

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

# A Mob of Meerkats

By Guy Belleranti

On a large rock in the dry grasslands of southern Africa, a few slender, foot-tall meerkats stand upright on their rear legs. Their statue-like stances, along with their small pointed faces and large eyes, make a cute picture. However, these meerkats aren't posing for photos. They're acting as guards, watching for predators while others in their group, or mob, search for food.



A mob of meerkats is made up of thirty to forty individuals from several families. They're led by a dominant male and female, but the slightly larger female is considered the top meerkat.

If one of the meerkats standing guard spots a jackal, hyena, hawk, eagle, or other predator, it will call out an alarm. The call will be different if a predator is approaching from the air than if the danger is coming from on land. Mob members usually run for the safety of their extensive underground burrows and tunnels. Sometimes, however, they stand together, hissing, until the predator leaves.

Inside the burrows, other mob members watch over newborns and juvenile meerkats. The burrows have many entrances and exits. The deeper tunnels have comfortable year-round temperatures.

A meerkat mob has several burrow systems. The meerkats move from one system to another every few months. They often occupy burrows previously dug by ground squirrels or other animals. However, meerkats are also well adapted for creating or extending burrows. They have long claws for digging. They also have a clear membrane covering their eyes, and ears that close to keep out dirt.

More fun meerkat facts:

- Meerkats are diurnal. This means they are active during the day. When they emerge from their burrows each morning they like to stretch out on their backs and warm up in the sun.
- Although the name “meerkat” might make you think they’re related to cats, the meerkat is actually related to the mongoose.
- The dark fur around a meerkat’s eyes diminishes the sun’s glare.
- Meerkats can be vicious fighters. When members from two different mobs clash over territory, some might not survive.
- Meerkats have an excellent sense of smell. This helps them find food even when it’s hiding underground. They love insects, but also eat spiders, scorpions, lizards, rodents, eggs, birds, and fruit.



## About the Author

Guy Belleranti is an author of fiction, poetry, articles, puzzles, and humor for children and adults. He also works as a docent at the Reid Park Zoo in Tucson, Arizona. The information in this article comes from his experiences teaching children about the wild animals at the zoo.

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1. According to the article, which of the following is **not** a way meerkats would react to a predator?

- a. Meerkats might run to the safety of their burrow.
- b. Meerkats might climb a tree to escape a predator.
- c. A guard meerkat might call out an alarm.
- d. Meerkats might stand in a group, hissing, until the predator leaves.

2. Based on what you learned in the article, why do meerkats make different calls?

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3. Meerkats are able to live in complex burrows and even expand the burrows of previous animals. What are two physical traits that help meerkats do this?

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_

4. If you see a group of meerkats standing very straight on their hind legs, what are they most likely doing?

- a. sunbathing
- b. sniffing out prey to eat
- c. watching for predators
- d. socializing with each other

5. According to the information in the article, how are the internal clocks, or active and resting times, of meerkats similar to those of humans?

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Match each vocabulary word from the reading passage with the correct definition.

- |                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| _____ 1. diminishes | a. a young animal  |
| _____ 2. slender    | b. a small carnivorous mammal related to the meerkat       |
| _____ 3. vicious    | c. most powerful   |
| _____ 4. jackal     | d. decreases; makes something less                         |
| _____ 5. dominant   | e. violent; cruel  |
| _____ 6. juvenile   | f. active during the day                                   |
| _____ 7. occupy     | g. a thin structure that acts as a boundary in an organism |
| _____ 8. mongoose   | h. a wild dog that lives in Africa                         |
| _____ 9. diurnal    | i. gracefully thin; slight                                 |
| _____ 10. membrane  | j. reside in a certain place                               |



## ANSWER KEY

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1. According to the article, which of the following is **not** a way meerkats would react to a predator? **b.**

- a. Meerkats might run to the safety of their burrow.
- b. Meerkats might climb a tree to escape a predator.**
- c. A guard meerkat might call out an alarm.
- d. Meerkats might stand in a group, hissing, until the predator leaves.

2. Based on what you learned in the article, why do meerkats make different calls?

**Meerkats make different calls to communicate whether the predator is approaching from the air or from the land.**

3. Meerkats are able to live in complex burrows and even expand the burrows of previous animals. What are two physical traits that help meerkats do this?

- 1. **long claws for digging**
- 2. **clear membrane over eyes to keep out dirt**

4. If you see a group of meerkats standing very straight on their hind legs, what are they most likely doing? **c.**

- a. sunbathing
- b. sniffing out prey to eat
- c. watching for predators**
- d. socializing with each other

5. According to the information in the article, how are the internal clocks, or active and resting times, of meerkats similar to those of humans?

**Both meerkats and humans are diurnal, meaning they are both active during the day.**

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Match each vocabulary word from the reading passage with the correct definition.

- |                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| <b>d.</b> 1. diminishes | <b>a.</b> a young animal  |
| <b>i.</b> 2. slender    | <b>b.</b> a small carnivorous mammal related to the meerkat       |
| <b>e.</b> 3. vicious    | <b>c.</b> most powerful   |
| <b>h.</b> 4. jackal     | <b>d.</b> decreases; makes something less                         |
| <b>c.</b> 5. dominant   | <b>e.</b> violent; cruel  |
| <b>a.</b> 6. juvenile   | <b>f.</b> active during the day                                   |
| <b>j.</b> 7. occupy     | <b>g.</b> a thin structure that acts as a boundary in an organism |
| <b>b.</b> 8. mongoose   | <b>h.</b> a wild dog that lives in Africa                         |
| <b>f.</b> 9. diurnal    | <b>i.</b> gracefully thin; slight                                 |
| <b>g.</b> 10. membrane  | <b>j.</b> reside in a certain place                               |