

Aardvark

Orycteropus afer

SWAHILI: Muhanga

A thickset animal with a rounded body, a long, tapered tail, and a small, pig-like head with a very long nose and ears. The body colour ranges from light brown to pinkish-grey and the legs are black. Young animals are usually quite hairy, while adults may be mostly hairless on the back. There are four large claws on the front foot and five on the hind foot. Males and females are the same size.

Subspecies

Four subspecies are listed for Tanzania: *O. a. lademanni*, *O. a. matschiei*, *O. a. observandus* and *O. a. ruvanensis*, although their validity is doubtful due to significant intra-specific variation.

Similar species

Unlikely to be mistaken for any other mammal.

Ecology and social behaviour

Aardvarks are found in a wide variety of habitats, including open grassland, woodland, thicket, lowland and montane forest, montane grassland and agricultural land. They avoid rocky terrain, which is difficult to dig. Their diet consists mainly of ants and termites, as well as beetle pupae and larvae. Aardvarks dig into termitaria using their powerful front claws, licking up the invertebrates with a long, sticky tongue. They are solitary and exclusively nocturnal: camera trap records from Tanzania show highest peaks of activity between midnight and 5:00 a.m. Recorded home range sizes vary between 2–5 km² (0.8–2.0 mi²) with size probably related to food density. Individuals may travel several kilometres in a night in search of food. They frequently dig large, deep feeding burrows, which will be jarringly familiar to anyone who has driven off-road in East Africa. Burrows used for shelter can be very large, with multiple entrances, and may be occupied over long periods of time. Active burrows may be recognized by the presence of flies and fresh diggings.

Least Concern

HB:	100–130 cm (39–67")
Ht:	60–65 cm (24–26")
Tail:	44–60 cm (17–24")
Wt:	50–80 kg (110–176 lb)



Where to look

Although relatively common in some places, the Aardvark's shy nature and nocturnal habits means it is seldom seen. They are occasionally observed on night drives on Manyara Ranch and Ndarakwai Ranch.

Distribution in Tanzania

Aardvarks are very widespread in Tanzania. They have been recorded in all mainland National Parks, with the exception of Rubondo and Gombe, and they are known from the majority of Game Reserves in the country.

Population size and conservation status

This species probably occurs at low densities across most of its range, although it is likely to be more common where termites are abundant, including much of western Tanzania. It is common in Sumbawanga Rural and Nkasi Districts down to the Zambian border. It frequently inhabits agricultural areas, and is found in coffee plantations on the outskirts of Arusha. Camera trap records for

this species suggests it is relatively common in the lowland forests of Mahale NP and in Ugalla GR. Population trends are unknown, although probably stable in protected areas.

Habitat loss poses the main threat to this species, and it is hunted for food in parts of western Tanzania.



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TOP: camera trap photo, Tarangire NP; BOTTOM: captive individual.

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