1st Quarter AOW—Z-Chart **NAME _____**
DUE 8/31/16 **CLASS ___**

The Mongoose - Courageous Snake Killer and Lovable Pet

It may be only a little longer than a foot, yet this intelligent and daring little mammal is feared by some of the deadliest snakes in the world. Moreover, according to some, they make lovable pets.

By Earl Hunsinger

Imagine coming face to face with a king cobra. Since a full-grown king cobra can be 18 feet long and can lift a third of its body off the ground, this could literally happen to you, if there are king cobras where you live. Since king cobras feed almost exclusively on other snakes, and have even been known to attack larger snakes, including pythons, you might wonder what could possibly frighten such a dangerous and fearsome creature.

Anyone familiar with Rudyard Kipling's classic story “Rikki-Tikki-Tavi” knows that the answer is the mongoose. In the story, a young mongoose is adopted by a family and repays them by protecting the household from poisonous snakes, including a black cobra. While this is just a story, there is a lot of truth in it.

In his book The Heart of the Hunter South African writer Laurens van der Post says this about a real snake-mongoose encounter: "I have seen [a mongoose], no more than thirteen inches long from head to tail and perhaps only five inches high, take on a six-foot cobra. After a series of adroit and nimble feints wherein the snake repeatedly struck, to miss him by a bare millimeter, he would dash in, seizing the cobra at the back of the neck to bite instantly through its spine."

Of course, not all mongooses eat snakes (yes, the preferred plural of mongoose is mongooses, not mongeese, since mongoose is derived from the Marathi or Hindi word mangus and is therefore linguistically unrelated to the word goose). There are over 40 species of mongooses, ranging in size from the dwarf mongoose, which is just over a foot long, to the crab eating mongoose of Southeast Asia, which is about four feet long. Most have short legs with long bodies, long bushy tails, small ears, and pointed noses. They are covered with thick,

coarse, gray to brown fur. While most are solitary animals, some species are very sociable, such as the meerkat.

Depending on the species, in addition to snakes their diet might include insects, earthworms, snails, lizards, frogs, rodents, eggs, fruit, and crabs. While they may look cute and cuddly, they are intelligent, bold, and agile predators. They are also cunning. For example, the banded mongoose is said to have a trick it uses when it wants to invite a guinea fowl to supper. It stands on its hind legs and then falls sideways, causing the curious bird to come closer to see what happened.

Of course, the mongoose is most famous for being a snake killer. However, its ability to fight cobras is not just a result of its supreme confidence and courage, or its lightning fast speed and agility. While not being immune to the cobra's poison, one expert says that it would take eight times the lethal dose to kill a mongoose.

In spite of its reputation as a predator, the mongoose is not a vicious animal. On the contrary, some have found that they make lovable pets. Of course, as with any pet, it's good to know as much about mongooses as possible before running out and trying to buy one. For instance, not all species may be suitable to domestication. As Bruce Kinloch, himself the owner of a pet mongoose, says in his book Sauce for the Mongoose, "Most species of mongoose are solitary, nocturnal beasts and make poor pets in consequence."

In addition, they are not always selective in what they prey upon. For instance, according to Columbia University's Introduced Species Summary Project when imported to help control the rat population, they "caused at least 7 amphibian and reptile extinctions in Puerto Rico and other islands in the West Indies." For this reason they are illegal in the United States and some other lands.

However, if you live in India, like Rikki-Tikki-Tavi's family, you too may find that the mongoose is a courageous snake killer and lovable pet.