Meerkats at the Melbourne Zoo

Meerkats love to dig, and humans love to watch them!

Meerkats are not a threatened species, and it is unknown whether wild populations are increasing or decreasing.

# Meeting the Meerkats

Meeting the meerkats at Melbourne Zoo is an important way to connect with the animals of Africa, and to learn about the Zoo’s conservation programs.

There are three subspecies of meerkat: red, grey and slender-tailed, the subspecies at Zoos Victoria.

# About Meerkats

Meerkats live in southern Africa, which is dominated by the Kalahari Desert. Countries where they are found include Angola, Botswana, Namibia and South Africa.

[](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5y7YLOiwBuM)They are small: 26–28cm (with a 22cm tail).

Finding safety in numbers, meerkats live in groups of 10–30, with a female in charge of each smaller family unit. Meerkats spend most of the day foraging for food. A lookout stands on a high viewpoint until relieved by another meerkat. Danger can come from threats such as jackals, vultures, snakes, servals or hawks. Meerkats have a wide range of vocalisations, and warning calls are specific to each form of danger. The pack may band together to threaten a predator or rival pack with much hissing and jumping.

Meerkats are omnivorous, and their diet includes pupae and larvae of moths, butterflies, beetles and flies; termites; crickets; spiders; scorpions; and other invertebrates that they excavate. They also eat lizards, small snakes, birds, eggs and mice. In dry areas they get moisture by chewing local melons, roots and tubers.



Meerkats are not cats, they are a member of the civet family, which includes the otter and mongoose.



# The latest additions

Already one of Melbourne Zoo's top attractions, the resident meerkat family has recently increased - in both bodies and cuteness factor - by five.

A litter of meerkittens, native to South Africa, were born about two months ago and yesterday made their public debut, having just been weaned from their mother.

Now that the litter are on to solid food, they will spend more time in the enclosure where the public can watch them feeding - and engaging in their favourite pastime, posing. "In the wild they eat insects, mice, scorpions and small reptiles," said Melbourne Zoo's senior carnivore keeper Adrian Howard. "But here we feed them live crickets, mince and fruit and vegetables."

The meerkittens, who share the enclosure with their mother, her four sisters, and the litters' father, are being conditioned by keepers to accept some human contact, and will soon be ready for the zoo's Up Close program, where members of the public can hand-feed them.

# general information

These gregarious animals are often seen in groups, and several families may live together in a large community. Squirrel-sized meerkats are mongooses famed for their upright posture. They often stand on their rear legs and gaze alertly over the southern African plains where they live. Mothers can even nurse their young while standing.

Meerkats (also called suricates) work together in numbers. A few will typically serve as lookouts, watching the skies for birds of prey, such as hawks and eagles that can snatch them from the ground. A sharp, shrill call is the signal for all to take cover. While a few individuals guard the group, the rest busy themselves foraging for the foods that make up their varied diet. Meerkats will eat insects, lizards, birds, and fruit. When hunting small game, they work together and communicate with purring sounds. Meerkats are good hunters and are sometimes tamed for use as rodent-catchers.

Meerkat groups utilize several different burrows and move from one to another. Each burrow is an extensive tunnel-and-room system that remains cool even under the broiling African sun. Females give birth to two to four young each year in one of the group's burrows. Fathers and siblings help to raise meerkat young, teaching them to play and forage and alerting them to the ever present danger from above. Young meerkats are so fearful of predatory birds that even airplanes will send them diving for cover.

# fast facts

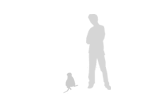
Type: Mammal

Diet: Omnivore

Size: Head and body, 25 to 30 cm; tail, 19 to 24 cm

Weight: Less than 1 kg

Size relative to a 2m man:



# Where do you find meerkats in the wild



Meerkat range