What do sloths eat? Leaves, plus nine more animals' menus

Peabody blog · Science · updated 2026-10-30

A three-toed sloth eats leaves, and that's why it moves slowly. Plus what a koala, panda, giraffe, blue whale and five more animals eat, in plain words.

A three-toed sloth eats leaves. That's the whole menu on Peabody's sloth page, and it's the reason a sloth is slow. Leaves give very little energy, so a sloth saves energy by moving slowly and resting a lot.

Why leaves make a slow animal

Peabody's sloth page says a three-toed sloth's stomach has several parts and digests leaves very slowly. Its long, curved claws hook over branches, so hanging takes almost no effort, and it eats, sleeps and even gives birth upside down. It lives in the rainforests of Central and South America, and the rainforest page shows who it shares the trees with.

A few more things from the page that children like:

- Tiny green plants called algae grow in a sloth's fur, and they help it blend in with the leaves.
- Sloths are surprisingly good swimmers.
- A sloth climbs down to the ground only to go to the bathroom. The page says how often, which is a good reason to open it with your child.

One honest note. The sloth page has no number for its length, height, weight, speed or lifespan, and says "no checked number yet" on each line. No page I trust gives one, and I'd rather leave a gap than fill it from memory.

Nine more animals, nine more menus

These are the "eats" lines from the animal pages, in Peabody's words. The last column uses the six words Peabody sorts every animal into: plants, meat, plants and animals, bugs, fish, and tiny floating sea life.

- Animal: Koala · What it eats: eucalyptus leaves · Kind of eater: plants
- Animal: Giant panda · What it eats: bamboo, mostly, and sometimes other plants · Kind of eater: plants
- Animal: Giraffe · What it eats: leaves from tall trees, especially acacias · Kind of eater: plants
- Animal: Monarch butterfly · What it eats: nectar from flowers; its caterpillars eat only milkweed · Kind of eater: plants

- Animal: Leafcutter ant · What it eats: a fungus they grow on chewed-up leaves, and sweet juice from the leaves · Kind of eater: plants
- Animal: Ruby-throated hummingbird · What it eats: nectar from flowers, and tiny insects · Kind of eater: plants and animals
- Animal: Blue whale · What it eats: krill, tiny shrimp-like animals, by the mouthful · Kind of eater: tiny floating sea life
- Animal: Meerkat · What it eats: insects, spiders, scorpions and small lizards · Kind of eater: bugs
- Animal: Bottlenose dolphin · What it eats: fish, squid and shrimp · Kind of eater: fish

Two of these are my favorites to read aloud. The leafcutter ant doesn't eat the leaves it cuts, it eats a fungus grown on them. And the biggest animal on the list lives on some of the smallest.

Peabody says what an animal eats in plain words and never how it gets it. That's a rule I set for the whole section, so you can read any page with a young child and not be surprised.

A pattern to wonder about

The sloth, the koala and the giraffe all eat leaves. The koala page says it sleeps most of the day in the fork of a tree, and that it gets most of its water from the leaves it eats. Is that like the sloth? I'd let your child have the first guess. The pages don't say, so a guess is all anyone has, and that's a fine place for a conversation to start.

Ways to play with menus

- Compare two diets. Compare Two has an "Eats" row on every pair. On Asian elephant vs blue whale it says one eats plants and the other tiny floating sea life.
- Take the quiz. The What does it eat? quiz gives eight animals and three boxes each, read aloud. Every answer comes from the animal pages.
- Sort the cards. Print the fact cards for one habitat and sort them by what they eat.
- Meet your animal. In the Which animal are you? quiz one of the seven results is the sloth.

Questions grown-ups ask

Do sloths eat anything besides leaves?

Peabody's sloth page lists leaves, and that is all it lists. I don't have a checked source for more.

Why are sloths so slow?

Peabody's page says leaves give very little energy, so a sloth saves energy by moving slowly and resting a lot. Its stomach also digests the leaves very slowly.

How long do sloths live, and how big are they?

Peabody doesn't have a checked number for the three-toed sloth's size or lifespan yet. I'd rather wait for a source I can point to than guess.

Peabody (peabody.kids) is free through the end of 2026, with no ads and no sign-up on the animal pages. When you've finished with menus, the library has stories to read next.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/what-do-sloths-eat