



The

Meerkatter

The Friends of the Kalahari Meerkat Project Report - www.kalahari-meerkats.com - **May 2019**

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Back to a stable Zulus?

The Zulus saga continues at the KMP! As a quick reminder, Poma (VZUF007) the former dominant female disappeared in March, short after she had given birth. She died from a snake bite and the group lost the litter. Female dominance was unclear all along April, with the two sisters Spruddle (VZUF028) and Lil' G (VZUF029) competing. Lentil (VZUF032), the youngest female, was out of the competitions. All three remaining females were pregnant at the end of April. Early May was busy for our small group, as all three pregnancies came to an end.

On the 3rd of May, the first female gave birth overnight, Spruddle (VZUF028). She had started to lactate and the group babysat her litter the next day. The following morning, Lil' G (VZUF029) had also given birth. But, sadly, Lentil (VZUF032) the last pregnant female decided not to let these newborn pups survive, in order to give a chance to her own litter. Spruddle (VZUF028) and Lil' G (VZUF029), both lactating, tried to move the pups to a new sleeping burrow, this is when seven pups have been seen, this is obviously very early to see them as they usually emerge after two or three weeks after birth. Lentil (VZUF032) started to be aggressive towards the pup, some were killed above ground, and some were brought back below. The two older females might have tried to move their pups to safety as they could see their younger sister being a threat to the newborn pups.

Infanticide is commonly observed in meerkats, a female would kill another female's litter so that her own would benefit from the cooperative care system, other individuals babysitting her litter and other females lactating for her pups. The dominant female is responsible for the majority of reproduction, and benefits from cooperative care. The dominants would usually kill subordinates' litters. But subordinate females can also kill dominant females' litters to benefit from more helper, even though it is less common. After that sad day, the group changed sleeping burrow and were not seen carrying pups, evidences of lactation stopped and no members babysat. Both litters had been lost.

A couple of days later, on the 9th, Lentil (VZUF032) gave birth. Better news than for the two previous litters, the group babysat the following day and

Lentil (VZUF032) started to lactate. Spruddle (VZUF028) and Lil' G (VZUF029) started to lactate again, and helped babysitting for the newest litter. Lentil's (VZUF032) strategy did work out well for her pups, as the group is still babysitting and lactating for them. At the end of May, two pups have been seen in the burrow mouth, they have not yet emerged but they should come above ground very soon. It might seem like a very aggressive behavior, but this was in the best interest of her own offspring and their survival.



From left to right: Lentil (VZUF032), Spruddle (VZUF028) the new dominant, and Lil' G (VZUF029), all three full term pregnant. Photo Credit: Meerkat volunteer Lena Bureau.

At Zulus, when Spruddle (VZUF028) and Lil' G (VZUF029) gave birth, a dominant female had not been officially identified as they had stopped competing and no aggression or submission could be observed, but Meerkat Volunteers were suspecting Spruddle (VZUF028) to be the new dominant female. She was confirmed dominant on the 10th, not because of submissions she would receive from other individuals or her displaying aggressive behaviors, but because she did gain weight and had grown in size, because she was marking their territory a lot and was acting as a leader for the group. Sometimes, identifying a new dominant can be tricky and other pieces of evidence have to be taken into account. Later in May, Lil' G (VZUF028) has been seen being submissive to Spruddle (VZUF028), the new dominant female.



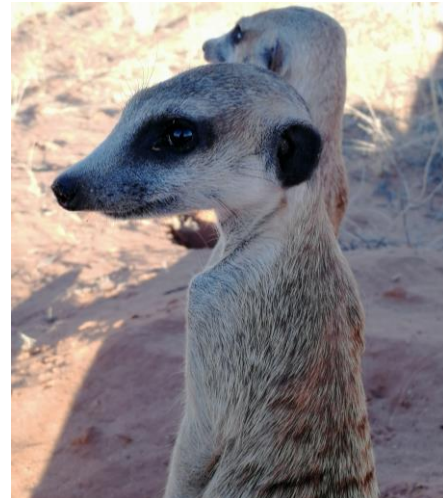
One question remains: who is the father of all those pups? Zulus has seven individuals, our three females and four males. All four males are directly related to the females, the dominant male being their father and the three subordinate males being their direct brothers.

