

Meerkats – college essay



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Meerkats: Standing Tall Steven Fetherolf Strayer University Introduction

Standing tall, the small animal scans the sky for predators, his neck extended and head swiveling side to side, ever diligent in the search for anything that may prove a threat to his group of fellow meerkats. At his fullest height, he barely reaches 12", the average of an adult male in his species. What is this strange animal, looking similar to a mongoose or an elongated squirrel and sporting black "bandit" markings around its eyes that are vaguely reminiscent of a raccoon?

What does anyone know of this incongruous, oft-overlooked creature, whose comparable significance to more exotic animals is virtually unknown? If you have watched the television channel Animal Planet, you may have caught the series Meerkat Manor, a documentary that provides a glimpse into a meerkat's world in an entertaining and personable fashion, the voice-over narrating the mannerisms of members of the meerkat's group and affixing names to each. [pic] Figure 1. Meerkat Family

Interesting facts The meerkat is a small, agile mammal that is indigenous to the southern regions and Kalahari Desert of Africa, and is directly related to the mongoose family. Its scientific name is *Suricata suricatta*, and is classified as a carnivorous mammal (Lester, 2006, Meerkat Info, para. 1). The name "meerkat" originates from the Afrikaans dialect and translates to "marsh cat" in the English form, although it is neither a cat nor does it live near marshes.

The physical attributes observed are that they grow to approximately 12" in height when attaining adulthood, while standing 6" at the shoulder, weigh

approximately two to three pounds, and have a tail that grows up to 8" in length and is used in a method similar to a tripod, providing balance while standing or running. Bodily proportions are not related to being male or female, although colorations and markings afford the ability to determine a meerkat's sex, ranging from brown to orange with grayish heads and a black band of fur surrounding their eyes, which acts as a natural sun shield against the desert's harsh glare.

Their hair is coarse and hollow, layered on its body to afford insulation against the desert's harsh, hot summers, and protect them from cooler weather in the winter. Their fur color is not camouflage, and exhibits a sharp contrast to the lighter shades of the sand in its habitat, making them highly visible to natural predators in the air and on the ground. As a result, several meerkats will stand sentry and act as security while the other members of the gang, the given name of multiple meerkats in a group, forage for food.

The skin pigmentation on their bellies is unique, as they have a dark brown or black tinge that provides for quick absorption of sunlight and generating warmth for the meerkat as they have low tolerances for cooler temperatures (Bennett-Wallberg, 2007, Meerkat Vital Statistics, para. 2). The meerkat's vision is very good, with eyes that have a membrane that offers protection against blowing dust and sand. As well as a meerkat sees, it has difficulty with depth perception, and cannot focus on objects within twenty feet.

As a result of this nearsightedness, they will often move their heads from side to side to obtain corrected perception. Vision is supplemented with a keen sense of smell that gives them the ability to forage and find food buried

under several inches of sand. The meerkat uses its front claws which are curved and sharp, as an excellent benefit when digging for insects. A meerkat must dig an equivalent amount of sand equal to their body weight just to get one insect.

The diet of a meerkat would appear to be less than desirable to most of us, as it consists of crickets, ant larvae (a favorite), worms, grasshoppers, eggs, snakes, small rodents, and scorpions. Even though the scorpion has a stinger with which to inject poison into its victims, the meerkat is extremely tolerant of various deadly venoms, which makes them a predator to some insects and animals that others cannot tolerate. This tolerance to venom ensures that the meerkat has little competition for its diet and further allows them to maintain a steady, plentiful supply.

Due to the harsh, water-scarce deserts in which meerkats live, finding adequate water supplies is nearly impossible and when present, water is dominated by larger animals that consider meerkats to be a meal. Therefore, the meerkat must make use of available moisture and obtains its requirements primarily through its diet. It has been observed that a gang of meerkats will inhabit underground burrows consisting of numerous entrance and exit holes, multiple sleeping and birthing chambers, and having hundreds of feet of tunnels branching off in several directions, which give them the ability to escape predators who invade their homes.

An average gang's burrow may have well over fifteen separate dens and it should be noted that the number of areas provide them the opportunity to rotate their use every three to four weeks. This rotation is a result of parasite

(ticks, ants, fleas) overload, making living conditions both unsafe and unsanitary. Once the parasitic levels have reached a reasonable level, meerkats will re-inhabit the dens. At least one chamber within the burrow is reserved as a bathroom, or litter box, serving as a safe place for relief of bodily functions.

It is extremely unsafe for a meerkat to exit the burrow at night to relieve themselves, so having a “ bathroom” is both remarkably versatile and indicative of their reasoning capabilities. At approximately 11 to 12 months, a meerkat reaches adulthood, although they are sexually mature at 10 months. Each gang will have an alpha male and an alpha female, whose primary role is reproduction. During this time, no others within the group will have sexual relations amongst themselves. Other males will venture away from the gang periodically and attempt to have sex with a female meerkat from another gang, which sometimes ends with the other gang’s female being outcast to avoid competition with the alpha female. Likewise, beta females in a gang will be pushed aside or shunned while the alpha female is gestating and has her pups. According to Weaver (1999), if the beta female becomes pregnant and has pups herself, she may attempt to replace the alpha’s with her own (p. 113). Their gestation period lasts for approximately 70 days until birth is achieved.

During the first two weeks, meerkat pups will remain in the birthing chamber in the burrow systems, then eventually venture outside to learn food foraging techniques. At around six to 16 weeks, a meerkat has the capability to remain on its own, although a meerkat mentor may be assigned to one for well over four months, teaching them how to hunt, stand security and take

care of other pups born within the group. Meerkats have a social structure that helps them survive in the wilderness. Each has a role and responsibilities that support the others, and is of equal importance to the next.

Some stand security, or sentry, and act as a first line of defense against threats; some are primary foragers because they have higher sensitivity of smell and sight, others are excavators and generally are stronger, which gives them the ability to develop intricate tunnels and dens, and a select few, primarily female, act as babysitters who nurture and protect the pups while others are out looking for food. Rarely do fights occur within a gang, but they do occur between rival gangs. A primary reason is conflict of territory, especially when feeding areas are infringed upon.

It is interesting to see these fights, as meerkats of a gang will “ mob” together and appear to be bigger in size and strength. The fighting itself can become intense, with biting and scratching being the primary means of defense. It is unusual, but not unlikely, for deaths to occur during the fight. This happens more often afterwards, when a meerkat returns to its home burrow and is subsequently attacked and killed by its fellow gang members. Meerkats have highly trained senses of smell, and may mistake their own meerkat due to saliva from the fight being deposited on him, making him “ appear” to be of the rival gang.

Finally, it has been proven that while meerkats are beneficial to have near the home as a defense against scorpions and snakes, they do not make good pets, as they are group-influenced and choose to be the alpha, or dominant,

animal in the “ pack”. This may lead to attacks against babies and small children, and especially against house guests that come to visit. References

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