

ROCK HYRAX or DASSIE

Procavia capensis

RANGE: Throughout much of Africa

HABITAT: Rocky outcroppings (kopjes) in grasslands (savannah or veld)

CONSERVATION STATUS: Presumed large population is widely distributed in a number of protected areas.

In spite of a rather heavy build, hyraxes are agile animals, able to run up steep rock surfaces with ease. The soles of their feet are rubber-like and covered with sticky sweat, providing traction when needed. Hoof-like nails help grip slippery rocks. Early Dutch settlers in South Africa called them, *dasje* (dassie), meaning “little badger.”

Much of their lifestyle revolves around their poor ability to regulate their internal temperature. They sun themselves to warm up, draw back to the shade in order to escape intense daytime heat, and at night huddle together in crevices to conserve heat. They won't come out if it's raining. Living in groups of 2 to 26 individuals, the dominant female, acting as a guard, uses a high-pitched cry to warn others of predators like lions, jackals, leopards, or wild dogs. As a defense from eagles that swoop out of the morning sun to catch them, hyraxes have a thin moveable eye membrane that shields the pupil and allows vision directly into the sun.

Hyraxes don't have typical incisors. Two tusk-like teeth in the upper jaw are used in defense, while four teeth in the lower jaw have narrow slits and are used for grooming. Thus, unlike most herbivores that bite with their front teeth, hyraxes must turn their heads sideways and bite with their molars. They gobble large bite of grass and leaves so as to spend less time in open areas with little protection. Microorganisms in their stomachs aid digestion.

DID YOU KNOW?

Hyraxes, elephants, and sea cows are often grouped together since their feet and flippers all bear nails instead of true hoofs. The small tusk-like teeth in their upper jaws resemble the massive tusks of elephants, and their social orders are similar. While there is little fossil evidence to support this relationship, they do share some gene sequences. Whether or not scientists prove an elephant-hyrax link, they are truly fascinating animals in their own right!