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# Meerkatter

The Friends of the Kalahari Meerkat Project Report - [www.kalahari-meerkats.com](http://www.kalahari-meerkats.com) - **August 2019**

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## One end new beginnings

This month we have experienced a wonderful high of having members of our newest group Tswana be comfortable enough to be dyed. This means these individuals were now being consistently identifiable, and data could start being collected on them as volunteers were finally able to tell them apart. Two pups, one female and one male (VTSF003 and VTSM004 respectively) were dyed on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August and a juvenile female (VTSF005) being dyed the next day August 27<sup>th</sup>.

Tswana, our newest group, was first collared in April and was a group composed entirely of wild individuals. This makes their progress even more astounding as there was no previously habituated individuals in the group to aid habituation. When the habituation process first began in April volunteers had to be over one hundred meters away for Tswana to even emerge from their sleeping burrow.

Now less than 5 months later, three of the juveniles are comfortable to play, forage and just generally be relaxed with volunteers less than one meter away from them! These three individuals can be weighed regularly, are easily identified.



One of the Tswana pups scratching the box in which we keep the egg at a few centimeters from Charlotte, being more than comfortable! Photo Credit: Meerkat volunteer Charlotte Alley.

This habituation boost was not only limited to Tswana! Elrond's Council has been progressing at a very exciting rate and volunteers have been able to

follow the group for entire morning sessions! At first the group was concerned about different movements and did not like volunteers wearing their backpack (or even their hat!!), but have since improved more and more. Volunteers have also started approaching the group in the afternoon which is a big step for Elrond's Council and any habituation group, and there is much hope that this group will become fully habituated within the next few months. Volunteers have all fingers and toes crossed for this outcome!

There was also progress at Gold Diggers this month. Gold diggers is our oldest and biggest habituation group. They have been quite slow in their progress as there are so many of them (group estimates are approximate 20 individuals!). This many individuals make habituation difficult, however, our volunteers persevered and there are three juveniles who are getting quite comfortable being close to us and will even approach to sit and play at our feet and with our belongings! Volunteers hope that Gold Diggers will soon reach Tswana's progress with multiple identifiable individuals who we can collect data on regularly.

Regrettably, August also brought some very unfortunate news, the two remaining adult females at Van Helsing Tim Tam (VVHF127) and Quincy (VVHF129) were both euthanized on the 14<sup>th</sup>. These two lovely ladies had been suffering with TB for a while and were very sick with the disease. Both females suffered with lumps, some of which had burst, were skinny and often reported as fatigued. For those who remember, many members of Van Helsing have succumbed to the devastating disease in the past.

Some will remember that Van Helsing was down to six individuals early August: Tim Tam (VVHF127), Quincy (VVHF129), Hydrogene (VVHF132), Azote (VVHF133), Oxygene (VVHF134) and Carbone (VVHM135) and the wild males who immigrated into the group in April. The number of wild males seen at the group varied between three to five, with the one showing signs of dominance habituated enough to be identifiable (VVHM136).

Unfortunately, after the loss of the dominant female Tim Tam (VVHF127) and the eldest subordinate Quincy (VVHF129), no other individuals were



collared. This means that volunteers would no longer be able to find the four sub-adults; Hydrogene (VVHF132), Azote (VVHF133), Oxygene (VVHF134) and Carbone (VVHM135) and the wild males. This loss was felt greatly by all members of the Kalahari Meerkat Project as Van Helsing had been such a beloved group for so long, first being seen in February 2008 and were followed up until the 14<sup>th</sup> of August 2019.

The loss of this group was very disappointing for volunteers as the wild males that immigrated into the group in April of this year were getting better and better with their, but some were starting to show signs of TB, with one developing a visible lump.



Last February, there were ten members of Van Helsing including Hydrogene (VVHF132), Azote (VVHF133), Oxygene (VVHF134) and Carbone (VVHM135) when they were still pups. Unfortunately, volunteers are no longer able to follow this group. Photo Credit: Meerkat volunteer and Zurich Manager Lena Bureau.

### Summer is coming back

The cold season is coming to an end, warmer and earlier days are starting to paint the colors of Summer and with this, meerkats are getting more active again! As Summer is returning to the Kalahari, we usually see more movements in meerkats; groups explore and try to expand their territories, males are trying to find themselves mating opportunities, females are getting pregnant as the rainy season approaches carrying better conditions for meerkats, ...

