

## **And God Created.....The Aardvark, a True Digging Machine**

by David Everson

The Aardvark is truly one of God's unique creations. I can imagine Noah seeing the aardvark and thinking, "what is that"? When it was first described by western scientists in 1766 the characteristics were most unusual and since then they have allowed it to be called "the most unusual animal in Africa". Its odd characteristics have made it difficult to classify, and even today its taxonomy is still uncertain. The name Aardvark is South Dutch meaning "earth pig" but it is not related to the pigs at all. The scientific name *Orycteropus afer* comes from the Greek *Orukter* which means, a tool for digging, *podos*, a foot and *afer* which means Africa. Therefore, the aardvark is the animal from Africa with a foot for a digging tool.

The legs are short and powerful and end in webbed toes, four on each of the front feet and five on each of the hind feet. The toes ending long blunt claws that are excellent for digging burrows in the ground or holes in termite nests. The claws are stronger than the head of a pick-axe which is necessary when you spend most of your time digging.

Its body is bulky and the back is humped, somewhat resembling that of a large rodent with much less hair. The head is long and narrow, much like that of an anteater, and ends in a pig-like snout. The ears are very long, like those of a rabbit, and can move independently of one another. The mouth contains 20 teeth situated near the back of the jaws. The teeth themselves are remarkable in that they continuously grow and yet lack both roots and enamel. Fine tubes radiate through each tooth, and this gives the classification into the Order Tubulidentata which means "the tube-toothed" which is a very unusual characteristics in animals. The mouth contains another unusual feature, the long tongue. Somewhat like that of the anteater, the tongue is 1.5 feet in length, thin, and sticky. It is perfect for slipping between holes in termite nests and lapping up the insects.

The aardvarks grow to a body length of between 3-5 feet with a hairless, rat-like tail that can grow to a length of 1-2 feet and can be used for defense. At the shoulder it has a height of about 2 feet and can weigh between 100-170 pounds. Aardvarks are covered with a thick pink-grey skin that protects them from the insect's bites. The body is sparsely covered with coarse hair. On its nose are long white hairs 1-2 inches long which grow from the nostrils. These hairs, combined with folds of skin that cover the nostrils when the animal is digging, protecting the aardvark's nose from dirt clogs and insect attacks.

Aardvarks are found in Africa, and prefer open woodlands and grasslands. They are plentiful wherever termites are found. Aardvarks are nocturnal, sleeping in temporary burrows during the day. They live solitary lives, getting together only to mate. They dig their own shelters and can out dig 2 or 3 men with shovels. Their burrows are up to 10 feet long and end in a sleeping chamber. Breeding burrows are more permanent and longer up to 40 feet long. Abandoned burrows are taken over by various other animals including some birds.

Aardvarks feed primarily on termites during the dry season and soft-bodied ants in the rainy season. They will travel long distances covering up to six miles a night to locate food. When a termite nest is found, the aardvark will use its digging ability to open a small hole in the side of the nest and lap up the insects with its sticky tongue. It will feed from the same nest for several nights. Aardvarks are indeed amazing creatures that show the creative power of the Almighty Creator.