A roving male has been seen hanging around the group at the end of May, volunteers think it might have been part of one of our habituated groups in the past as he was not scared enough from us to flee. Could it be that roving males approached Zulus after Poma's (VZUF007) tragic end? It will be very difficult to determine...

The curse of the dominant females

Something must be going on with dominant females at the KMP... After Hakuna Matata, Run Amuk, X-Force, Van Helsing and Zulus, more dominance changes in females have occurred!

Indeed, Van Helsing has experienced another female dominance change, only a couple of weeks after the previous one. Inara (VVHF109) sadly had to be euthanized, as she was suffering from severe TB symptoms. Kaylee (VVHF110) took over dominance very shortly after this unfortunate event, without any competition or even aggressive behaviors being recorded, she was the next natural leader for the group. But TB did not wait for long before striking again, Kaylee (VVHF110) had started to develop typical TB symptoms and was recently reported as being skinny, fatigued, had labored breathing, and had various growing TB lumps. Her general condition got worst quickly. This is when an unexpected event has been witnessed; the two youngest females Tim Tam (VVHF127) and Quincy (VVHF129) both chased Kaylee (VVHF110) away from the group and evicted her. On the same day, Kaylee (VVHF110) was seen hanging around Van Helsing, trying to get back in the group, unsuccessfully. The next morning, she woke up at a different sleeping burrow, not too far away but out of reach from her home group. At Van Helsing, serious competitions had started, Tim Tam (VVHF127) and Quincy (VVHF129) were heavily competing, did not even take time to forage but were assessing and challenging each other for the majority of the day. Both were battling to become the next dominant. At the end of May, the two sisters had not settled down, but were both starting to show TB symptoms. The stress these competitions generated certainly is not helping. Volunteers are hoping to see them choosing a new dominant female quickly, so that the fragile group can try to go back to normal foraging behaviors instead of intense fights. Kaylee (VVHF110) is still by herself, but will hopefully rejoin her family, maybe once the other females have picked the next ruler?



Sigma (VLF230), the new dominant female at Lazuli. Photo Credit: Meerkat volunteer Lucie Reinwalt.

Unlike Zulus, the female dominance change at Lazuli was very quick and easy. Filthy McNasty (VLF223) disappeared on the 26th of May. She was not seen for evening weights on Sunday, these are shorter sessions. Volunteers assumed she was below, and would simply not come back up to be weighed. But she did not wake up with the group the next morning and was not seen since. Within a day, charismatic Sigma (VLF230) asserted her dominance on all other members of the group, initiating dominance completion with other individuals but no challenger tried to go against her. Females were immediately very submissive to her. Sigma (VLF230) settled as the new dominant female in 24 hours.

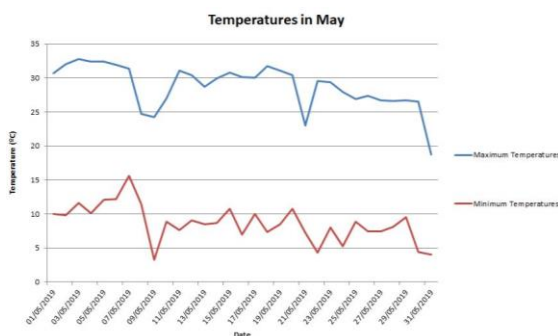
The reason for Filthy McNasty's (VLF223) absence is unknown, she was a young but firm dominant. But shortly before she disappeared, Sigma (VLF230) had started to assert dominance on other subordinates, and initiate competitions. This is an unusual behavior for subordinate females, unless they want to challenge current dominants. Could it be that Sigma (VLF230) was preparing for a dominance overtake and fought Filthy McNasty (VLF223) to take her place?

