



The Meerkatter

The Friends of the Kalahari Meerkat Project Report - www.kalahari-meerkats.com - November 2020

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Kat-napped?

The breeding season is well and truly at its peak at the Kalahari Meerkat Project. This month dominant females at four different groups have given birth and two more were pregnant by the end of the month. Of all the fully established groups only two were lacking in pregnant females and pups. Of the many new pups that have joined the ever-growing meerkat population, one came as a surprise for observers.

Last month we saw the founding of a new sub-group, Aristokats, formerly called Lazuli 3. The group originally consisted of Little Creature's male The Worm's Heart (VCRM010) and Lazuli females Annie (VLF240), Weasel (VLF241) and Squelch (VLF250). On the very first day of November they had an extra member: a tiny, unmarked pup. None of the females had shown any signs of pregnancy or lactation, so observers concluded that the pup must have come from a different group. Aristokats had been spending much of their time in Jaxx territory not far from the burrow where the Jaxx dominant female Baloo (VJXF080) had given birth in. The Aristokats pup was estimated to be around 2 weeks old based on its size, coat condition and barely opened eyes. It was around the same age as the Jaxx litter that had not yet emerged or been marked. Observers therefore speculated that Aristokats' newest member was truly a Jaxx pup that had been stolen from the burrow. However, without anyone present to witness what had happened no one knows for certain where the pup came from.



The unnamed kidnapped Aristokats pup VAKP001. Photo Credit: Meerkat volunteer Laurie Johnson.

This is not the first time this year a pup has been taken from a group. In fact, there is a link between the first pup-theft and this latest one: Annie. In March Annie and another Lazuli female, Lennon (VLF246), took a pup from the Lazuli breeding burrow during their eviction. Together they joined up with Shandy (VHMM023) and formed the sub-group Lazuli 2. The group was short-lived as the females returned to Lazuli within a fortnight. The stolen pup, born to Lazuli dominant female Sigma (VLF230), was lost.



Yearling female Annie (VLF240), who is getting a reputation for being a "kat-napper". Photo Credit: Life History Coordinator Shaz Alderton.

It is typical for groups and individuals to kill any unrelated rival pups they encounter. In doing so they eliminate competition for resources. Apparent kid-nappings are rare, most have occurred during or following inter-group-interactions. A well-known example of this occurred in 2006 when the extinct group Young Ones had a pup named Axel (VYM137) accepted into Whiskers following an inter-group-interaction.

In most cases observers assume immigrations of pups into rival groups are a result of mistaken identity. It is not known if any thefts are done so intentionally. It is possible that the benefits of raising unrelated offspring to increase group size (and therefore security) outweighs the costs. Immigrant males will contribute to raising (babysitting and pup-

feeding) already-present offspring in their newly joined group, even when they have no known relation to the young. Based on that, perhaps it is not too unreasonable to assume Aristokats intentionally stole a pup to increase their own group number. The majority of sub-groups do not become fully established, with many males dispersing in search of better opportunities or females abandoning males to return to their home group. Any additional individuals may improve their chances of establishment.

Unfortunately, it all seemed for naught. The Aristokats pup was never seen again following that day. On top of that, The Worm's Heart left the females twice in the month to rove at the neighbouring groups, Jaxx and Fake-e-plan. As he is the individual wearing the radio collar it has become difficult to remain up to date with the activities of the females. On some days when Worm was present, other individuals including Annie and Weasel have been absent. With so much movement occurring, the dis-integration of Aristokats unfortunately seems imminent. We will keep you updated on what becomes of them.

Rampant Rovers

Coinciding with the large number of births and pregnancies is a similarly large number of males voluntarily leaving their groups to go roving. Continuing from last month: Namaqua's former dominant male Lewie (VLM228) has been seen visiting Zulus, Make-e-plan and Ubuntu. Other roving males from October have been on the move again this month, including Shandy (VHMM023) and Wallace (VLM264) from Lazuli and Jay-A-Rod (VWM216) from Zulus.



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Yearling male Legolas (VECM009) was captured via camera trap footage roving on the border of Zulus and Ubuntu territory. Image Credit: Zoe Turner, Zurich Manager.

