

THE CONFUSED SLOTH

written and photographed by Cyril Brass

Visit after visit, I have been fortunate to see and photograph them. Sometimes hanging high on the treetops. Other times at eye level clinging to a branch.

The creature is the 3-toed sloth and the place is Costa Rica. This small Central American country does an excellent job of protecting its wildlife and eco-systems through national parks and private reserves, still allowing wildlife enthusiasts and nature lovers to enjoy their visit. The sloth is one of the main wildlife attractions in Costa Rica.

Situated on the Pacific coastline, Manuel Antonio National Park is one of the smaller parks in Costa Rica and one of the most visited by tourists. On several previous trips this tropical region has provided me with excellent encounters to view and photograph the 3-toed sloth in their natural habitat. It is always rewarding to capture images of the characteristics and behaviors of wildlife in their own backyard.

The sloth is the slowest mammal on Earth and one of its strangest creatures. This tree living mammal can be found in tropical rainforests of Central and South America. Its entire life is spent living in trees and hanging upside down in trees with only brief moments spent on the ground.

However, my journey to this tropical paradise in July 2005 provided me with a very different sloth experience. I arrived late in the evening in San Jose, Costa Rica's capital. It was difficult to sleep knowing my adventure would begin in a few hours at first light. Travelling on an early morning bus ride to the Pacific coast village of Manuel Antonio, it was time for some sun, sand, adventures and wildlife.

With so many accommodations to choose from in the area, my choice was a small cabina. My room was surrounded by a lush green garden not more than fifty meters from the white sandy beach and warm Pacific water.

While Pablo, the office attendant of the cabins, processed the payment for my stay for the next 3 nights

(which actually turned out to be 7 nights) I told him partly in English and partly in Spanish of my previous visits to Costa Rica and Manuel Antonio; that I was a wildlife and adventure photographer looking to get some good shots of monkeys, coatimundi, iguanas, anteaters and sloth.

He was quick to inform me of a "Perezoso" nearby, not knowing the English translation. I knew exactly what he was talking about. He pointed me in the direction of the sloth sighting. Wow, a wildlife encounter already!

I quickly ran back to my room to grab my camera gear, in hope the sloth would still be there. How far could he have gone considering he travels at such a leisurely pace? I felt I had an excellent chance to get a few snapshots.

Pablo was correct and I was in luck. A small group of tourists had gathered standing along the main road. But something appeared odd as I approached the growing crowd.

No one was looking into the trees where you would expect to see a sloth. Instead everyone had their eyes focused on a road sign. There he was.

This confused sloth had climbed up a road sign instead of a tree. What was he thinking? Strange thing about this was, the sign and post were both made of metal. Not strange that he could climb the post, as his powerful arms and legs with long sharp curved claws could securely grasp onto anything,

but strange that he didn't figure out what he was about to climb, which would not feel like any other tree he had climbed previously. But this particular sloth

decided to venture up the road sign anyway.