Volunteers are hoping to see the former dominant around soon.

The faces of many groups have changed recently, with all these new dominant females. Cold winter months will hopefully be calmer at the KMP, but do meerkats ever pause?

**Pregnancies in May 2019**

Females pregnant in May	8
Females who aborted	0
Females who gave birth, litters lost	2
Females who gave birth, litter emerged	3
Females who gave birth, unknown outcome	2
Females still pregnant at the end of the month	1

Weather at the KMP

Winter has come to the Kalahari, with 3.3°C being the coldest temperature recorded in May, but volunteers are prepared to face colder mornings soon! Afternoons are still warm, with the warmest temperatures reaching 32.8°C. Very little rain has fallen this past month, the KMP only got 1.0mm of rainfall.

May 2019 Life History Details**(Little) Creatures:**

- Kanye (VCRM002) finally returned to his home group mid-May after a long absence, and has stayed with Little Creatures until now.
- The two pups are still foraging with the group and are now dyed and identifiable as their habituation has improved a lot. One of them is a male, the other one a female.
- Habituation has impressively improved at Creatures, the females that were slowing the progress down are now more comfortable with volunteers at a shorter distance.
- All members are in good health.

Elrond's Council:

- Three healthy looking pups have emerged and have started to forage with the group at the end of May, they are fairly comfortable with hands but we still need to work on their habituation.
- Kamala (VBBF116) left and returned the very next day.
- Elrond's Council had an encounter with roving male Sauce (VZUM026), they chased him away and he retreated.
- Habituation is still improving, the pups are getting very good but it is still in progress, the wild dominant male is now fine within two meters of us, but the yearling female is still alarming at volunteers, even though the rest of the group does not react to us or her alarm.
- The group looks very healthy.

Gold Diggers:

- The five pups are still successfully foraging with the group.
- Habituation has been a little bit more difficult to work on in May, as the KMP has experienced a number of cold and/or windy mornings, and Gold Diggers do not like this kind of weather! They would wake up later and leave very quickly, which does not leave a long time to work on habituation. Let's see how the group copes with winter!
- All members are in good health.

Hakuna Matata:

- Flint Lockwood (VHMF001) is a strong dominant for the group, and their six pups have turned into successful juveniles.
- Hakuna Matata had an interactions with Lazuli, were both groups got confused by the overwhelming fight. Dante (VHMM007), Guacamole (VHMM008), Twirl (VHMM014) and Pingu (VHMM017) all left and returned on that day.
- The group had an encounter with Fledermaus (VLM242) on the same day.
- Dante (VHMM007) left and returned three other times, and Guacamole (VHMM008) four.
- All members are in good health.

Jaxx:

- Six pups emerged and have started to forage at the very end of May. The pups are already well habituated.
- The group had one daily group split.
- All members are in good health.

Lazuli:

- Filthy McNasty (VLF223) disappeared on the 26th of May, and Sigma (VLF230) took over dominance two days later.
- Jabok Black (VJXM098) is missing at the end of May.
- Lazuli had an encounter with Hakuna Matata, an encounter with Dante (VHMM007) and two with Guacamole (VHMM008). On the same day, Thursday (VLM239), Fledermaus (VLM242), Haopia (VLF244) and Israel (VLM247) all left and returned.
- Squelch (VLF250), Sizzle (VLM252), Splat (VLM254), and Sausage (VLF255), four of the five pups, had an interesting encounter, as Dante (VHMM007) and Guacamole (VHMM008), both from Hakuna Matata, encountered Lazuli, those four pups followed them to a burrow as the two groups were busy fighting. It ended with the two Hakuna Matata males babysitting the Lazuli pups, they were taking very good care of them and even groomed them! All pups returned safely to their home group at the end of the day.
- The group are all in good health.

