

Degu

Octodon degus

Class: Mammalia **Order:** Rodentia (rodents) **Suborder:** Hystricomorpha (hystricognath rodents such as chinchillas and guinea pigs)

Family: Octodontidae (Degus, rock rats and viscacha rats)

Other names: brush-tailed rat, common degu

Other subspecies:

Other Relatives: there are 3 other species in the genus *Octodon*



Zoo Degus

'Harpo' 1.0 – male, B: 12/15/2008 Aq: 4/1/2009

About Harpo

Harpo was captive born.

Status

Least concern [1]

Geographic Region

Western slope of the Andes Mountains between Vallenar and Curico, to 1,200 m [1]

Habitat

Coastal and central scrubland [1], this mediterranean-type semi-arid shrubland ecosystem called "matorral" [2]



Characteristics

Size: *Length range:* 9.8–12.2" (head to base of tail) *Weight range:* 6.0 – 10.6 oz.

Longevity: **Wild:** 6-8 years

Captivity

Physical Description

- Degus superficially resemble a large gerbil.
- The fur is yellow-brown on the back and head, and the under parts and feet are cream colored. There is a pale band around the eye and, in some individuals, the neck. The ears are large and darkly pigmented. [2]
- The tail is moderately long and tufted.
- The fifth digit is reduced, and on the forefeet it has a nail instead of a claw [3].
- Degus have excellent vision – they can even see UV light.
- The cheek teeth are **hypodont** (very tall, like cow and horse teeth) and their biting surfaces resemble a figure of eight. [2]

Dimorphism

Males: Males tend to be about ten percent larger than females.

Females:

Diet: Herbivore

Diet in the Wild: In the wild, they are generalist herbivores and feed on the leaves, bark, and seeds of shrubs and plants.

Diet at the Zoo: seeds and chinchilla pellets, as well as hay

Behavior

- *Diurnal, day-active*

Feeding Behavior

- Degus feed exclusively above ground and have been observed climbing into the low branches of shrubs while foraging. [2]
- Degus are extremely important for the ecosystems they inhabit – they keep many plant species in check.

Home Life

- **Semi-fossorial**, digging extensive communal burrow systems [2]
- Burrow openings are often disguised with cow dung and sticks [3].
- Burrows are often shared by Bennett's chinchilla rat (*Abrocoma bennettii*) [2]

Social Structure and Communication

- Degus are very social and tend to live in groups of one to two males and two to five related females. They live in large, elaborate burrows. By living in groups, predators are more easily detected. [2]

Updated: 7/1/2017

- Groups maintain territories throughout much of the year.
- Dustbathing is an important social behavior among degus. Groups repeatedly mark favorite wallows with urine and anal gland secretions. This may help the group identify each other by scent as well as delineating territorial boundaries. [2]

Defense Mechanisms

- Degus use vigilance and cover to avoid predators. Their pelage is also counter-shaded and matches the soil color, which reduces visibility to predators. When a predator is spotted, they take cover in shrubby areas and may retreat to the communal burrow [2]
- Degus live socially and use alarm calls to warn others of danger. When a degu detects danger, it can warn the others with a vocal alarm call or by beating its tail on the ground. [2]
- Like some lizards, a degu can shed part of its tail if a predator grabs it. It will not lose much blood and the wounds heal quickly, but the tail won't grow back. [3]

Reproduction

- *Placental mammals*
- Degus tend to breed once per year.
- The breeding season usually begins in late May, and the young are conceived in late winter to early spring. In years with heavy rain, degus may produce a second litter. The gestation period is 90 days, and litter size is typically four to six pups.
- Males and females participate in rearing one another's young.
- Pups are born **precocial**, furred and able to see; they begin exploring within hours of birth.

Conservation

Degus are of least concern.

- **Use & Trade:**
- **Threats:** There are no major threats for this species at present. [1]
- **Predators:** subject to predation by larger mammals such as culpeo foxes (*Lycalopex culpaeus*), and from the air by raptors such as barn owls (*Tyto alba*), short-eared owls (*Asio flammeus*), and black-chested buzzard eagles (*Geranoaetus melanoleucus*)

Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- The genus, *Octodon*, is named for the figure-eight shape of their cheek-teeth
- Have elaborate vocal repertoire
- **Coprophagists** – re-ingest feces to extract more nutrition
- Sometimes kept as pets, but it is illegal in some U.S. states and Canadian territories

Glossary: List of definitions of the most important recurrent technical terms used in the text.

Coprophagy- the consumption of feces. The word is derived from the Greek κόπρος *copros*, "feces" and φαγεῖν *phagein*, "to eat".

Fossorial - adapted to digging and life underground

Hypsodont - a pattern of dentition with high-crowned teeth and enamel extending past the gum line, providing extra material for wear and tear. Some examples of animals with hypsodont dentition are cows and horses; all animals that feed on gritty, fibrous material.

Precocial - hatched or born in an advanced state and able to feed itself almost immediately

References

- [1] The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. , "Octodon degus," IUCN Red List, 2013. [Online]. Available: <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/15088/0>. [Accessed February 2015].
- [2] M. Hejna, "Octodon degus," Animal Diversity Web, 2006. [Online]. Available: http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Octodon_degus/. [Accessed February 2015].
- [3] C. A. Woods and D. K. Boraker, "Octodon degus," The American Society of Mammalogists, vol. 67, no. Mammalian Species, pp. 1-5, 1975.