

# Life on the Kopje

BY RACHEL MAYA

**F**rom the fields of South Africa to the plains of the Serengeti, rocky outcrops known as Kopjes (pronounced copy) come forth from the open African savannas. These geological features are composed of large masses of rock that have poked through to the surface due to erosion, weathering, and tectonic forces. The types of rock forming the outcrops vary from location to location, but most consist of old granite, gneiss and even kimberlites associated with diamond deposits.

A Kopje has its own range of wildlife and vegetation upon an open plain, resembling an island of rock in a sea of grass. Offering shade and shelter, they provide protection and food for the animals who call them home. Rising several hundred feet in some areas, these hills provide a thriving habitat for many species.

The new African Kopje Exhibit at the Louisville Zoo imitates this unique natural habitat and will eventually display six different species: the rock hyrax, Rodrigues fruit bat, black and rufus giant elephant shrew, red-billed hornbill, and African pygmy falcon. The mixed species exhibit is inside the Giraffe House. The giant elephant shrew and rock hyrax are currently in residence.

Steven Wing, the Zoo's general curator, reveals that with the opening of this exhibit two new mammals have been added to the Louisville Zoo; the rock hyrax and the giant elephant shrew. Also joining the habitat are three bird species that have been off exhibit at the Zoo. They will join two male and two female endangered Rodrigues fruit bats. The Louisville Zoo will participate in international breeding efforts to improve the bat's endangered status. Wing hopes to acquire a pair of pygmy falcons for breeding as well.



## Rock Hyrax

Rock Hyraxes can grow to be up to two feet long and one foot tall, weighing roughly nine pounds. On the Kopje they eat grasses and insects and at the Zoo they enjoy a variety of vegetables, fruits, crickets and mealworms. Hyraxes are active in the daytime and spend much time sunbathing. They

do not burrow, but instead seek shelter in rock crevices provided by the Kopje which shield them from birds of prey. Hyraxes have vision that enables them to look directly into the African sun while lying on their outcrops, a feature that allows them to keep watch for their predators.

Ironically, these small creatures are most closely related to elephants and manatees. They have sharp tusk-like incisors which are used for protection rather than for eating. Rock Hyraxes are very chatty and are known to generate approximately 21 different calls that range from rapid sounds to screams. These noises act as warnings of danger and also help the animals keep in contact with each other.

## Giant Elephant Shrew

These shrews use their long sensitive noses to find food and seek out territories. Because they have poor eyesight, their mobility depends heavily on their sense of smell and excellent hearing. In their natural habitat they feed on insects, small mammals and amphibians. The small and light giant elephant shrew (roughly one foot long and tall, weighing one pound) makes many shallow nests from leaf litter in order to camouflage into the ground. It uses different nests each evening to escape enemies. Elephant shrews are among three percent of mammal species that are monogamous.

Giant elephant shrews are fast runners and are called "sengi" by native Bantu speakers, which means long-legged. They move quickly to escape predators like hawks, snakes and leopards. Unfortunately, the giant elephant shrew has become endangered due to the loss of its central African habitat.





*Photos by Robert D. Kemnitz*

### **Rodrigues Fruit Bat**

The Rodrigues Fruit Bat is an endangered species that lives on the remote tropical island of Rodrigues, located in the Indian Ocean. These bats use their keen sense of smell and sharp eyesight in order to find their food. They do not use echolocation like their other smaller relatives. They eat many different fruits, flowers and nectars from such species as the tamarind tree, jamosa, mango, eucalyptus, palm and others.

Poaching by humans for food and the destruction of habitat are the two main threats to the Rodrigues Fruit Bat population. In the 1970s only 70-80 animals were living and the bats were considered the most endangered in the world. Today, the population is well in the thousands due to captive breeding efforts. These will be the first breeding pairs of bats to be housed at the Louisville Zoo.

### **African Pygmy Falcon**

A notable bird of prey, the African Pygmy Falcon spans approximately eight inches in length from head to tail. They are very vocal and call out, high pitched, in alarm and during breeding. African Pygmy Falcons do not build their own nests, but instead occupy vacant nest chambers among communities of Sociable Weavers, another common bird of the African plains.

Pygmy Falcons enjoy the arid flat grasslands of Africa and are able to defend their nests from predators. This allows for them to be fairly successful and populous. They feast on large insects and small rodents, abundant on the Kopje. In order to hunt for food, Falcons perch on elevated branches before catching their prey with their beaks or talons.

### **Red-Billed Hornbill**

The Red-Billed Hornbills are tree-dwelling birds that are widely dispersed across Africa. They obtain their food either by catching their scurrying prey or by digging into the ground with their large bills. In the wild, they chase insects like beetles and grasshoppers and also small reptiles and amphibians. In the Zoo they are fed a special meat-based diet along with a variety of insects.

Unlike other species who hop on land, Hornbills tend to run. They have short wings for flapping and gliding when they do take flight. They hang from tree trunks using a long tail as a brace. These birds usually gather in pairs or small family groups but they may flock in hundreds to wet feeding areas during the dry season. Their biggest predators are larger birds of prey and snakes.



### **Just Planting a Seed ...**

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