives in northern South America and northeastern Brazil



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Drawing blood for testing from a wild silky anteater, who will then go back up his tree. Drawing blood for testing from a wild silky anteater, who will then go back up his tree. Credit: Pedro Da Costa Silva, Karina Molina and Alexandre Martins

\* Ida's silky anteater, *Cyclopes ida*, from the north of the Amazon River and left margin of the Negro River

\* the Central American silky anteater, *Cyclopes dorsalis*

\* the Yungus silky anteater, *Cyclopes catellus*, from Bolivia

#### And the newly identified species:

\* Thomas' silky anteater, *Cyclopes thomasi*, named for Oldfield Thomas, a British naturalist who had a penchant for silky anteaters

\* Xingu silky anteater, *Cyclopes xinguensis*, from the Xingu River in Brazil

\* Perhaps the most obvious is the red silky anteater, *Cyclopes rufus*, from Rondonia, also in Brazil, which happens to be fiery red. That was quite the giveaway.

It's nice that they were identified, but we may never get to know the silky anteater cousins. Their habitat is under threat from deforestation, mining, and agriculture, says Miranda, who also heads the conservation NGO Projeto Tamandua, which hopes to rescue sloths, armadillos and anteaters. Now we know there are more to rescue than we thought.



**Ruth Schuster**  
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