

Rock Hyrax

Procavia capensis

Rock hyraxes look like large guinea pigs, with gray, brown, or brownish-yellow fur. They have dark noses; tiny, mouselike ears; a stumpy tail and a light-colored spot on their backs. Their incisor teeth grow constantly, and are worn down by biting and chewing.

What They Eat

Rock hyraxes eat grass and all kinds of plants, including ones that are poisonous to other animals. They occasionally eat insects and bark as well.

Where They Live

As their name suggests, rock hyraxes are found in rocky habitat with scrubby vegetation throughout much of Africa and into the Middle East.

What They Do

Plant-eating rock hyraxes live in colonies of 25-80 animals amid rocks and scrub. Each family unit consists of a male, one or more females, and their young.

Rock hyraxes spend their time in large groups called “colonies.” They have invented an elaborate system of communication that helps them coordinate behavior among themselves. Unable to completely regulate their body temperature internally, hyraxes use behavior to help keep from getting too hot or too cold: in chilly weather they stay huddled in shelters to conserve heat, and in warm weather they lie on rocks to get warm.

Rock hyraxes become mature at 16 months of age. Seven to eight months after breeding, females give birth to 2-4 young. The young may begin nibbling at plants when they are just a few days old, but they are not weaned for about three months. After male hyraxes mature, they leave their birth colony to find a new place to live.

How They're Doing

Able to survive in rugged terrain across a wide range of latitudes, rock hyraxes appear abundant and not threatened in most of the places they are found. People occasionally hunt rock hyraxes for food or their hides.

Interesting Facts

- Sociable creatures, hyraxes use more than 20 different sounds to communicate with each other.
- When hyrax colonies are out and about, one member acts as a sentry, watching for danger and barking if it sees something alarming.
- Their feet have moist, sticky surfaces that work like a suction cup, helping the animals cling to surfaces as they climb.
- Hyraxes have been observed to go more than four months without water.
- The hyrax's closest relatives are elephants, manatees, and dugongs.
- Fossils have been found that suggest hyrax ancestors were the size of oxen.
- Hyraxes can climb trees.
- Rock hyrax colonies pee and poop in a single spot on the rocks. Over time, this pile becomes a large, sticky mass. This material has been used by humans for a variety of purposes, including medicine.
- Leopards, jackals, hyenas, lions, eagles, and pythons are among the animals that eat hyraxes.
- Rock hyraxes may live to be 9-12 years old.