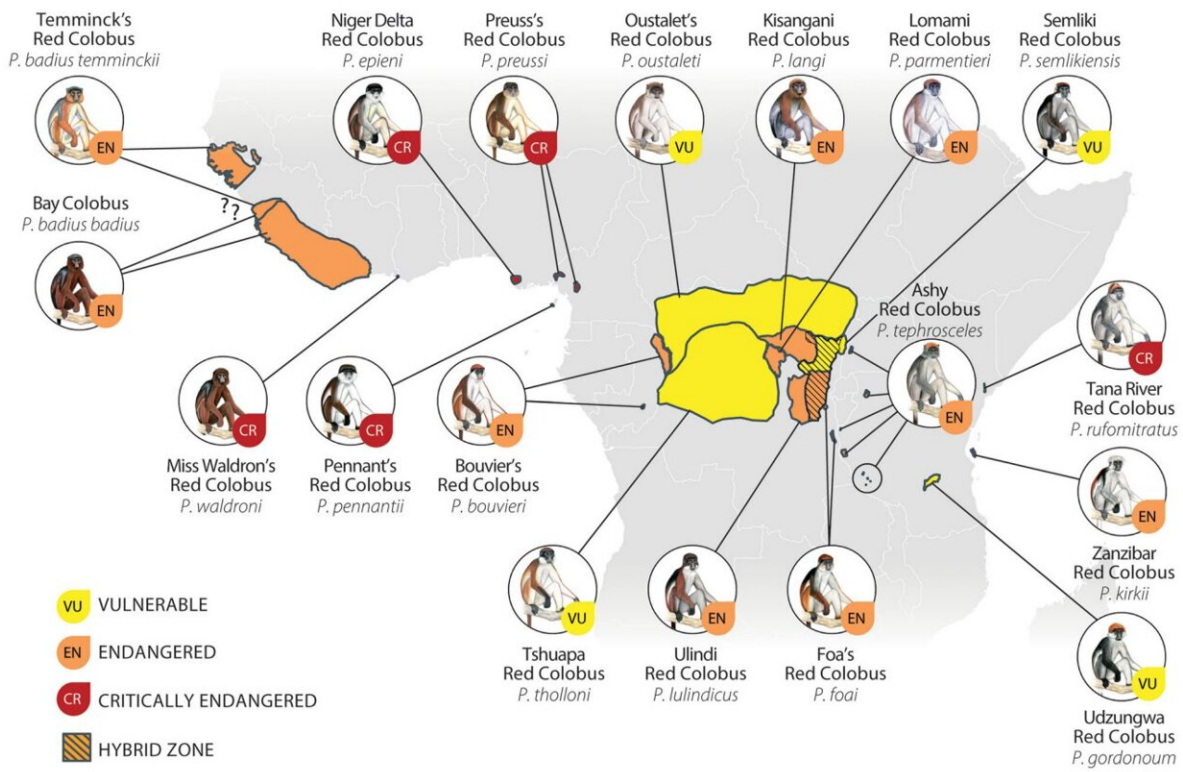


Red colobus are Africa's most endangered monkeys—protecting them will also safeguard forests

August 16 2024, by Joshua M. Linder and Nelson Ting



Geographic range and IUCN Red List of Threatened Species conservation status of the 17 red colobus (*Piliocolobus*) species. Credit: *Conservation Letters* (2024). DOI: 10.1111/conl.13014

Many people have never heard of a [red colobus](#), yet they are Africa's

most imperiled group of monkeys.

There are 17 species of red colobus found in [tropical forests](#) from Senegal in west Africa to the Zanzibar archipelago in east Africa. These photogenic monkeys have aesthetically appealing hairdos, coat colors and color patterns. They weigh, on average, between [5kg and 12kg](#) and take daring, long-distance leaps between trees to find foods that other primates find difficult to digest, like leaves and unripe fruit.

We are primate experts who specialize in studying how to conserve red colobus and other primates. With experts from Africa, Europe and the United States, we drew up the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's [Red Colobus Conservation Action Plan](#). This five-year plan, which runs from 2021 to 2026, aims to make the red colobus a high priority animal for conservation purposes.

