

# MEERKAT



*Suricata suricatta*

## STATUS

- Low Risk.

## ORIGIN

- It is believed that the first meerkats originated in Eurasia about 50 million years ago before migrating to Africa between 20 and 30 million years later.

## HABITAT

- Meerkats live in the arid and semi-arid western areas of southern Africa including southern Angola, Namibia and Botswana as well as northern parts of South Africa.
- This open savannah habitat has an average rainfall of less than 600 mm per year.
- A meerkat's habitat is also home to snakes and 60 other carnivores (lions, jackals, hyenas etc.), which are all potential threats to the meerkat.

## SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

- Meerkats enjoy each others' company and are close to being the most sociable of all carnivores.
- A typical group is made up of 10 individuals, although groups of as many as 30 are not uncommon. A group usually consists of 1-3 breeding females, up to 4 adult males (one dominant), several yearlings, and up to a dozen of the year's offspring. Meerkats often mate for life.
- Meerkats form a cohesive group which cooperate and depend on each other for survival. At least one meerkat will always be on lookout – in a tree or on a rock up to 4 metres high, for an hour or more. Team work is essential for their survival.
- In each group's territory there are dozens of boltholes and dens. Meerkats take part in territorial gang wars in which they defend themselves and their 'home' rigorously.
- A meerkat is both a predator and prey – which means they must constantly scan the skies for birds of prey as well as watch for other predators whilst searching for food.



## DESCRIPTION

- Meerkats are mongooses. The name 'meerkat' is derived from the Afrikaans name for a marsh cat, although they are not cats and do not live in marshes!
- They are miniature carnivores who are little more than 30cm tall, even when they are standing upright on hind legs, supported by their stick-like tail. They weigh about 1kg.
- Meerkats have fang-like canines, small beady eyes and long curved claws.
- At the scent of food (beetles, insects, grubs, small lizards and scorpions), they will forage and dig feverishly.

## POINTS OF INTEREST

- Meerkats rarely drink – they get their liquid from their prey.
- They will harass cobras to avoid having to confront them in a dark den or bolthole. They can tolerate 6 times the venom dose that would kill a rabbit and can also tolerate scorpion venom.