The People of the Forest

An expanded educational guide to orangutan biology, behaviour, intelligence and survival.

What is an orangutan?

Orangutans are great apes found naturally only on the Southeast Asian islands of Borneo and Sumatra. Their name comes from the words orang (person) and hutan (forest). They are the world’s largest living tree-dwelling mammals.

Orangutans are not monkeys: like other great apes, they have no tails. They are related to humans, chimpanzees, bonobos and gorillas, and share roughly 97% of their DNA with humans.

Built for life above the ground

Very long arms, flexible shoulders, curved fingers and grasping feet help orangutans move from branch to branch. Rather than racing through the canopy, they often test branches carefully and may sway smaller trees to reach another crown.

They spend most of their time in trees, although some, especially Bornean orangutans and adult males, also travel on the ground.

PRINTABLE FIELD GUIDE • RANGE

Where orangutans live

Approximate geographic ranges of the three living species.

Where do orangutans live?

Bornean orangutans occupy remaining forests across parts of Borneo. Sumatran orangutans live in northern Sumatra, particularly the Leuser region. Tapanuli orangutans live in the Batang Toru landscape farther south. All three species are classified as Critically Endangered.



Approximate range of the three living orangutan species. Source: OCI Orangutan Facts range map.

Three living species

These are separate species, not three regional names for the same animal.

Bornean **Pongo pygmaeus**	Found on Borneo. Often stockier, with broader faces and darker, coarser reddish hair. Adult flanged males often have large rounded cheek pads.
Sumatran **Pongo abelii**	Found in northern Sumatra. Generally slimmer, with longer, lighter orange hair and narrower male cheek pads, often accompanied by more facial hair.
Tapanuli **Pongo tapanuliensis**	Found only in Batang Toru, North Sumatra. Often has short, frizzy hair; mature males may have flatter cheek pads and prominent moustaches. Described as a separate species in 2017.

Published population estimates

Bornean: approximately 104,700 (2016 IUCN assessment). Sumatran: approximately 11,694 (2021 to 2023 range-wide survey). Tapanuli: approximately 716 (2021 to 2023 range-wide survey; 95% confidence interval 645 to 792).

These are estimates drawn from surveys in different years, not an exact present-day census. They should not be added together and presented as a precise current world population.

Three Bornean subspecies

The Bornean species includes three recognized subspecies: P. p. pygmaeus in the northwest; P. p. wurmbii in central and southwestern Borneo; and P. p. morio in the northeast. Camp Leakey and Tanjung Puting lie within the Central Bornean subspecies’ range.

How to tell them apart

Coat, build and male cheek-pad shape provide clues, but individuals vary. Tapanuli and Sumatran orangutans in particular can look similar. Geography and genetic evidence are more reliable than appearance alone.

PRINTABLE FIELD GUIDE • DAILY LIFE

Life in the Rainforest

What orangutans do all day, and why rainforest knowledge matters.

What do they eat?

Fruit is especially important, including figs, durians and many other seasonal fruits. Orangutans also eat leaves, flowers, bark, seeds, insects and occasionally honey. Food availability changes across the year, so they must remember where useful trees are located and when they bear fruit.

They eat a remarkably varied forest diet and help disperse some of the seeds of the trees on which they feed. This is one reason their survival is tied to diverse, functioning forest, not simply any area covered by trees.

They build beds in trees

Orangutans typically build a fresh sleeping nest each evening by bending and weaving branches into a platform. They may add leafy cushions or coverings for comfort and protection from weather. Young orangutans learn to make nests through observation and practice.

Mostly solitary, not antisocial

Orangutans are the most solitary of the great apes, but their social lives are more complex than living entirely alone. Mothers spend years with dependent offspring. Adults have overlapping home ranges, and males communicate over long distances using calls.

The long call

Adult flanged males can produce powerful long calls, aided by an enlarged throat pouch. These calls travel through the forest and communicate their presence to other orangutans.

Memory, planning and tools

Wild orangutans remember seasonal food sources and navigate through large, complicated territories. In some populations they use sticks to reach seeds, insects or honey. Leaves may be used as tools, including for protection or handling objects. Tool traditions vary between populations.

Culture is learned

Young orangutans learn by watching their mothers. Skills such as locating food, handling difficult fruits, building nests and avoiding danger may take years to master. Some differences in tool use and feeding practices appear to be passed along through social learning.

Childhood and Reproduction

Orangutans live slowly. That makes the loss of an adult especially consequential.

An unusually long childhood

Infants depend on their mothers for transport, food, warmth and protection. As they mature, they explore nearby branches while staying close enough to watch how their mothers feed, travel and respond to threats.

Young orangutans remain with their mothers for many years, often roughly seven to eight years before full independence. They need this time to learn a difficult way of life in the forest.

One of the slowest reproductive rates

Wild females give birth only about once every seven to eight years on average. A population therefore cannot recover quickly when adult females are killed or removed. A captured infant may represent not only one animal taken from the forest, but also the death of its mother.

How long do they live?

Orangutans can live for more than 50 years in the wild, though exact lifespans are difficult to establish because they require following individuals for decades. Some animals in professional zoological care have lived into their 60s.

Why do adult males look different?

Some mature males develop large cheek pads called flanges, an enlarged throat pouch and a much heavier body. Others remain unflanged while still being sexually mature and able to reproduce.

Flange development is influenced by complex hormonal, social and physiological factors. The presence of a dominant male does not simply switch flange development on or off. Some males remain unflanged for many years.

A mother cannot easily be replaced

When an infant loses its mother, it loses both direct care and its main teacher. Specialist rescue and rehabilitation may save its life, but cannot fully recreate the experience of learning to survive with a wild mother.

PRINTABLE FIELD GUIDE • CONSERVATION

Protecting the People of the Forest

The animal’s unusual intelligence and slow life history make protecting mature forest particularly important.

Why are all three species threatened?

Deforestation, agriculture, roads, mining and fire remove or divide rainforest habitat. Wildlife killing, capture and conflict with people cause additional losses even in areas where forest remains.

A green landscape is not always functioning rainforest. Oil-palm plantations and small isolated forest patches do not replace the variety of seasonal foods, nesting trees and connected habitat that orangutans need.

What makes a population vulnerable?

Orangutans need access to food across changing seasons and, over generations, opportunities for movement and reproduction. When forests become isolated, animals may be stranded in unsuitable patches or forced into risky contact with people.

Their very slow reproduction means that even modest increases in adult deaths can produce lasting population declines.

What helps?

Conserving and reconnecting suitable rainforest habitat, reducing conflict, enforcing laws against killing and illegal possession, and involving local communities are all important. Rescue and rehabilitation help individual animals, but they do not replace forest protection.

Share what you learned

1. Why is a long childhood useful for an orangutan?
2. How is rainforest different from a tree plantation?
3. Why does the loss of a single adult female matter for so long?
4. Which features help an orangutan move through the canopy?
5. Why should every population estimate include its survey year?

Sources and further reading

OCI Orangutan Facts · Bornean orangutan · Sumatran orangutan · Tapanuli orangutan

IUCN Red List · Smithsonian National Zoo: Orangutan