Some new prospecting males that have been witnessed encountering other groups include Legolas (VECM009) from Elrond's Council, John Wayne (VJXM114), Merlot (VJXM121), Shiraz (VJXM122) and Grigio (VJXM126) from Jaxx, Pixie (VWM210) from Zulus and Coquillette (VTSM014) from the habituation group Tswana. Yearling male Legolas managed to slip under the radar of the notoriously aggressive Zulus dominant male Scuzi (VWM213) and interact with the group's dominant

female Spruddel (VZUF028). Unfortunately for Legolas, Spruddel repeatedly turned down his advances through chattering and face-swatting. Not to be deterred, Legolas interacted with some of the younger males of the group including Godric (VZUM053) and initiated dominance competitions. However once Scuzi noticed the intruder, Legolas was sent running for the dunes.



Shiraz (VJXM122) and Merlot (VJXM121) competing for dominance at Fake-e-plan. Photo Credit: Life History Coordinator Shaz Alderton.

Adult male John Wayne had more success than Legolas. John managed to immigrate into Aristokats and was seen repeatedly mounting Annie. No mating was observed. Interestingly there was no aggressive interaction or competition between John and Aristokats only resident male, The Worm's Heart. Both males initially submitted to each other, but after a day Worm was confirmed to be dominant. John returned to Jaxx within a week.

The most successful rovers of the month were the younger adult males from Jaxx. The subordinate "wine boys" Shiraz, Merlot and Grigio, emigrated from Jaxx and immigrated into Fake-e-plan. Fake-e-plan's resident males Mushu (VMPPM028) and Kratos (VMPPM024) had recently left, presumably to go searching for unrelated females. With only Bigwig (VMPPF022), Cirilla (VMPPF026), Scylla (VMPPF025) and Hope (VMPPF029) remaining in the group, the Jaxx males had little difficulty integrating. Dominance competitions between the males has been witnessed at nearly every session, but by the end of the month there was still no confirmed dominant male.

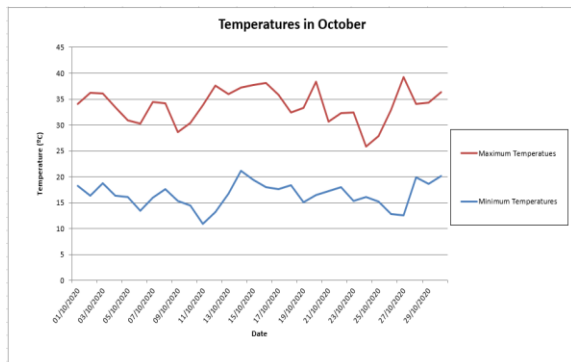
For most of this year the title of "super-rover" belonged to 4-year old Sauce (VZUM026) as he was the male most commonly seen encountering rival groups. He has put an end to his roving days since becoming dominant male at Namaqua. Now it seems the individual Sauce displaced, Lewie, will become the next "super-rover" of the current population. Lewie has had nine encounters across four different groups since his departure from Namaqua last month and a total of 39 encounters recorded across his life history so far. But he has a long way to go to before

breaking any records. The highest number of encounters with rival groups recorded is tied between Frisky natal dominant male Bramley (VFM127) and Whiskers subordinate male (and eventually Uberkatz dominant male) Gump (VWM132). They each had 102 encounters reported over their lifetimes. There is still - at the very least - three months left of the meerkat's peak breeding season, meaning there is still plenty of time for the current rovers to try their luck.

Pregnancies in November 2020

Females pregnant in November	6
Females who aborted	0
Females who gave birth, litters lost	0
Females who gave birth, litter emerged	2
Females who gave birth, unknown outcome	2
Females still pregnant at the end of the month	2

Weather at the KMP



There has been little fluctuation in temperature throughout November compared to previous months. The highest temperature of 38.4°C was recorded on the 20th. The coldest temperature was 10.8°C on the 11th. The total rainfall for the month was 71.8mls, 29.8mls of which (~40%) was collected on the 21st alone.

