

Meerkats

Meerkats are feisty little mammals that live in the semiarid plains of southern Africa. They are a type of mongoose, and they live in large groups known as gangs or mobs! Each mob of meerkats is made up of several families consisting of up to 30 individuals. There is a dominant couple – a male and a female – in each mob. The female who is usually larger is the leader of the group. Meerkat mobs are very close, and its members spend a lot of time grooming each other, hunting for food and playing.

Meerkats live in burrows. Even though they are very good diggers themselves, they usually take over burrows that other animals have already made and abandoned. There are more than a dozen entries and exits to each burrow and many tunnels and levels inside. These underground homes stay at around the same temperature all year, even when it is very hot or very cold outside.

Each morning, meerkats come out of their burrows and spend a little time warming up in the sun. Then they head out to look for food. They do this for most of the day, taking breaks to cool off in the shade when it gets very hot. Meerkats are carnivores that eat a wide variety of prey. They are fierce and will even attack and feed on poisonous snakes. Because they are such good diggers, spiders, insects, snails, lizards and scorpions are also prey for meerkats. A meerkat's excellent sense of smell helps it to find prey that is buried underground.

Meerkats are very territorial. They have scent pouches under their tails and will rub the pouches on plants and rocks in their territory to “mark” it as their own. They are very fierce about defending their territory from intruders, though they have been known to allow other animals into their mobs.

Meerkats live in very dusty, sunny environments. Because of this, nature has given them dark patches around their eyes to absorb the glare of the sun. You could say that meerkats have natural sunglasses! They also have long pupils to help them see horizontally without moving their heads. Their ears can close to keep out dust and sand while they work on their burrows.

Meerkats (Cont'd)

Unfortunately for meerkats, they have a number of predators, such as eagles, falcons and jackals. To protect themselves and each other from predators, meerkats take turns guarding the mob and its territory while others forage for food. Guards climb up to a high rock and stand straight up to look around for enemies. When a meerkat begins guard duty, it makes a low peeping sound to let the other meerkats know that all is well. If a predator is spotted, the guard will alert the others with a distinct whistle or bark. The warning sound is different depending on whether the predator is coming by land or by air! Meerkats have special tunnels known as “bolt holes” that are used to escape from predators. There may be thousands of bolt holes throughout the territory of a single mob. When meerkats bolt, they kick up a cloud of dust to make it difficult for predators to see them. If cornered, they will stand tall in groups and act fierce in order to scare off their attacker.

Meerkats Questions

1. Meerkats are
 - a. mammals.
 - b. reptiles.
 - c. rodents.
 - d. marsupials.

2. Meerkats live in groups called gangs or _____.

3. Female meerkats
 - a. are usually larger than males.
 - b. are the leaders of the mob.
 - c. Both of these
 - d. Neither of these

4. Meerkats
 - a. usually dig their own burrows.
 - b. usually live in burrows made by other animals.
 - c. live high up on rocks.
 - d. live in crevices that are already in rocks.

5. Which is not something a meerkat eats?
 - a. snakes
 - b. insects
 - c. reptiles
 - d. falcons

6. Meerkats usually search for food
 - a. when it is very hot.
 - b. during the day.
 - c. at dusk.
 - d. during the night.

Meerkats Questions (Cont'd)

7. How has nature helped meerkats adapt to bright sunlight?
 - a. Meerkats have very wide pupils.
 - b. Meerkats can see in dim light.
 - c. Meerkats have dark patches around their eyes.
 - d. Meerkats have very dark skin.

8. When a meerkat on guard duty makes a low peeping sound, he is telling the other meerkats
 - a. that there is a lot of prey in the area.
 - b. that a predator is coming by air.
 - c. that a predator is coming by land.
 - d. that all is well.

9. Which is warning sounds that a meerkat might make?
 - a. chirp
 - b. hiss
 - c. bark
 - d. peep

10. When in danger, meerkats run into holes called _____ holes.

Name _____

Date _____

Meerkats Answers

1. a
2. mobs
3. c
4. b
5. d
6. b
7. c
8. d
9. c
10. bolt