Make-e-plan:

- Bridget's (VQLF011) is still pregnant but should give birth very soon.



- At the very end of May, Crunchy Nut (VMPF006) and Dauphinoise (VMPF007) got evicted by the dominant female, probably because she is about to have her pups. They have tried to get back into the group, unsuccessfully. Volunteers are hoping to see the two females back in the group very soon.
- The group members are all looking healthy.

Namaqua:

- Six pups have emerged at Namaqua, and are now foraging with the group. Most of the May litters seem to be successful this year, with no missing pups, and this one is no exception!
- Cleo (VWM205) got his last seen date in May, leaving the group with only five adults.
- All injuries have healed, some will keep scars but the group is now healthy.

Tswana:

- Early May, a new individual has been collared; a sub-adult female.
- The group is composed of one adult female and one adult male, one sub-adult male and one sub-adult female, and four curious pups. Their territory ranges around the old Rascals territory.
- Habituation has started, and the group responds surprisingly well. Volunteers are able to sit, stand and move a little bit closer every session.
- The group looks healthy, but it is not always easy to have a good look at them from a distance.

Ubuntu:

- The four pups are still all foraging with the group, and their habituation is in progress, they are getting more comfortable with hands and are now weighable.
- Shrew (VUBM018) left and returned to Ubuntu once this month.
- Volunteers are still working on habituation, as Scar (VUBM021) the dominant male is getting better but still very vigilant when foraging.
- Daisy (VBBF111) did not look well early May, she did not have any particular symptom but volunteers did not find her at her best shape, but all members were in good health by the end of the month.

Van Helsing:

- Hobo Llama (VVHM123) had to be euthanized due to his advanced stage of TB.
- The wild males are slowly improving, but are still too sketchy for volunteers to collect any data on them. The group had an encounter with a wild group, probably the group those wild males came from.
- As usually at Van Helsing, nothing went as planned, and they did once more not have a quiet month. Kaylee (VVHF110) was the dominant female, until she was chased away and evicted by Tim Tam (VVHF127) and Quincy (VVHF129). Kaylee (VVHF110) suffers from TB, the two youngest females probably took advantage of the situation. They are now

competing, trying to sort out who the next dominant will be.

- Kaylee (VVHF110) is not doing so well, she is skinny, fatigued, has labored breathing and a couple of TB lumps. Tim Tam * (VVHF127) and Quincy (VVH129) are starting to have sub-mandibular lumps, but still have some energy to compete! The rest of the group seems to be healthy, and so are the wild individuals.

Whiskers:

- Swift (VWF176) has once more given birth at the very end of the month, the group is now babysitting and the dominant female is lactating.
- Whiskers had an encounter with a roving male, and volunteers suspect he was once habituated, or at least partially.
- All members look healthy.

X-Force:

- The KMP has decided to stop following X-Force as they were moving further away from our reserve. We wish them all a great success and hope for the litter they were babysitting to be a healthy one!