In the action plan and our [latest published research](#), we argue that conserving the red colobus will benefit African tropical forests.

This is because [evidence from several sites](#) shows that red colobus are among the first large mammals to disappear from a hunted forest. They vanish before more well-known species such as gorilla, chimpanzee, and elephant die out in forests from hunting. Therefore, the absence of red colobus, or a declining population, is an early warning indicator of emptying forests and eroding ecosystems.

Red colobus conservation will also help to train and employ the next generation of African conservationists and improve human food security and [public health](#).

Why are red colobus in danger?

According to the [IUCN Red List of Threatened Species](#), every species of

red colobus is threatened with extinction. Hunting by humans for meat is a leading cause of their decline. Red colobus live in large, noisy social groups. They tend not to flee like other mammals do in the presence of a hunter. This makes them easy targets.

Hunting has caused the probable extinction of [Miss Waldron's red colobus](#) from Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. This monkey was last seen alive by scientists in 1978, making it the first primate to likely have gone extinct in the last 300-500 years. Forest loss and degradation from logging, agriculture, mining, wood fuel production and infrastructure development also threaten red colobus because they rely so heavily on the oldest and tallest trees in a forest.

Why invest in conserving red colobus monkeys?

It is important to protect the red colobus from extinction. When funds and resources are directed at conserving red colobus, this helps safeguard and restore some of Africa's most important forest habitats that the red colobus live in. These include the largest remaining forest blocks in west Africa, the Gulf of Guinea forests and large swathes of the Congo Basin forest. These forests are key for mitigating the impacts of global climate change.

Making red colobus a high conservation priority has already proven to be a successful strategy for conserving African tropical forests. The protection of [Zanzibar red colobus](#), for example, was a key impetus in the creation of Zanzibar's only [national park](#), [Jozani–Chwaka Bay](#) and the Kidikotundu–Nongwe–Vundwe Reserve. Both of these areas protect large areas of indigenous forest on the island.

The forests in which red colobus live also support the livelihoods and health of millions of indigenous and local human populations in Africa. This is why conserving the red colobus needs to happen in partnership

with forest-dependent communities. In Nigeria's Niger Delta, for example, a [Memorandum of Understanding](#) has been signed by a [local community](#) to establish a red colobus community conservation area.

In the Sambel Kunda area in The Gambia, [international scientists work with communities](#) to support red colobus monitoring, forest restoration, and conservation education. This community-led project protects one of the largest remaining populations of Temminck's red colobus.

What needs to be done?

The [IUCN Red Colobus Conservation Action Plan](#) is the first of its kind for any group of African monkeys. It recommends these actions to conserve the red colobus and preserve Africa's tropical forests:

- grant proper international and national legal protections for all red colobus species
- conduct forest surveys to improve people's understanding of where red colobus live and what they need from the environment to survive
- invest in and expand protected area networks
- support local communities to move away from unsustainable forest harvesting and take up more active roles in preserving their forests and endangered species
- improve links between conservation and public health by strengthening access to family health services and implementing measures to prevent potential [zoonotic disease transmission](#) between monkeys and humans.
- invest in local and global education and outreach programs focused on red colobus and their habitats.

We also formed a Red Colobus Working Group to guide the plan's implementation and promote collaboration with other conservation

initiatives. We've founded the [Red Colobus Conservation Network](#) to connect people interested in red colobus conservation.

Since the action plan's publication in 2021, over US\$500,000 has been directed to projects aimed at conserving red colobus and their habitats. But much more is needed. We conservatively estimate that a modest US\$20 million is required over a five-year period for strategies to prevent red colobus extinctions and preserve African tropical forests.

We call on scientists, conservation practitioners, civil society organizations, local communities, and governments to recognize red colobus as a priority conservation target and a flagship for catalyzing broader African tropical forest conservation efforts.

This article is based on the work of those who contributed directly to the Red Colobus Conservation Action Plan and the many individuals who have contributed to the conservation of red colobus and their habitats for many years.

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