

African Pygmy (Four-toed) Hedgehog (*Atelerix albiventris*)



Classification and Range

African pygmy hedgehogs are found in scattered local populations from Senegal in western Africa to southern Somalia and Tanzania on the continent's eastern edge. They're one of 15 hedgehog species scattered through most of Africa and Eurasia. All belong to the class Mammalia, order Insectivora, and family Erinaceidae. Southeast Asia's furry Gymnures, or moonrats, are in the same family.

Habitat

Their habitats vary from forest to desert, but none of the members of the hedgehog family live in the arctic, or in areas where the ground regularly becomes saturated. *Atelerix albiventris* lives in semiarid areas and dry savannas.

Physical Characteristics

African pygmy hedgehogs are 6-8 inches (15.3-20.3 cm) long and weigh 18-25 ounces (509-708 g). They have long, rather pointed, pinkish-brown snouts with moist, dark noses, round dark eyes, oval brownish ears, and short white hair on their brows, cheeks and bellies. The hairs on their backs and sides are modified into 1/2-1 inch (1.3-2.5 cm) long, un-barbed spines, white at the base and tip with a dark band around the middle, giving a salt-and-pepper appearance. Their back feet have only four toes; their front feet have five. Though their eyesight is reasonably good with some

degree of color vision, they depend far more on their excellent hearing and sense of smell that can detect prey two inches (5 cm) or more below ground. Vocalizations include chirps, chuffs, hisses and growls that increase with agitation. When fighting or angry they twitter loudly, and if hurt or badly frightened they scream.

Orbicularis Panniculi

Hedgehogs have a unique muscle, called the orbicularis panniculi, circling their body under the edge of their spiny coat. A frightened hedgehog can roll into a ball and draw the edges of its spine coat together like a drawstring purse, with its head, belly and feet tucked inside. Additional muscles are attached dorsally from the tail to the skull, dividing there into five branches that control the spines on the forehead.

Life Span

They live 8-10 years in captivity. Their life span in the wild is about 2-3 years.

Diet

In the wild: African pygmy hedgehogs eat worms, snails, arthropods, frogs, lizards, snakes, eggs, nestling birds, small mammals and carrion. They also eat fruits, seeds, peanuts, fungi and roots. They consume food amounting to about 1/3 of their body weight per night.

In Captivity: They are fed cat food, chopped fruit and mealworms

Reproduction

A male courts a female by running in circles around her, twittering, growling and snorting. She may initially ignore him, hiss and snort at him, run away, or curl into a defensive ball. The male persists, and the female eventually positions herself with her rear legs stretched back and her spines flattened. The male has an extra-long penis, so he can avoid being impaled on the female's spines. During copulation he secretes a waxy plug that prevents other males mating with her. After a gestation of 30-40 days, two to 10 young are born. The mother licks them clean and eats the afterbirth, then

picks them up in her mouth and guides them to her teats. Newborns are blind, weigh about 0.35 ounces (10 g), and have soft, white spines at birth. Born with edema, their skin is swollen with fluid and covers the soft spines. After a few days, the young reabsorb the excess fluid, exposing the spines. Their eyes open in eight to 18 days. At two weeks they can roll up, and after about six weeks start traveling short distances with their mother. Nursing stops at 40-45 days, and they leave their mother and siblings shortly thereafter. They reach sexual maturity at about 2 months of age.

Life Cycle

Pygmy hedgehogs start foraging at dusk and continue most of the night, then return to their burrows for the day. Solitary and territorial, they enlarge their territories during brief food shortages. On average, they use an area with a radius of 220-330 yards (200-300 m) around shelter found in and under logs, among rocks, under roots of trees and brush piles, in termite mounds and burrows and under buildings. During the dry season when insects are scarce, they aestivate, or become torpid, and live off their stored fat. Their major predators are Verreaux eagle owls, honey badgers, jackals and wild dogs.

Fascinating Facts

- They're about 40 times as resistant to snake and arthropod venom as a guinea pig of the same size!
- They lick and chew objects with unfamiliar odors or possess irritating substances, producing quantities of foamy saliva that they spread over their spines. This is believed to deter predators.