

ALERT EYES, EARS, AND NOSES

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Over a period of time proficient and avid diggers excavate with vigour and adeptness, tunnels 75 mm high and slightly wider into calcareous soil, down to a depth of 1 000 to 1 500 mm. The ultimate purpose is to create a system of tunnels which will provide "comfortable" temperatures in the order of 22°C during summer when air temperatures on the ground above might rise to 62°C. During winter when the air outside might be as cold as -7°C, temperatures within the tunnel system will be at least 14°C warmer.

This microhabitat, which is dynamic and constantly enlarged or "cleaned", is where 12 to 16 hours out of the 24 hours are spent and young are born. This is the home of approximately ten small (less than 1 000g), diurnal, beetle, and caterpillar-eating animals. In German these occupants are appropriately named Erdmännchen which, translated,

literally means "little men of the earth".

These social (gregarious) little animals are believed to have evolved from the ancestral carnivores which were probably solitary, nocturnal, flesh-eating inhabitants of forests. It is postulated that by leaving the forests to live in open country, they responded *inter alia* to predation risks by socializing, thereby creating immunity from predators by increasing the number of alert eyes, ears, and noses.

These then are the Erdmännchen, better known as suricate, stokstertmeerkat, or graatjiemeerkat (*Suricata suricatta*) which are found only on the Subcontinent of southern Africa, inhabiting mainly arid regions, and often found in association with the yellow mongoose (*Cynictis penicillata*) and ground squirrel (*Xerus inauris*). ○



Photograph: The Living World of Animals, Reader's Digest Association.