

Meerkat

(*Suricata suricatta*)

Habitat and Distribution: Grasslands, plains and savannas in South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique and Zimbabwe (Kalahari Desert)

Size: Up to 12 inches tall and 2 pounds

Wild Diet: Mostly insects, but also small vertebrates, eggs and plant matter

Predators: Hawks, eagles (esp. martial eagle), jackals and snakes

Life Span: 5-15 years

Reproduction: Meerkats are sexually mature at about one year. The females can have as many as three litters a year. There is no breeding season, and favorable conditions can lead to an increase in births. After an 11 week gestation, an average of three offspring are born. Babies are usually weaned between 49 and 63 days. Both mother and father may provide care to the offspring.

Behavior: Meerkats are highly social, and live groups called mobs made up of as many as three family groups (up to 30 individuals total). Each family group is made up of parents and their offspring. Meerkats live in burrows that they construct or find, consisting of elaborate tunnel systems with many entrances. One adult will stay with the young while the others go to look for food. Foraging consists of digging in soil and grass or overturning rocks. While out foraging one individual acts as a sentinel, keeping a lookout and sounding an alarm if predators are seen. The sentinel duty will rotate throughout the group in the course of a day, and switching of duty is announced vocally. Anti-predator behaviors include alarm calling, running for cover, mobbing, defensive threats and covering the young. Meerkats are basically diurnal, but activity is also controlled by soil temperature- in very hot weather meerkats will retreat to their borrows to cool off, and on rainy or overcast days they may not emerge at all.

Conservation Connection:
Secure

Interesting Facts: The 4 digits on each foot end with a sharp, curved claw suitable for digging.

