

# Feeble Mountain Folk

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**A**s we look at many ways to build our lives on the Rock of Christ, we'd be remiss not to check out an example in nature. In fact, the Bible features these little creatures, described as "feeble folk." Poetically describing the wisdom of God's creatures, Proverbs 30 calls our attention to the natural world. "There be four things which are little upon the earth," the writer declares:

*but they are exceeding wise: the ants are a people not strong, yet they prepare their meat in the summer; the conies are but a feeble folk, yet make they their houses in the rocks; the locusts have no king, yet go they forth all of them by bands; the spider taketh hold with her hands, and is in kings' palaces (Proverbs 30:24–28).*

Ants, locusts, and spiders are familiar to most of us. But what in the world, I have often wondered, is a coney? Historically, the word has been used for rabbits, but rabbits don't make their houses "in the rocks." So what creature is Proverbs describing?

Many scientists and Bible scholars believe the "feeble folk" described here are the little-known mammals that dwell in family clusters high in the mountains of Africa and the Middle East. With their scarcely regulated body temperatures, they bask in the sun like lizards or huddle together to keep warm. Their padded, sweaty feet keep them from slipping on rock surfaces, and their noisy songs, screams, and twitters echo throughout the day.

Have you identified this strange creature yet? Called conies, dassies, *pimbi*, and rock rabbits, the unusual star of Proverbs 30 is most commonly known as the rock hyrax. Their scientific name is *Procavia capensis*.

## Life in the Rocks

Unlike most mammals, hyraxes can't regulate their own body temperatures well. Their homes in the rocks help keep them from overheating or getting too cold. If the temperature outside is inhospitable, they don't go out. They spend lots of time huddling and "heaping" with other members of their colonies. One dominant male heads a group of twenty or more females.

Hyraxes depend on the strengths of their environment, not just on their own abilities, to live. Believers who are called to live on the rock of Christ can see why the Proverbs 30 writer would point the hyrax out as a good example.

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The hyrax is specially suited for life in the rocks in several ways. Its flexible, moist feet act as suction cups, pulling up a flap of skin to help the hyrax climb up steep rock faces. Hyraxes have four toes on their front feet and three on their hind feet, complete with hoof-like toenails.

The rock hyrax is an extremely noisy mammal. The members of a colony communicate via whistles, twitters, songs, and long, rising territorial shrieks





that may sound like a woman screaming. Hyraxes have twenty-one different calls, and they use them all to advantage.

Hyraxes are herbivores—vegetarians. They get much of their water from the grasses, fruit, and other vegetation they eat, which is a good thing, because the rock hyrax doesn't stray far from its home in the rocky mountain crevices. Their babies are born, after seven months' gestation, fully developed and energetic.

When threatened by a small predator, a hyrax will bite to defend itself. But when trying to escape a big predator, such as a python, leopard, or caracal, a hyrax once again acts like a godly Christian—it hides itself in the rocks. The Proverbs 30 writer astutely called these creatures “feeble folk” that are wise to make their homes in a protected place.

### Strange Cousins

Hyraxes are among the most unusual animals in the world. While they look superficially like rabbits, pikas, or guinea pigs, the resemblance stops there. Rock hyraxes and their two cousins, the tree hyrax and the yellow-spotted hyrax, have far stranger relatives.

Evolutionary scientists look for “common ancestors,” while creation scientists classify animals by similarity to help them learn more about the types God has placed in creation. But the hyrax's classification might surprise you. This odd little mammal, no bigger than ten pounds, is closest in type not to rabbits or rodents but to elephants and sirenians (dugongs and manatees). With these creatures, the hyrax shares flexible feet, dental structure, unusually placed mammary glands, and other anatomical features.

But elephants and sirenians aren't the only creatures hyraxes resemble. They also share features with rhinoceroses, hippopotamuses, horses, and odd-in-their-own-right South American creatures such as tapirs and capybaras.

### Strength of the Rock

Proverbs 30 commends three animals for their hard work and pro-activity—ants, spiders, and locusts—workers with strengths and skills to boast of. It lists the hyrax alone for reliance on something else. Rock hyraxes depend on their environment to provide them with strength they don't have in themselves. In their furry, huddling way, these little creatures teach us something important. In the end, it's not about what we can do, but about the strength of the Rock in whom we live.

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