

Sloth

SCHOOL

by Charles C. Hofer

Teaching
Rescued
Sloths
How to
Be Wild
Again



Little, loving Olivia



Cookie looks comfortable!

Rescue, Rehabilitate, Release

Over the years, The Sloth Institute has rescued and released hundreds of sloths. Some come to TSI with minor injuries that need attention. They might stay for a few days or weeks. Other sloths come to TSI with painful burns from touching electric wires or deep wounds from being attacked by a pet dog. These sloths could take months or even a couple years to be rehabilitated and returned to the wild.

Sam Trull has seen it all. She's a wildlife conservationist originally from Durham, North Carolina. She co-founded The Sloth Institute in 2014 and serves at its executive director. For Trull, it's been a journey over three continents to find her passion. Born and raised in North Carolina, she studied primatology in college and then traveled throughout Africa.

Eventually, she arrived in Costa Rica and began working with a wildlife rescue center. Back then, rescuing injured or abandoned sloths was a grim prospect. Once, she was handed a baby sloth and was told, "They never survive; do whatever you need to do to keep it alive."

Lush rainforest meets the warm surf of the Pacific Ocean in the town of Manuel Antonio, Costa Rica. Scarlet macaws flash through the trees. An occasional howler monkey bellows from the canopy. A chorus of colorful birds sing night and day. It's a tropical paradise. It's also a great place to go to school...a rather unusual school. Here, the best students get to just hang around and sleep most of the day.

Up in the treetops is a recent graduate. Her name is Hope. She's a three-fingered sloth. In 2020, Hope was found orphaned and unable to survive on her own. Luckily, someone found her and brought her to The Sloth Institute (TSI), a non-profit organization/NGO dedicated to the

rescue and release of sloths. Over the next year, Hope went to Sloth School, TSI's rehabilitation program that nurses sloths back to health and returns them to the wild. Today, she is enjoying a happy and healthy life just hanging around and munching on the tasty leaves of Cecropia trees.



Sam Trull, co-founder of The Sloth Institute in Costa Rica (left), and wildlife veterinarian Ana Maria Villada Rosales examine a sloth.



Trull warms up an enclosure by adding leaves to it.



A Team Sloth member arrives with a sloth in a new location.



A content Sebastian is free but wears a collar for tracking purposes.



Raspberry makes her way on a "sloth speedway."



Trull at work in her lab

Trull was up to the challenge and soon a love of sloths was born. "That was when I realized sloths needed their own organization to truly survive, thrive, and be properly released," she says.

Rescuing and rehabilitating sloths is one challenge. Releasing them into the wild successfully can be especially difficult.

For years, Trull was told it couldn't be done. Sloths were too fragile, people said. Sloths will get eaten by predators, they argued. "I was not OK with that answer," she says today. "I didn't want to see them in cages for the rest of their lives."

Trull and her team at TSI learned that with a lot of work, rehabilitated sloths could be released and live long and healthy lives in the wild. Her approach to sloth release has been infectious. She says that other organizations—in Ecuador, Venezuela, and beyond—reach out to her seeking advice on how to release sloths.

"A lot of it is lack of knowledge," Trull says sympathetically about why people call. "But a lot is fear of not knowing what is going to happen to them when they release them. And knowing someone else has done it gives other places the confidence to try it with their sloths."

Sloth School

TSI's rehabilitation program is called Sloth School. It's a multistage process of rehabilitating sick and injured

sloths back into the wild. However long they attend, the sloth students usually experience many ups and downs along the way.

Sloth School begins with "primary school." Whether it's a baby sloth separated from its parents or a severely injured adult sloth, in this first stage, TSI staff focus on feeding and nursing the sloth back to health. If all goes well, sloths can move on to "middle school" where they live in a small enclosure filled with an apparatus that resembles a large jungle gym. Here, they'll learn how to climb and regain their strength.

Sloths then move on to "high school." This is a large enclosed area



In "primary school," sloths are fed and nursed back to health.

filled with trees and plants that mimic the natural environments of Costa Rica. Here, sloths will learn how to live on their own and how to forage for food. They also will gain experience in socializing with other sloths.

Eventually, sloths may move on to the final stage of Sloth School. "University" happens when TSI staff releases the sloths back into the wild. After release, sloths will usually live on the grounds of a 55-acre resort that houses TSI. Staff can track the sloths and make sure they're on the way to successful lives in the wild.

At this stage the sloths are free to leave the grounds and venture into the Costa Rican rainforest. One recent Sloth School graduate, a two-fingered sloth named Gwen, wandered almost two miles (3.2 km) away to find a new home in the nearby national park. There, she found a mate and eventually had offspring of her own!

Saving Sloths

For Trull and the TSI staff, the rescue, rehabilitation, and release of sloths is only part of the work. Raising awareness about the human impacts to sloths is an important element in sloth conservation. From Honduras to Bolivia, all species of sloths are surrounded by human-made threats.

Pet dogs regularly attack sloths. Powerlines can electrocute and burn sloths. They get killed or injured crossing roadways. Still, habitat loss might be the biggest threat to sloths throughout their range. Clearing areas for houses or ocean views can be devastating for sloths.

Sloths not only live in trees but use them to get around. "One tree can be the difference between life and death," says Trull. "Everything has to be connected for them. So they're a good flagship species. If it connects for them, it will connect for other species as well."

To help sloths and other rainforest creatures, TSI works with public and private landowners to help restore lost canopy connections. One solution is installing "speedways." These are durable climbing ropes attached to



Ian, who has "graduated from high school," prepares to make the jump to the wilds of "college."

Know Your Sloths

» There are six species of sloths worldwide, all of which live in Central and South America.

» The sloths' family tree (*Xenarthra*) includes other oddball animals like anteaters and armadillos.

» Their natural predators include the jaguar, ocelot, and harpy eagle.

» The sloths' slow nature is a survival strategy. By moving so slowly, they stay hidden and blend into the forest canopy.

» Sloths mainly feed on leaves, but some can also eat eggs and insects, too.

» Sloths poop about once a week. But pooping from high in the treetops would alert predators. Instead, sloths (slowly) climb down to the ground to do their business. And they gotta make it quick. During the bathroom break, sloths are exposed to any predators that might be lurking nearby. Who knew going to the bathroom could be so dangerous!



treetops that help keep the canopy connected. Speedways can help reconnect parts of the forest after other trees have been lost to forest clearing.

Projects like sloth speedways are just one of many conservation efforts underway. There's still a long way to



Phantom, a graduate, is about to get a new lease on life.

go to ensure the sloths of Costa Rica have safe rainforests to live in. But Trull and the team at TSI are making a difference—one sloth graduate at a time.

Charles C. Hofer is a wildlife biologist and writer living in southern Arizona. He had the pleasure of visiting The Sloth Institute (www.theslothinstitute.org) and learning about their work during a recent road trip through Costa Rica.