

It was cold and dark out there in the Klein Karoo. The sun hadn't got itself out of bed yet, and our only source of light came from the stars. The shadowy Swartberg mountains barricaded the landscape, a faint halo profiling their jagged peaks.

There were ostriches out there, somewhere in the gloom. I could hear their booming chatter. And jackals too, their eerie calls travelling far across the wild landscape. Other than that it was as silent as the bottom of the sea.

"Brrr," said my little daughter, Mia. "Brrr. Indeed," I replied, stifling a yawn. It was 6am, an ungodly hour to be sure. But we were here to see meerkats. And to see meerkats, one is required to be up and awake and parked off next to their burrow long before the animals get up for the day.

Devey Glinister, or the meerkat cowboy as I have come to see him, had set up a small ring of camp chairs for us, next to the little creatures' abode. We sat in them, huddling from the chill and gazing intently on the dark mound of earth in front of us.

I'd done one of Devey's meerkat tours before, a fun foray into a private nature reserve just outside Oudtshoorn. An activity where you and a bunch of other meerkat aficionados sit around and wait for the little critters to make an appearance.

In his trademark cowboy hat, denims and sheepskin overcoat, Devey commentates, offering up all sorts of facts about meerkat behaviour and biology, as the animals line up dutifully like soldiers at an inspection parade. It's a very popular tour, especially with foreigners, all fans at one time or another of the hugely successful television series *Meerkat Manor*.

Fascinating creatures they certainly are, but what is it about this modest-sized member of the mongoose family that we find so appealing? There are after all 31 species of mongoose, and the meerkats (*Suricata suricatta*) are just one of them.

"Well, just look at their appearance," said Devey. "Firstly, it's their appearance. Their rounded heads and pretty eyes are characteristics we associate with infants. And that's not all. They often stand upright like a human, and they're forever curious and seem so playful." Devey added that it was probably

their endearing comradeship, the way they care for their extended family, and their united bravery in the face of danger, that makes it so easy for us to be anthropomorphic about them.

"Many local people refer to meerkats as 'the little Earth men' and, when you see them standing on their hind legs, clustered together like a caring sharing family, it's easy to understand why."

But I wasn't here this time just for the meerkats. Rather, I wanted to find out how a rough and tough-looking cowboy like Devey, a man I know to be a wild-horse whisperer and big-game capture expert, came to find himself deeply involved with a clan of teensy-weensy cute and cuddly mongooses.

The image didn't fit. And so I asked him, perhaps expecting to hear that, beneath his austere façade, lived a bunny hugger's heart, or maybe it had just been a financial opportunity he had run into... His answer was quite surprising. "It was God," he announced, just as the first of the meerkats popped its little head out of a hole. "God led me to these animals." Turns out Devey is a very religious man.

"I was never really into the Almighty," he told me, as the sun cast its first rays over the mountains and onto the meerkats that had begun to emerge from their subterranean digs. They stood erect like little men, their 'solar panel' tummies pointed towards the rising sun.

"I never asked Him for anything, or expected anything, or even really thought

about religion much," continued Devey. "I ran horse trails from our farm in the forests above Plettenberg Bay, and looked after my children, but then, space and money became an issue, and I needed to find a new place from which to make a living."

Very soon after that, he was approached by managers at a wildlife lodge in Oudtshoorn to run horse trails on their property. "And so we moved out here, but unfortunately there wasn't enough demand for my rides. Things just weren't working out. Our backs were to the wall and I just prayed."

Devey described how the next day he and his family were invited to dinner by the owners of the De Zeekoe Guest House and private nature reserve. Turns out they needed someone to take over their meerkat tours, and they asked Devey and his sons to do the job.

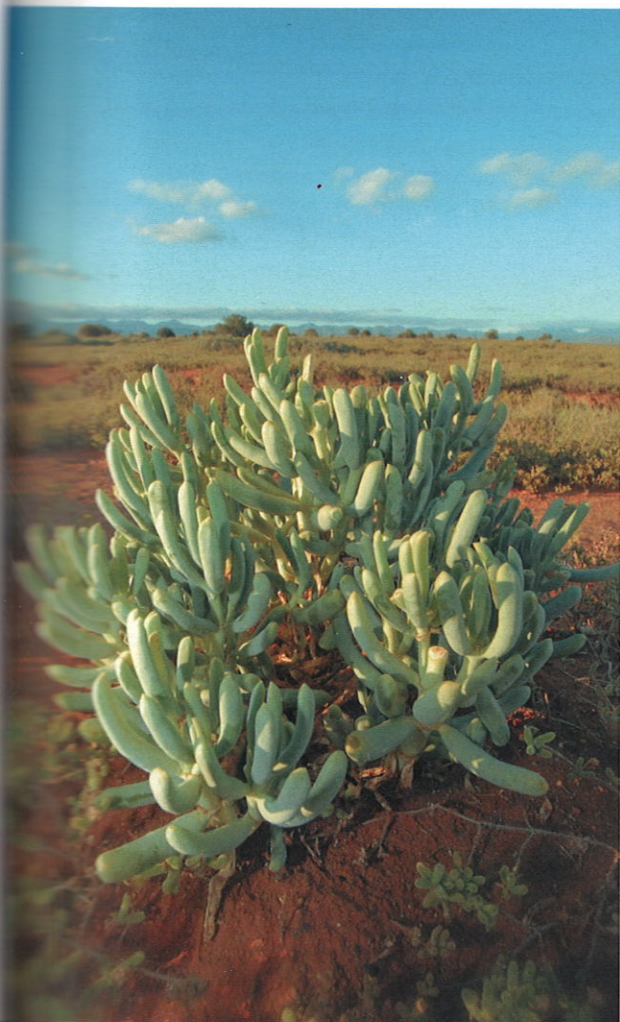
"Now, every day, I come out here into the Succulent Karoo and introduce our guests to meerkats," said Devey. "Every night I come back and make sure that the meerkats have gone to bed. That's my life. God found us a nearby farm to live on. He led me and my family to these meerkats. And now life is good and stable, and I am able to provide food and shelter not only for my own family [and horses] but for the other children who my wife and I take care of."

