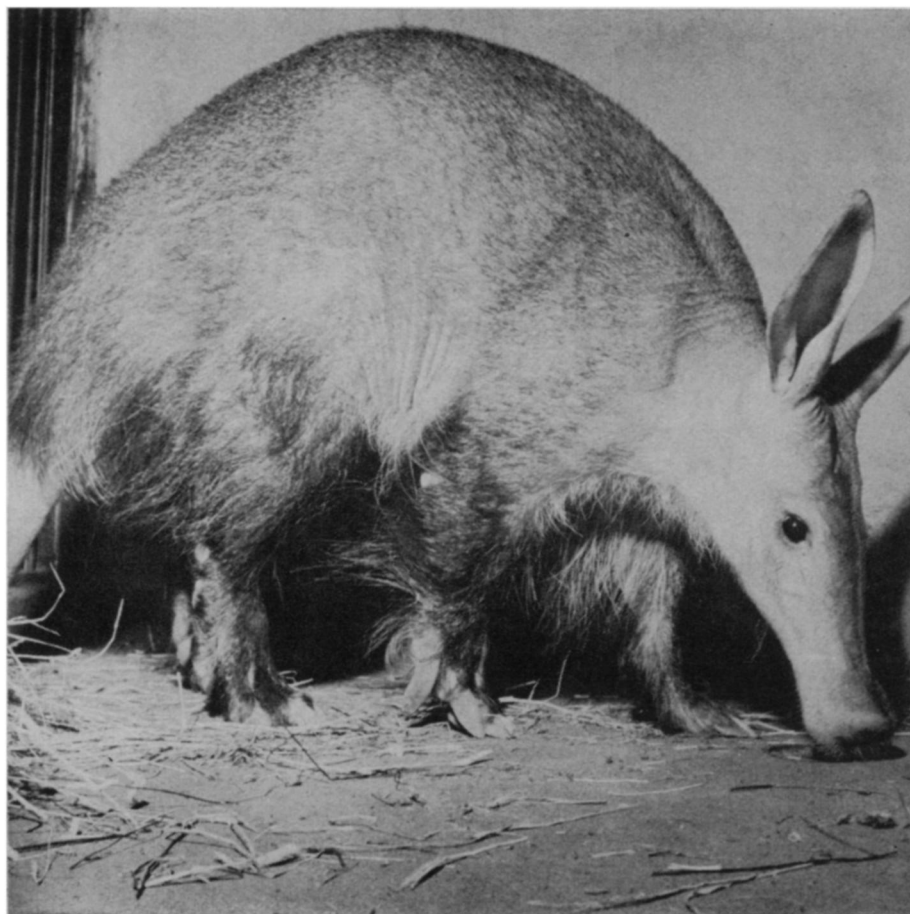


## Nature Note



### Aardvark (as in A)

One of the strangest mammals on the planet is the aardvark, so different from other living animals that scientists have created a separate order in the animal kingdom for it alone to occupy. This is the Tubulidentata order, which means "Tubule-Toothed," for, among other peculiarities, aardvarks have unique teeth that lack an external covering of enamel and are formed by a series of parallel tubes of dentine.

Besides the distinction of claiming the first word in certain dictionaries, the aardvark has other outstanding qualities. It has ears much like a donkey and a body and bristles much like a pig. The word aardvark comes from the Afrikaans vocabulary of South Africa and means "earth pig." The head is quite long with a snout that terminates in a round, blunt, pig-like muzzle. Its tapering tongue often hangs out of its mouth, with the end coiled up like a clock spring. When in use, this thin, sticky tongue, about 18 inches long, uncurls and probes the passages of a termite or ant hill where it becomes loaded with the aardvark's favorite food. Some people say aardvarks have such a keen sense of smell they

can sniff out a distant moving column of these insects, sometimes tens of thousands of individuals—or they can "hear" the thousands of tiny footfalls as the insect army marches across the terrain.

Even though aardvarks usually move with slow, awkward movements, these powerful animals are extraordinarily swift burrowers, especially when alarmed. They can dig into soft dirt faster than several men can shovel. Aardvarks make their homes by burrowing tunnels about nine feet long. Sometimes they temporarily move into inhabited termite or ant nests, seemingly undisturbed at their meals by the many stinging bites inflicted by their hostile hosts. When a baby is born—usually one to a litter—it remains in the burrow for about two weeks before accompanying its mother in nightly excursions. For the next several months, mother and offspring move from one burrow to another. Perhaps it is the loss of this mobility in captivity that makes breeding difficult and parents indifferent to offspring born in zoos. In the wild, these animals are found only in Africa from Ethiopia south.

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