November 2020 Life History Details

Aristokats (formerly Lazuli 3):

- The number of individuals present at the end of the month was unknown due to the radio-collared individual, The Worm's Heart (VCRM010), being absent from the group.
- An unnamed pup VAKP001 assumed to be from another group was present on the 1st and was out foraging with the group. It was not seen again after this date and was assumed predated.
- John Wayne (VJXM114) immigrated by the 8th. He and dominant male The Worm's Heart submitted to each other, leaving dominance uncertain. However, by the 10th The Worm's Heart was re-established as dominant male.

John Wayne emigrated and returned to Jaxx on the 14th.

- The Worm's Heart left on two occasions and returned once. Annie (VLF240) was absent from the group on the 1st but had returned by the following day. Weasel (VLF241) was away from the group on the 24th and has not been seen since.
- The group had one inter-group-interaction with Jaxx on the 7th in which Aristokats retreated.
- All individuals seemed to be healthy when they were last seen.

Elrond's Council:

- There were 23 out of 24 individuals present at the end of the month with sub-adult male Cake (VECM030) absent.
- Dominant female Tayl Baez gave birth between the 6th-7th. Three pups emerged on the 28th and have been marked.
- Subordinate females Pippin (VECF003) and Galadriel (VECF032) returned to the group after being absent last month. Cake who was also absent in October seemed to have returned to the group on the 10th but has not been seen again since.
- Legolas (VECM009) left and returned on two occasions.
- Habituation Level is still considered Incomplete as Galadriel needs further progress. By the end of the month she would allow observers to follow between 1-5m but is most comfortable at 4m+.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

Fake-e-plan:

- There were 7 out of 9 individuals present at the end of the month with yearling males Mushu (VMPM028) and Kratos (VMPM024) absent.
- Mushu and Kratos had left by the 10th. Five days later Merlot (VJXM121), Shiraz (VJXM122) and Grigio (VJXM126) were found to have immigrated into the group.
- There is no clear dominant female or dominant male.
- The Worm's Heart (VCRM010) encountered the group once at the end of the month.
- All individuals appear to be in good health.

Gold Diggers:

- All 12 marked individuals were present at the end of the month along with an unknown number of pups.
- The position of dominant female is still not confirmed.
- The unnamed adult female VGDF013 gave birth on the 16th. No pups have been seen but the group has been babysitting and VGDF013 and VGDF012 have been lactating.
- James (Sawyer) (VGDM011) was absent from the group on the 11th but had returned by the 15th. VGDF012 and VGDF018 did not emerge with the group on the 15th and appeared once the next day. They had returned to the group within days of VGDF013 giving birth.
- On the 27th Rogelio De La Vega (VGDM015) and Elliot (VGDM016) were seen leaving the



group. Both had returned by the end of the month.

- Gold Diggers' Habituation Level is in Advanced Progress as all individuals are marked. Observers have continued to make progress with following the group for up to 3 hours. However, they still have days where they will not allow observers to follow and run away.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

Jaxx:

- There were 18 out of 19 individuals present at the end of the month with subordinate female Didah (VJXF112) absent.
- Subordinate male Rollie (VJXM101) was considered emigrated as he has been absent from Jaxx for over a month.
- Five pups born to dominant female Baloo (VJXF080) emerged and have been foraging with the group.
- Yearling males Merlot (VJXM121), Shiraz (VJXM122) and Grigio (VJXM126) emigrated and joined Fake-e-plan. John Wayne (VJXM114) emigrated and immigrated into Aristokats before returning Jaxx within a week. He left again later in the month along with yearling male Rincewind (VJXM131). Both males returned within days. Didah was not found with the group at the end of the month.
- The Worm's Heart (VCRM010) encountered Jaxx on two occasions.
- The group had one inter-group-interaction with Aristokats in which the rival group retreated.
- All individuals seem to be in good health.