He explained that, at any one time, there is usually a foster child or two living under his roof. "I have two biological sons and a foster daughter, who I consider our own. We have





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Devey Glinister in his pick-up truck. • Who's watching who? Visitors line up to watch meerkats watching them, watching them. • What is so endearing about meerkats is the way they care for their extended family. • The reserve outside Oudtsoorn is in the Succulent Karoo, home to diverse succulents such as the *Senecio ficoides*. • Humans are fascinated by the *Suricata suricatta* meerkat. Who *can* resist that rounded head and those beautiful, inquisitive eyes?



"If a sentry spots an eagle, he will sound the appropriate 'sky predator' alarm and then hide underground, quickly followed by the rest of the gang. A jackal alarm call will send the gang up into the trees, and a snake alarm will initiate a mobbing

other 'sons' and 'daughters' too. They come to us from unstable homes. Sometimes they are with us for a long time, and sometimes a short time. Whatever time it takes for things to be right again with their own families back home. The church brings us these children, and so do the authorities. But this is God's work, and therefore it is my work too."

Devey is a paradoxical man. On the outside, he's a tough-looking dude with a stubbly chin and a scruffy cowboy hat. He has captured rhinos and lions, and can control the wildest of horses and scare the hardest of men. All he lacks is spurs and a gun in a holster to complete his rugged Clint Eastward image.

But on the inside he is deeply spiritual, with a heart that allows him to care for those who he feels need a loving home and some level-headed guidance in life. And then there are his God-given meerkats, to whom he applies equal care and dedication.

"Meerkats also really look out for one another," explains Devey. "They live mostly out on the open plains, an environment

swarming with predators, where they can never let their guard down and run the risk of becoming a meal." So how can a meerkat turn his back on a dangerous world in order to dig up his dinner of grubs, bugs and scorpions? "Trust," says Devey. "A gang of meerkats consists of up to 30 individuals, all of which periodically take time away from feeding to scan for any signs of trouble.

"But that in itself is not enough to guarantee the safety of the group, and so special sentries are placed on lookout duty. These animals position themselves on an anthill or a shrub and will give vocal warning

to the rest of the gang should trouble be sighted. Sentinel rotation occurs throughout the day and is announced by a special call."

Devey explains that scientists have decoded more than 30 sounds made by meerkats, all of which have specific meaning. "For instance, there is a unique call for jackals and another one for poisonous snakes. If a sentry spots an eagle, he will sound the appropriate 'sky predator' alarm and then hide underground, quickly followed by the rest of the gang. A jackal alarm call will send the gang up into the trees, and a snake alarm will initiate a mobbing."



RIGHT: The Succulent Karoo, with the Swartberg mountains in the north and the Outeniquas in the south, is peppered with glorious aloes. BELOW LEFT: As the sun comes up in the Klein Karoo, so do the meerkats. BELOW RIGHT: The meerkat posse. Devey, his son JD and the two Tonys in silent vigil at a meerkat burrow.



Devey was also quite taken with the teamwork of these little creatures. "Meerkats pepper their territories with emergency bolt holes, but if they find themselves caught in the open, the adults will shield the youngsters with their own bodies.

"And by grouping together in what looks to us like a meerkat rugby scrum, they are able to fool short-sighted snakes into thinking the meerkats are one big animal." He says they do have some immunity to snake venom but still take enormous risks when trying to drive a snake away. "It just shows how willing they are to face jeopardy for the overall benefit of the gang."