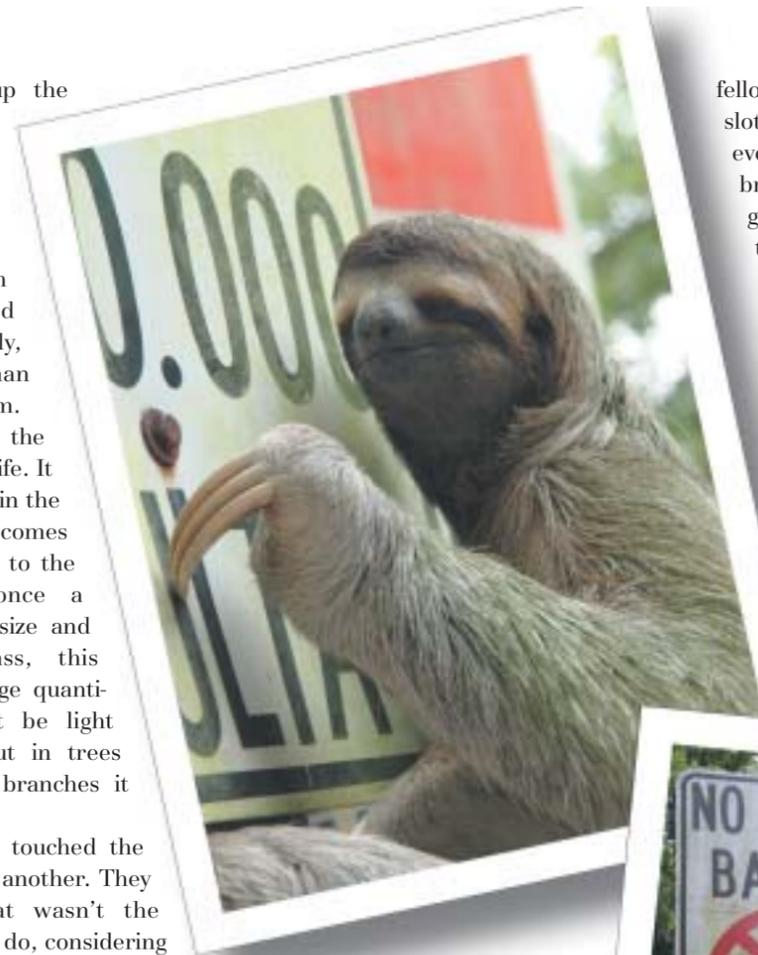
Closely, the group watched the unusual looking creature. How awesome was this to see a sloth up so close? He turned his head, ever so slowly, watching the human species surrounding him.

The sloth lives in the trees almost its entire life. It eats, sleeps and mates in the trees. The only time it comes to the ground is to go to the bathroom, usually once a week. With its body size and lack of muscle mass, this enables it to store large quantities of food and yet be light enough to move about in trees without breaking the branches it travels on.

One boy carefully touched the motionless body. Then another. They seemed unaware that wasn't the safest thing for them to do, considering the possibility of transferring animal and human diseases. The thick coat of the sloth is unlike that of almost all other mammals. Because it spends most of its life upside down, the hair grows from its belly down to its back allowing the rain to run off the body easier. A dog's coat on the other hand grows from its back down to its belly.

Living in tropical rainforests means lots of rain with high humidity. This continuously moist environment allows for tiny one-celled algae and mold to grow in the thick coats of the sloth making the hair look greenish instead of its natural grayish brown. This greenish tone actually creates better camouflage for the animal in its natural habitat and more protection against its predators such as the jaguar and eagle. It also makes it more challenging for humans to spot one, as it can appear more like a clump of moss growing on a tree branch than an animal.

I was able to come within inches of this helpless sloth. No need for my telephoto lens on this encounter. What a



fellow's attempt to transfer the sloth was successful. The sloth eventually grabbed hold of the branch releasing his viselike grip on the signpost. Some of the crowd stopped the passing traffic as the fellow carried the rescued creature carefully across the road to the edge of the rainforest. He set the sloth down next to the base of a real tree. Methodically the sloth started his climb, gripping his claws into the tree, extending one arm at a time, until he was safe at last, high in the branches.

great feeling it was to be that close and to get some great shots.

Several of the onlookers spoke about what, if anything, should be done about the sloth. Whether to leave him on the signpost or move him to a tree, was the issue. There was no place to go but down to the ground for this creature, a very risky place for a sloth. If you were ever to see a sloth on the ground, he would be crawling, pulling himself forward with his arms, as he is unable to walk upright, due to weak back muscles and paradoxically strong shoulder, neck, hip and arm muscles.

Any attempt by this sloth to cross the busy road would most likely end in his death. One gentleman walked across the road into the forest to retrieve a large branch to carry the sloth to safety. With a little poking and prodding with the long thick stick, the



Sometimes, it seems, Nature needs a helping hand or, in this case, a helping branch. ca

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