

THE EVOLUTION OF LEMURS

Pistant islands are homes of many strange inhabitants: plants and animals found nowhere else on our planet. Lemurs, such as the sifakas, are found only on the island of Madagascar, the world's fourth largest island which lies off the southeast coast of Africa in the Indian Ocean. Some 45 different species of lemurs have been discovered, of which 17 are now extinct. No monkeys, or apes, or other primates (except for humans, who were late arrivals some 2000 years ago) have been found on Madagascar – only the lemurs. But why are lemurs here and nowhere else?

This same sort of question was repeated over and over in different forms as the naturalists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries explored widely separated regions of the world, such as South America, Australia, the Galàpagos Islands, the Malay Archipelago, and Madagascar. These travellers (Charles Darwin among them) were astonished by the vast numbers and extraordinary diversity of the organisms they encountered. The naturalist explorers wondered if perhaps it was possible that groups of plants and animals, separated from one another – as on islands – change and diversify over time into new kind of organisms.

The lemur known to scientists as *Propithecus coquereli* (figure) is about the size of a small house cat, the total length of the animal from head to tail is approximately one meter. It is among the largest of the surviving lemurs. Sifakas are the acrobats of this primate world, using their long tail for balance as they fling themselves through the air. They can cover a distance as great as 7 metres in a single leap. These animals often rest in the tamarind trees, found in the dry forest region of Madagascar. When faced with an enemy, they hiss the alarm call that gives them their name: *shifakh!*



A lemur called coquerel *sifaka*, in Madagascar.

Leggi attentamente il testo e rispondi alle domande che seguono.

- A** What kind of primates live on Madagascar?
- B** How do sifakas get their name?