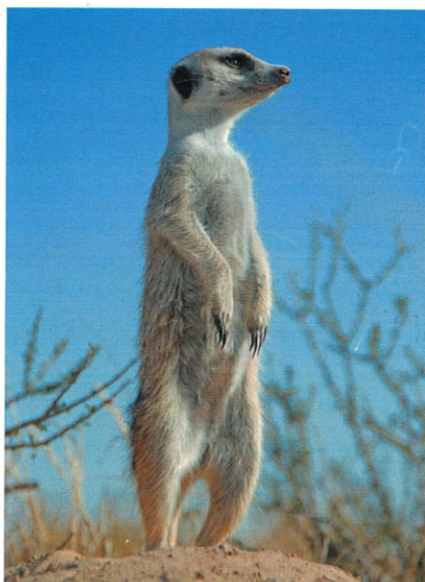
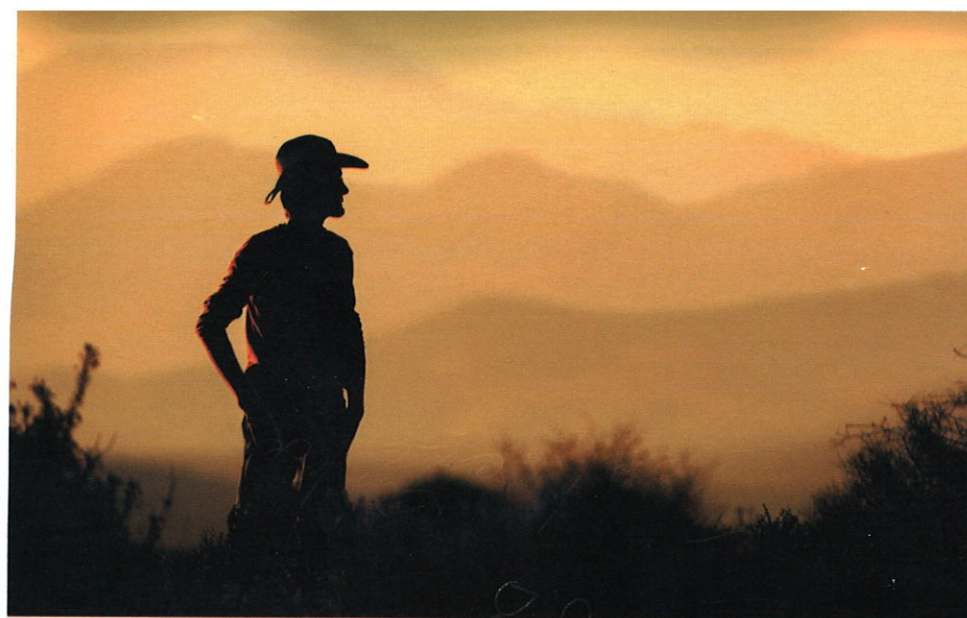
By now, baby meerkats were tumbling around us and my family was oohing and aahing at them. "But it's not so easy running these tours," Devey told me. "You can't just walk up to a clan and expect them not to run away. You have to habituate them to our presence and let them know that we mean them no harm. Sometimes this can take years."

And how does he do it? Well, he preaches to them, that's how. Every day, for the first year or so of his new job with the De Zeekoe meerkats, Devey would sit around in the Karoo with his sons (JD and Rudolf) and two volunteers both named Tony (in fact scarecrows stuffed with straw).

"We would remain at a respectable distance at first, moving closer and closer week by week, month by month, assessing how comfortable they were with our presence. Tony and Tony would stay out all day and overnight, and my sons and I would join them before sunrise each morning. We still do that now." Devey pointed to two scruffy looking mannequins standing sentry over another meerkat den. Next to them sat JD, quietly reading a book.

"Once they become accustomed to us, we begin to speak, make some noises, scuff our feet." In other words, act like fidgety tourists. "This further habituates them, and I found this to be a good opportunity to practise my Bible group sermons." Devey explained how he and his wife hold services and have Bible readings and workshops with local farming communities.

It conjured up a bizarre image. Devey in his jeans and hat, pacing back and forth in the bush (Bible in hand), bringing the word



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Devey makes a somewhat imposing figure; a tough looking cowboy who claims to have been born in the wrong country at the wrong time. "I think I would have fitted in nicely with America's Wild West." ● All lined up with 'solar panel' tummies pointed to the sun. ● Sentinel on duty. When his turn comes the meerkat takes up position on a mound, ready to call out a warning if anything untoward is spotted.

of God to a clan of mongooses, as they stand in rapt attention like any good congregation should. I couldn't help but laugh with delight, at which the meerkats bolted back into their underground sanctuary.

"You see what I mean," said Devey, arching an eyebrow. "This particular group is not quite 100 per cent habituated yet. But we're working on it, aren't we JD?" The young man looked up from his book and waved at us. The two Tonys were too intent on their work to respond.

We stayed for a while, trying our best not to be too disruptive to Devey's habituation work and, eventually, one by one, the meerkats tentatively re-emerged. They sunned themselves for a while longer and then departed into the

thick, low-lying vegetation of the Klein Karoo in search of food. The babies remained behind in the burrow, but they were not going to appear while I was there with my restive kids.

"I'll have to remain here with JD and the Tonys for now," said Devey, a softly dismissive tone to his voice. It was time for my family and I to head back to the vehicle, leaving behind the cowboy and his posse to bring the word of God to an unlikely congregation of tiny meerkats. ■

Map reference F4 see inside back cover

Wild Meerkat Adventure Tours

De Zeekoe, Oudtshoorn

044 272 6721, 082 584 9957

info@dezeekoe.co.za, www.dezeekoe.co.za