

MEERKAT



notes

ADELAIDE ZOO
EDUCATION SERVICE

ZOO

The Meerkat or Suricate (*Suricata suricatta*) is a type of mongoose found in South Africa. It can be found in dry, open country, often on hard and stony ground. Meerkats enjoy basking in the sun and do not venture from their burrow until after sunrise, returning at dusk.

These burrow-dwelling animals have long, powerful claws that are used for digging in search of food and for excavation of tunnels for their burrows.

The burrow is usually about 5 metres across, with possibly 15 entrances, which are slightly raised from the flat surrounding ground. It may be shared with the African ground squirrel. When food sources are low a colony may split and form a new burrow 1-2 kilometres away.

The Adelaide Zoo's animals are provided with a heated burrow for use as a retreat. The burrows are located under large rocks in their enclosure. They also fulfil their natural urge to dig tunnels by constantly constructing their own.

Meerkats live in colonies of between eight and 30 individuals. Reproduction is predominantly by an alpha pair, that is, the dominant male and female. Normally there is a single annual litter of 2-5 young, each weighing between 25-36 grams at birth. In optimum conditions, warm or wet weather, the female can rear successive litters every 11 weeks. The young Meerkats' eyes open at 10-14 days and they are weaned by 9 weeks of age. A Meerkat can live for up to 12 years.

After warming in the early sun, the colony moves out to forage in its home range, which can be up to 500 metres from the central burrow. The pointed snout is used to sniff out insects and grubs. Small mammals, birds, reptiles and eggs make up the major part of their diet, but some vegetable matter is eaten as well. At the Adelaide Zoo animals are fed several times a day on a varied diet of insects, small whole animals such as mice and day-old chicks, mince and fruits. The food is buried or hidden in the exhibit, which encourages them to search for it. Adults will readily share food with juvenile colony members and use this opportunity to teach the young what is edible. The entire group maintains visual and/or vocal contact at all times and the Zoo's animals can often be heard making soft grunts. All colony members often engage in play, grappling and wrestling with each other. This helps establish an individual's position in the hierarchy peacefully.

One adult, which is usually a male, will maintain constant watch for predators, like hawks or eagles, and will sound an alarm when one is sighted, only heading for cover if attack seems imminent. At the Adelaide Zoo a male can often be seen on an elevated position sitting on his haunches, maintaining a watch for predators and also keeping a close eye on planes, helicopters and birds that fly over. If caught in the open when attacked, the adults will cover the juvenile offspring with their bodies. Meerkats' eyesight is very similar to humans and they are able to see colour.

Although Meerkats are not a Threatened Species in the wild, Zoo's world-wide ensure that a healthy and genetically diverse captive population is maintained for educational and scientific study purposes.

The Meerkats at the Adelaide Zoo have been very successful breeders and in 2005 their home was extended so the family could grow comfortably. The Adelaide Zoo now boasts one of the largest

Meerkat exhibits in the Southern Hemisphere.

These delightful animals, one of the most watched in the Zoo, can be viewed foraging for food, basking in the sun or digging tunnels in their exhibit in front of the giraffe enclosure. Babies are also often present.

A relative of the Meerkat is the Dwarf Mongoose (*Helogale parvula*), which is also exhibited at the Adelaide Zoo.

The Dwarf Mongoose is found in Africa, from Ethiopia to Northern South Africa. They have a similar lifestyle to the Meerkat, living in groups, with an alpha male and female being the main breeders.

These two species are quite unique, as most mongooses are solitary animals, like many other small carnivores.

