



The meerk



Grant McIlrath is a nature conservation biologist whose interest in small creatures began at the age of 5. He has spent the past 18 years getting to know meerkats and is now giving tourists a glimpse into the lives of these shy lovable animals. Words and photography by **Jeremy Jowell**

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at man

It is pitch dark outside when we wake for our dawn rendezvous with the meerkat man. Still half asleep, I drive to the outskirts of Oudtshoorn and meet up with Grant McIlrath, who is brimming over with an exuberance that seems out of place for such an ungodly hour.

“Hi everybody, I’m glad you’re all here on what is quite a strange meerkat morning. It’s very overcast but I don’t think it’s going to rain, which is good because when it does, the meerkats stay in their burrows.” We follow McIlrath down a dirt path and set off on foot into the field. “Meerkats are very shy and secretive animals and it took me many years to gain their trust. Usually you will only see meerkats in the wild if you are lucky. Even then you wouldn’t get close before they disappear. But we’ll have front row seats because they are used to me and accept others in my presence.”

A pale light washes over the Klein Karoo landscape as we sit silently and wait for the meerkats to make their grand appearance. “Prrr ... Prrr,” utters McIlrath, making cat-like sounds to let the animals know of his presence. “I often make these strange noises and hand movements,” he says, fluttering his fingers. “The meerkats recognise them and it helps them to relax.”

McIlrath issues other instructions which will ensure good viewing opportunities. “Don’t make any quick movements because they associate that with predators. If they stare directly at you, don’t move until they look away. If we overstep their line of tolerance, they will dive into their burrows and not come up again.”

As the first golden rays warm the tranquil landscape, a small head suddenly appears.



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The little animal perches on his hind legs scanning the terrain for enemies, with tail acting as support and forelegs dangling in front of his fragile brown belly. Soon all 15 individuals are standing in a row sunning their bellies.

McIlrath is a nature conservation biologist whose interest in little creatures began at the age of nine while doing volunteer work at Johannesburg Zoo. “The Big Five get all the attention while smaller animals are hardly considered in tourism and conservation. They go unnoticed and consequently need a lot of protection,” he says.

After studying in Pretoria, McIlrath spent seven years in the Kalahari before starting the Meerkat Magic Conservation Project. His base for the past nine years has been Oudtshoorn, where he has recorded over 34 unique sounds and distinguished 48 of the meerkats’ behavioural mannerisms.

This meerkat family, known as the Ungulungu group, are famous film stars and have appeared in several television documentaries, including Discovery Channel’s ‘The Meerkat Adventure’. According to

McIlrath, meerkats belong to ‘The Shy Five’, along with the porcupine, armadillo, armadillo and bat-eared fox. “All occur naturally here and none are dangerous to people. They play an important role in nature but unfortunately are under threat as their burrows are being destroyed when ploughed over by farmers.”

McIlrath is clearly enthusiastic about his little subjects. “I only work with wild and free meerkats, not tamed, captive or fed animals. You can’t rehabilitate a meerkat that has grown up away from its natural habitat. They inherit the knowledge of where burrows are situated and if there is danger, they wouldn’t know where to run for safety.”

We follow the meerkats until the day heats up and they head off to rest in the shade. “These are incredible animals and I love working with them,” says McIlrath as we walk back to the vehicles. “They are like family to me. It’s inevitable that some disappear from the group, ones that I’ve watched growing up from tiny babies. This is part of nature’s balance, but it’s still sad because I get very attached to them. If I didn’t I would be dead inside.”

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INFO

For meerkat tour bookings and more information about the Meerkat Magic Conservation Project, telephone Grant McIlrath: (044) 272-3077 or 082-413-6895; E-mail: gmmcilrath@mweb.co.za; Web site: www.meerkatmagic.com