

Jerboas are unusual-looking creatures which live in hot and cold deserts in Africa and Asia. During hot summers in the African deserts, jerboas place a small amount of sand at the entrance to their burrows to prevent the heat from getting in. Jerboas living in Asiatic deserts, where the temperatures can be low, use the same technique in winter to keep out the cold. There are many different kinds of jerboa – their head and body length varies from 3 to 15 cm. They all have long tails, which can be up to 23 cm in length, and help them keep their balance as they move quickly across the sand. Climate change has led to further drying of water sources, which affects the availability of plant life. Their natural predators typically include snakes, owls and foxes, but a more recent problem has been an increase in the number of cats. Their presence is a direct result of urbanisation, as towns in some areas grow and spread into the natural habitat of the jerboas. Desert animals have to be able to survive in very harsh conditions where temperatures can vary widely, and they have to exist in an area that is almost waterless for a large part of the year. Little hairs on their feet give better grip on the sand, almost like snow shoes, helping them to hop in a zig-zag pattern in order to confuse enemies. The biggest challenge for jerboas has been identified as the loss of their habitat, which is another consequence of this expansion. In order to help them dig these burrows, many species have special folds of skin to stop sand getting into their noses. The choice of location of burrow sites is very important, but jerboas are experiencing another problem. More and more land is used by farmers for keeping their animals, resulting in the destruction of the jerboas' burrows as the animals walk on them. Jerboas don't actually drink water, so they have to extract as much moisture as possible from their food. Although jerboas have been found to live for up to three years on dry seeds alone, this has made surviving in these desert conditions even more of a challenge. Jerboas have successfully adapted to life in the desert. It is true that they are rather strange-looking, but their appearance is a vital part of their survival in the arid conditions of desert life. They are a fascinating choice of study for scientists who are keen to know more about these creatures and the threats that they are facing. Some jerboas have small mouse-like ears, while in others they are large and rabbit-like, but they all have hairs in their ears which keep out the sand. However, the jerboa's back legs are its most unusual feature, as they tend to be around four times as long as the front ones. These allow the jerboa to travel long distances, with a minimum of energy, when searching for food in the desert. They eat leaves whenever possible, but can also survive in dry periods by digging up plant roots. When on the move, jerboas jump like kangaroos, which is an amazing sight. Jerboas survive in the desert by living in holes called burrows.