

VERTEBRATES

Primates

Domain	Eukaryota
Kingdom	Animalia
Phylum	Chordata
Class	Mammalia
Order	Primates

55 MYA – PRESENT

Primates are an order of mammals that include lemurs, lorises, tarsiers, monkeys, apes, and humans. Primates range in size from the mouse

lemur, weighing as little as 30 g, to the mountain gorilla, which can weigh up to 200 kg!

Fossil Record

The oldest fossil primates have been found in Europe and North America in rocks from the Paleocene, about 60 million years ago. The first fossil monkeys are from the Eocene 50 million years ago, and the first fossil apes are from the Oligocene, 30 million years ago. The first great apes which are ancestors of gorillas, chimpanzees, orangutans, and humans, appear in the fossil record in rocks from the Miocene, about 14 million years ago. The first fossil of *Australopithecines*, the ancestors of humans, appeared in the Pliocene about 5 million years ago and the first fossil humans (genus *Homo*) appeared in Pleistocene rocks about 2.5 million years ago.

Habitat and Lifestyle

Many species of primate are arboreal and live in trees, while some are partially or mostly terrestrial, and a few species, including humans, are entirely terrestrial. Most primates live in the tropics but a few live in higher latitudes. It is only humans that occupy every continent from the tropics to very high latitudes.

Primates eat many different types of food, including other vertebrates, insects, leaves, flowers, fruits, and seeds. Primates give birth to altricial, highly dependent, young, which require prolonged protection and, in most cases, transportation by adults.



A family of ring-tailed lemurs, *Lemur catta*, living on Madagascar. Image from NickyPe, pixabay.



Skull of early hominid, *Australopithecus africanus*, early Pleistocene (about 2 million years old), South Africa. Image from Jim Frazier.

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DID YOU KNOW



Another species of small human (*Homo floresiensis*) lived on the island of Flores in Indonesia up until 12 000 years ago. They were small, slightly over 1 m tall, and weighed only about 25 kg. It is thought that a volcanic eruption led to their extinction, along with the dwarf elephant which occupied the same island.