Lazuli:

- There were 8 out of 10 individuals present at the end of the month with subordinate females Haopia (VLF244) and Lennon (VLF246) absent.
- Adult subordinate male Wallace (VLM264) has emigrated as he has been absent for over a month.
- Dominant female Sigma (VLF230) was pregnant by the end of the month.
- Adult male Shandy (VHMM023) who was absent at the end of last month returned to the group. He left and returned on three occasions. Subordinate males Squeal (VLM251), Slop (VLM253) and Captain Barbosa (VLM265) all left Lazuli on separate occasions multiple times. All of them repeatedly returned to Lazuli and were part of the group at the end of the month.
- Haopia was away from the group twice and Lennon once. Haopia returned the group once but was absent the next day. Both females appeared on the edge of Lazuli three times each and were chased off each time.
- Two unidentified adults encountered the group on the 24th. Three unknown meerkats encountered Lazuli on the 28th. On both days, the unidentified individuals were chased off.
- All individuals in Lazuli seem to be healthy.

(Little) Creatures:

- The number of individuals at Little Creatures at the end of the month is unknown as the radio

collared meerkat Mildred (VCRF009) was absent.

- One of the pups who was absent at the end of October did not return and has been assumed predated.
- Mildred was found alone on the 23rd. The rest of the group was found that day at a separate burrow but were not found again for the rest of the month.
- Little Creatures' Habituation Level is In Progress as there is still an unmarked individual in the group.
- When last seen, all individuals appeared to be in good health.

Make-e-Plan:

- Make-e-plan have increased their numbers to 14 this month with the arrival of at least three pups born to dominant female Bridget (VQLF011).
- Arabella (VMPF035) was absent from the group on the 9th. She appeared on the outskirts of the group that same day and was chased off. She returned to Make-e-plan on the 10th and foraged with them before leaving again that same morning. The next day she was acting as part of the group again.
- An unknown individual encountered Make-e-plan on the 6th and was chased off. Lewie (VLM228) encountered the group on the 24th and was chased off three times.
- All individuals appear to be in good health.

Namaqua:

- There were 10 out of 11 members present at the end of the month with dominant female Heatherleigh (VQLF018) absent. She did not emerge with the rest of the group on the 3rd and has not been seen since.
- Quarrel (VNQM010) has not been sighted since last month and has been considered Last Seen.
- Previous dominant male Lewie (VLM228) has emigrated as he has not returned to the group since leaving in October.
- No other events occurred at Namaqua this month.
- Tuberculosis is still present with Heatherleigh showing symptoms when she was last sighted. Subordinate female Skirmish (VNQF009), who had previously had symptoms, did not show any symptoms this month.

Phoenix

- The only identified individual, Pinky (VPHF001) was present at the end of the month along with around 14 wild individuals, including 1 pup.
- No major events have been observed at Phoenix this month.
- The group's Habituation Level is In Progress, individuals tolerate observers at 10-15m.
- All members of Phoenix appear to be healthy.

Tswana:

- There were an unknown number of members present at the end of the month. All the mature females including dominant female Britney (VTSF009) and the radio collared subordinate female Ocytocine (VTSF003) have not been found since the 14th. The other radio collared



individual, subordinate male Sushi (VTSM006), has still been found with the majority of Tswana's males and all the pups born to Britney in September.

- Two adult males Gnarl Barkley (VTSM015) and Lemon (VTSM018) were thought to have left as they have not been seen all month.
- Adult male Coquillet (VTSM014) left at the end of the month and was seen alone at Whiskers. He had returned to Tswana by the following morning.
- The yearling male Dopamine (VTSM004) has not returned to the group and has been Last Seen.
- Tswana's Habituation Level is still considered to be in Advanced Progress as all individuals are marked.
- The individuals that could be found this month all seemed to be healthy.

Zulus:

- There were 11 out of 15 individuals present at the end of the month with Pixie (VWM210), Jay-A-Rod (VWM216), Lil G (VZUF029) and Lentil (VZUF032) absent.
- Pixie left the group on two occasions and returned once. Jay-A-Rod left three times and returned two times. Lil G was found away from the group on the 12th, she appeared and was chased off. During the chase Lentil left Zulus. Neither of them have been seen for the rest of the month.
- Zulus encountered Lewie (VLM228) three times and Elrond's Council male Legolas (VECM009) three times.
- Zulus had two inter-group-interactions with Ubuntu.
- All remaining individuals in Zulus seem healthy.

The following authors contributed to this report:

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