

Atelerix albiventris or *Erinaceus albiventris*

East African Hedgehog

Class: Mammalia. **Order:** Insectivora. **Family:** Erinaceidae

Habitat and Range: Deserts and dry grasslands of Africa (Senegal to Sudan and southern Tanzania). Nocturnal, resting in rock crevices, under tangles of brushwood or dry leaf litter during the day.

Description: Small spine covered animal. Salt and pepper coloration on the back, light colored under parts, feet and legs. Long, pointed, dark snout. Small, beady eyes Face and under parts covered with hair only. Ears, which are relatively large, fold back against the head for protection.

Adult Size Aprox. 9-24 oz; Head and body 7-9", tail aprox. 1".

Diet in the Wild: Favorite foods are earthworms, slugs, insects and snails, but a wide range of other animal and even vegetable foods are eaten: eggs and ground-nesting birds, small mammals, frogs, reptiles, crabs, fruit, fungi, roots and groundnuts.

Reproduction: Two to ten (avg. five) young are born after a pregnancy of 30-40 days. Newborns are blind and almost naked with a few soft, white spines which are shed after about a month. Within two to three days following birth, hard spines begin to grow which, become stiffer, sharper and longer as the hedgehog matures. Eyes open between eight and 18 days; weaning occurs by 40 days of age at which time the young wander off.

Life Span: Six to eight years in the wild; ten years in captivity.

Perils: Most animals leave the hedgehog alone. However, large birds of prey (especially the Verreaux Eagle Owl) and a variety of carnivores are known to prey on hedgehogs.

Protection: The hedgehog has armor that resembles needles in a pincushion with thousands of stiff, sharp spines that stick out from the animal's back. A circular muscle, that runs along the sides of the body, across the rump and neck, contracts to form a "bag" which allows the animal to draw in its head and legs. By curling up, the hedgehog can turn its body into a spiked ball with the sharp spines sticking out, thus protecting its soft under parts and face from attackers. It also sleeps in this defensive position.

Interesting Facts: Various species of hedgehogs are found in Africa, Asia, Europe and New Zealand (where they were taken by settlers one hundred years ago). Hedgehogs live in many different kinds of climates and terrains. At night, the animal roams within its own small territory searching for food. During the day it sleeps in nests hidden by hedges, rocks or underbrush. Some hedgehogs live in 16-to 20-inch deep burrows. If food is scarce, or the climate is cool, the hedgehog hibernates. In desert regions it sleeps through the driest weather (aestivation).

It has been shown that these animals have poor eyesight and hunt mainly by scent. However, they have been shown to recognize colors. A hedgehog will eat a third of its body weight in one

night. Unlike the porcupine, hedgehogs do not lose their spines which are firmly attached to the body. An average adult has approximately 5,000 spines, each about one inch long. (Spines are actually modified hair.)

Hedgehogs are generally solitary, and both females with young and mated pairs stay together only for a brief period before the young are driven off or the pair loses interest in one another. These animals engage in a behavior known as "self-anointing." Foamy saliva is produced and smeared over the spines on the back and flanks. This is thought to be a sexual signal. However, the same behavior has been observed whenever hedgehogs encounter a strange hedgehog or unfamiliar objects with a strong scent. The substance released may also serve as protection from predators, either by disguising the animal's natural scent (making discovery more difficult) or by causing an irritation. Hedgehogs have been observed to rub their spines against toads. It has been suggested that the toxins produced by the skin of toads may be used as a defense.

There is a misperception that hedgehogs are immune to snake bites. They are not immune but are very resistant to snake venom and insect toxins. When snakes are eaten, they are approached carefully and bitten severely. The hedgehog's spines are directed forward over the nose to expose a minimal area of the body, and the snake generally strikes directly into the spines. The hedgehog attacks repeatedly until it has broken the spine or disemboweled the snake.

Folklore: About 2,000 years ago Pliny, a Roman author, recorded that hedgehogs carry fruit impaled on their spines rather than in their mouths. Although it is possible that leaves, twigs and even soft fruits might become caught on the spines, it is unlikely that they would naturally carry food in such a manner. As a rule, hedgehogs eat their food where they find it. Another folk tale is that hedgehogs suck milk from sleeping cows. This is highly unlikely. In all probability they merely are lapping up milk that has oozed from a full udder. In East Africa many superstitions surround this animal. Its skin or spines are often used as fertility charms. In some areas a bumper harvest is thought to be obtained by placing the skin of the hedgehog on the seed before sowing, and, for maximum cotton yields, its skin should be burned in the cotton field.

Ecology: Some people keep them as pets because they eat garden pests. Because of their spiny covering, hedgehogs are able to eat bees and wasps and may even attack and eat a poisonous snake. They may carry parasites such as fleas, ticks and mites in their spines and also are infected with intestinal and pulmonary worms. These parasites, however, are not easily transmitted to man or other animals. Hedgehogs have been used as laboratory animals in virus research.

Diet at the Zoo: Dry dog food, with crickets, meal worms, or pinkies added.