

Slender-tailed
Meerkat
Suricata suricatta



Physical Characteristics

- Sexual dimorphism: Male is larger.
- The body and legs of these animals are long and slender. The face is also tapered, coming to a point at the nose and rounded at the forehead. The ears are small and crescent-shaped. Generally, the color of the coat is peppered gray, tan, or brown with a silver tint. The nose is brown. The ventral parts of the body are only sparsely covered with hair. The fore claws are enlarged for digging and the tail is yellowish tan in color with a distinctive black tip. In addition, there are distinctive dark patches around the eyes. Dark horizontal bands run across the dorsal parts of the body except the head and tail.

Average Size

- Length: 16.73 to 23.62 in
- Weight: 776 g (27.35 oz)

Average Lifespan

- In the Wild: 5 to 15 years
- In Zoos: 12 years

Behaviors

- Meerkats exhibit sentinel behavior where one member of the group poses as a look out, watching for predators and other danger. The sentinel sounds alarm by giving a distinct bark. If a parent sounds alarm, its offspring run to and huddle around their mother
- Meerkats are highly social and live in mobs consisting of up to 3 familial groups. There can be up to 30 individuals in a mob. Each individual family group includes a breeding pair and their offspring. Within mobs, animals are usually friendly, but among mobs, serious fights can erupt.
- Although meerkats are basically diurnal, their activity is controlled largely by the soil temperature. They are only active when the sun is present and warms the surface of their burrows. When the weather is overcast or raining, they do not emerge from their underground retreat. Similarly, during midday, if temperatures are too high, meerkats will return to the burrow to cool off.

Habitat and Range

- Habitat: They are found in areas of savannah and open plains and are distributed based on soil type, with firm to hard soils being common living grounds.
- Range: portions of South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique, extending from the south west arid biotic zone and eastward into neighboring southern savanna and grassland area.



Diet

- In the Wild: Meerkats are mainly insectivorous, but will take small vertebrates, eggs, and plant matter. Their animal diet consists of 82% insects, 7% arachnids, 3% centipedes, 3% millipedes, 2% reptiles, and 2% birds.
- In the Zoo: The meerkats get a food mix similar to that of dog or cat food. They also get goods like worms, crickets, and fruit.

Reproduction

- Incubation/Gestation Period: 11 weeks
- Fledging/Parenting: As in all mammals, the mother provides the offspring with milk. Young mothers carry their young by picking them up any which-way, whereas older, experienced mothers always carry young by the nape of the neck. The father meerkat may take an active role in parental care by guarding the young. Because of the highly social nature of meerkats, nonbreeding individuals are often part of the mob. These nonbreeders act as helpers, guarding and provisioning the young.
- Clutch/Litter Size: 3 offspring per litter (up to 3 litters per year)
- Breeding Behaviors: Males initiate copulation by fighting with the female. If the female resists his attempts to mount her, the male will grip her by the nape until she is submissive. During mating, the male grips the female around the middle to maintain his position until copulation has ended.
- Meerkats become sexually mature around 1 year of age.

Conservation

- Status: Least Concern
- No species of mongoose is known to be threatened or endangered.
- Predators include various avian and mammalian carnivores, such as hawks and eagles (particularly the Martial Eagle) and jackals.

Classification

- Kingdom: Animalia
- Phylum: Chordata
- Subphylum: Vertebrata
- Class: Mammalia
- Order: Carnivora
- Family: Herpestidae
- Genus: *Suricata*
- Species: *S. suricatta*

Interesting Facts

- Nonbreeding members of the mob often act as babysitters for nursing females.
- Very young meerkats are unable to dispose of bodily wastes without assistance from their mother. It is important that she lick the perineal area to stimulate excretion of urine and feces.
- The Honolulu Zoo houses only male meerkats. This is to ensure no possibility of an escaped group to establish a breeding population. If this were to occur, they could seriously damage the natural ecosystem.