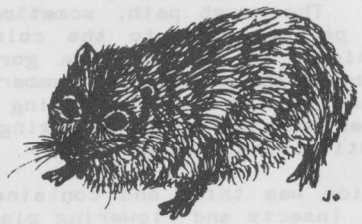
In shady pools on the slower stretches of the stream, edible frogs, *Rana esculenta*, croaked. On a small sand-covered, boulder-strewn plateau, where path and stream met, we saw our first rock hyraxes, *Procavia capensis*, which looked like large rodents.

Once we knew what to look for and where to look, we observed the hyrax, or conies to use their Biblical characterization (Psalms 104:18), everwhere. They were obviously well established, often looking down on us from a rocky vantage point, or climbing in a tree. As a plant feeder, the hyrax, from fossil evidence, shares many common features with primative ungulates such as the elephant. Widely distributed in Africa, in Israel and the Lebanon it is in its northern range.

Later in the week we went to see a large colony of Egyptian fruit bats, *Rousettus aegyptiacus*, in a high-domed cave in the Nahal Amud gorge, west of Tiberius in Galilee. In this area, which was a nature reserve, rock hyraxes were numerous. Elsewhere on our travels in northern Israel we saw these mammals in their appropriate habitats.

The hyrax is the size of a large domestic cat. Its pelage is uniformaly light to dark brown and its small feet are adapted for climbing both rocks and trees, but ill-equipped for digging. Also known as rock badgers, hyraxes live in close-knit communities in fissures and crevices in rocks. Another interesting feature of the hyrax is its poor ability to control its temperature, hence its need to huddle in family groups. Although they are herbivores, hyraxes crop their food with their molars, instead of using their incisors, as most hoofed mammals do. They are not ruminants.



These fascinating mammals do not wander far from their dens, especially in the height of the mid-day sun, because of temperature stress. They are also subjected to intense predation pressures, particularly from eagles, hyenas and leopards. Besides the leopard, the striped hyena, *Hyaena hyaena*, the wolf, *Canis lupus*, and the fox, *Vulpes vulpes*, all predate on the hyrax and are found at Ein Gedi.

As the heat of the sun increased toward mid-day, we saw circling lesser spotted eagles, *Aquila pomarina*, Egyptian vultures, *Neophron percnopterus* and griffon vultures *Gyps fulvus*, in the rising thermals, along with large numbers of migrating white *Ciconia ciconia* and black storks *C.nigra*. Of these, the eagle takes hyrax.

By mid-afternoon the heat was almost unbearable, so, after a swim in the stream we made our way back to the car. On that occasion we did not see the Nubian ibex, *Capra nubiana*, but did so on the following day when we returned to the area. The Ein Gedi ibex are common, and again, due to careful protection, are increasing in numbers.

We were all well satisfied with our 'wilderness' experience on our return to Jerusalem. The Ein Gedi gorge, situated in the Judean wilderness, is often mentioned in the Old Testament and is the site at which David spares Saul's life in the incident in which he cuts off a piece of Saul's robe (1 Samuel 24:4).

Michael J.A. Thompson.