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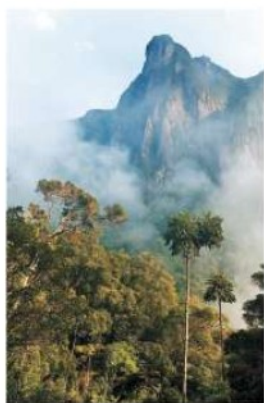
SAVING THE "GHOSTS" OF MADAGASCAR

ALSO
DECIPHERING DARK ENERGY
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SAVING THE SILKIES

IN MADAGASCAR, AN AMERICAN RESEARCHER LEADS THE EFFORT TO PROTECT ONE OF THE WORLD'S RAREST MAMMALS, A LEMUR CALLED THE SILKY SIFAKA BY ERICA R. HENDRY PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEVIN SCHAFER



CLUSTERED IN THE MOUNTAINS of northeastern Madagascar, they are known locally as “ghosts of the forest,” because they seem to flash through the trees. To scientists, silky sifakas are known as one of the world’s rarest mammals. There are fewer than 1,000 still alive, perhaps only 100, says Erik Patel, a PhD candidate at Cornell University who has spent years observing the animals in the island nation’s Marojejy National Park.

A type of lemur, a silky sifaka weighs between 11 and 14 pounds and measures up to three-and-a-half-feet long. Silkies “fly like angels,” local people say, leaping as far as ten yards from tree to tree. “You could be following them and suddenly you look up and they’re a quarter-mile away,” says Kevin Schafer, a Seattle-based wildlife photographer who spent two weeks with Patel documenting the elusive primate.

The bone-white animal (a.k.a. *Propithecus candidus*) is called silky because of its luxurious fur. The word “sifaka,” shared by several lemur species, echoes the screech—“shee-faak!”—made by some frightened lemurs, but not the silky.

People are the silkies’ main threat. Some hunt them for food. Others burn their forest habitat to make room for rice fields. Loggers also destroy silky habitat when they cut down, illegally, valuable rosewood trees.

Patel works with communities to discourage logging and the hunting of silkies. He has taken children to see them in the wild and hired villagers to track them. Unless destruction of their habitat ceases, he fears, the animal will become a ghost in fact. “Time is quickly running out,” he says.

Silky sifakas (right: engaged in grooming) have long eked out an existence in rugged, high-altitude forests (above: Leaning Rock in the Marojejy National Park). Now the growing number of people nearby pose a threat to the furtive primate.








View more of Madagascar's silky sifakas at [Smithsonian.com/lemurs](https://www.smithsonian.com/lemurs)



The silkies' complex diet (opposite top left) consists of some 150 types of flowers, leaves, seeds and fruits and is one reason the lemur has not survived long in captivity. Usually traveling in groups of two to nine (above), the animals spend much of their day grooming one another and playing. Within a troop, parenting duties may be shared; females have been observed feeding infants that aren't their own or carrying them through the treetops. Silkies have long toes and an opposable big toe that lets them grab branches with their feet. The animals are so arboreal they even sleep aloft. Kevin Schafer's photograph of a frolicking trio (left), a rare view of silkies interacting on the ground, also highlights the pinkish face silkies have—a unique trait. "It must be one of the most difficult places to work in Madagascar," Erik Patel (opposite left) says of the mountainous rain forest where he studies silkies. "It is very steep and there is no formal trail system. [But] when the weather is good, it is just magical."



Of the 100 or so types of lemurs, all in Madagascar, only two are mostly white, including the silky sifaka, which has long, luxurious fur. The animal is also notable for leaping tree to tree (top), bounding ten yards at a jump and prompting some local residents to say the elusive creature flies like an angel. The silky sifaka (left and above) is listed along with four other lemur species as among the world's 25 most endangered primates, with only an estimated 100 to 1,000 individuals remaining. Most live within wilderness preserves, but timber thieves take rosewood, destroying habitat, and poachers hunt silkies for food. Animals outside protected areas are at even greater risk, says Patel: "It's hard to be optimistic about silky sifakas we find there." 

ERICA R. HENDRY is an editorial intern at the magazine. KEVIN SCHAFER specializes in wildlife. His photograph of a flying scarlet macaw graced the cover of the December issue.