

Look Out Below!

When you look at a clothesline what do you expect to find - clothes, right? Well, not if you're at Joan's house. On her clothesline you are likely to find a sloth. You see, Joan lives in Central America. She is a biologist who studies the habits of tree sloths.

Tree sloths are cuddly creatures about two feet tall, with lots of greenish-colored hair. They live in the jungle. They are called tree sloths because they spend most of their time climbing trees. Their long arms and legs make them good but very slow climbers. A sloth may take as long as 15 minutes to climb a tree! On the ground sloths are even slower, since their arms and legs are not easy to use on level ground.

Joan took a couple of tree sloths home as pets, because they were too difficult to study in the jungle. The green algae that grows in their hair makes them almost impossible to find against the green background of the trees. Sloths can hang motionless for hours in the high branches, so they look just like any other tree branch.

Joan observed the sloth's habits over many months. She watched as they basked in the sun or climbed the woodwork in her house. But she realized something strange about the sloth's behavior. The sloths were naturally housebroken - they never "went to the bathroom." Then one day her favorite sloth, Speedy, got into a bowl of boiled rice and had to be cleaned off. As usual, she hung the sloth on the clothesline by its arms and legs and began to wash Speedy with the hose. As soon as Joan turned the hose on Speedy, he quickly dropped his stored-up fecal material. Joan found this strange behavior also to be true of the other sloths. They would go to the bathroom only when they were hosed down.

How would you explain this strange behavior? Bring your written explanation to class tomorrow.