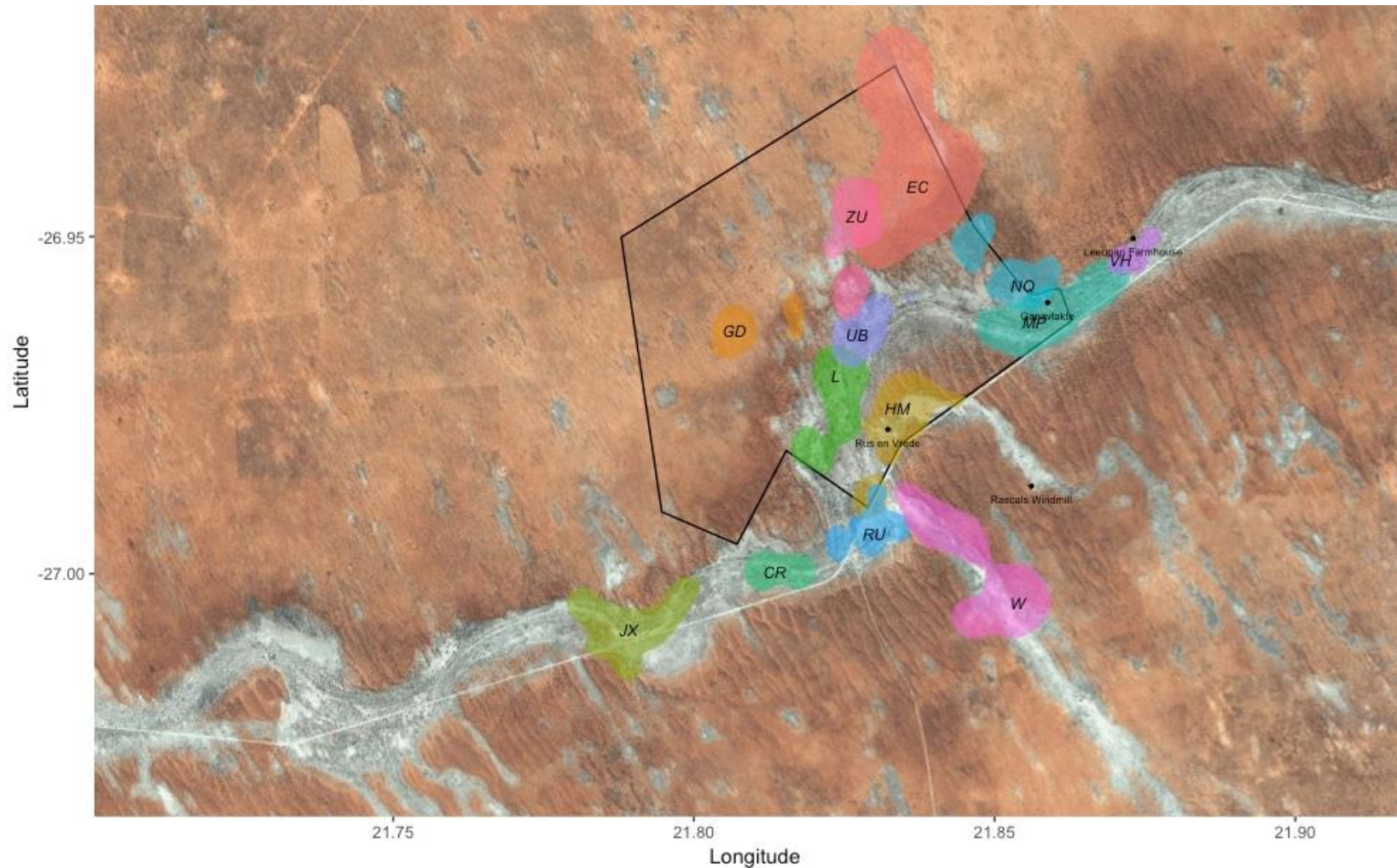
Zulus:

- Spruddle (VZUF028), Lil' G (VZUF029) and Lentil (VZUF032) have all given birth. The two first litters to be born, Spruddle's (VZUF028) and Lil' G's (VZUF029), did not survive. But Lentil's (VZUF032) is being babysat and all three females are lactating. Two pups have been seen in the burrow mouth, and should emerge soon!
- Spruddle (VZUF028) was declared officially dominant in May, after she had gained weight and has displayed dominant behaviors.
- Sauce (VZUM026) left and returned seven times this month, he did keep himself busy!
- The group also had an encounter with a wild male that has only been seen once.
- The group is looking healthy.

The following authors contributed to this report:

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Group Territories May 2019



Key: CR: Little Creatures, EC: Elrond's Council, GD: Gold Diggers, HM: Hakuna Matata, JX: Jaxx, L: Lazuli, MP: Make-e-plan, NQ: Namaqua, UB: Ubuntu, TS: Tswana, VH: Van Helsing, W: Whiskers, ZU: Zulus.