This year is no different in the returning of the activity as the Kuruman River Reserve is starting to be busier, but these events are starting earlier than last year. Indeed, August 2019 appears to be warmer compared to the past two years. This year is generally warmer, temperatures are higher and more stable during the day, and mornings are not as cold as they were in 2018 and 2017 when temperatures would fluctuate a lot more. This impacts the meerkats' rhythm; they wake up earlier and spend less time sunning at the sleeping burrow before leaving to go foraging. In the evening, meerkats also return later, which means that they spend longer out in the open to forage if comparing to the two previous August months. Temperatures do have consequences!

With these warmer days, the Kalahari is starting to see rovers running across shrublands and over dunes to try to find groups with mating opportunities that might accept them, or females that are evicted

from their home groups to form a new one. In August, the common rovers from last season are back in business. It might still be too early for younger males, but experienced males have left, approached and returned all month long.

Hakuna Matata has had some visitors; Pixie (VWM210), Finnick (VLM234), Thursday (VLM239), Fledermaus (VLM242) and Nelson (VLM248) approached the group but Pet (VCVM001) the undefeated king of the land has chased them away with the group he leads. He has even approached another group himself, an unusual move for a dominant male, but he indeed left with three of his subordinates, Dante (VHMM007), Guacamole (VHMM008) and Twirl (VHMM014) to go on an adventure at Lazuli. The iconic group chased the insisting rovers off successfully, just like with Bon Bon (VUBM016) who was equally received. This visit got payed back as two males from Lazuli, Finnick (VLM234) and Thursday (VLM239) approached Ubuntu together.

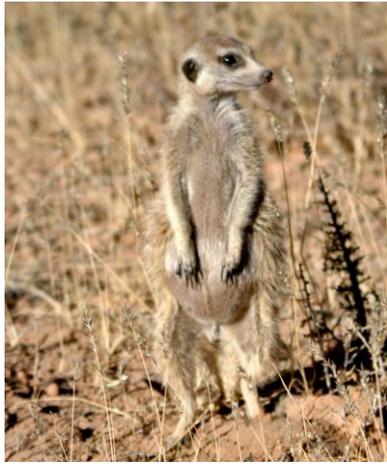


Thursday (VLM239) had left Lazuli, his home group, and was spotted in Hakuna Matata's territory. He is clearly looking for other meerkats to make friends with! Photo Credit: Meerkat volunteer Narelle Hill.

The famous pair of rovers, Bonnie (VWM209) and Clyde (VWM208) left Van Helsing, approached Make-E-Plan but got chased away, returned to Namaqua and tried approaching Make-E-Plan again within a month, great performance that they will probably beat over the next breeding season! Last but not least, Kanye (VCRM002) has once again proven that he can run fast... He had been seen at Little Creatures for morning sessions and at Jaxx later the same mornings multiple times. Kanye (VCRM002) approached Jaxx eight times in August and will probably not stop there. On the contrary, Sauce (VZUM026) has stayed surprisingly calm this month and only left once, he might have decided to settle down?

Rovers are on the move again, but so are the groups. Territories are overlapping again, especially around the riverbed where Hakuna Matata, Lazuli and Ubuntu can be found. It is therefore not surprising to encounter rival groups when you are using the same grounds. Lazuli has had one encounter with Hakuna Matata (after some war dancing, Lazuli retreated) and one with Ubuntu (Ubuntu retreated when Lazuli were spotted). Make-E-Plan and Namaqua are also being found very close to each other and had an encounter. There is no match as Make-E-Plan outnumbers Namaqua largely, the smaller group retreated as soon as they

could see the group led by Heatherleigh's (VQLF018, the dominant female of Namaqua) sister Bridget (VQLF011).



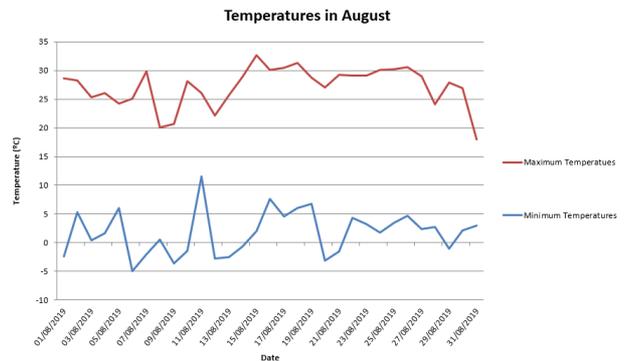
Sigma (VLF230) the dominant female at Lazuli being vigilant, and very pregnant! But even that far along, she would lead her group chase rovers and neighboring groups away. Photo Credit: Meerkat volunteer Narelle Hill.

Alongside the struggles of some to find new groups or to defend their territories, the Kalahari is about to welcome new pups in this climate of tensions. Two of our dominant females, Sigma (VLF230) from Lazuli and Swift (VWF176) from Whiskers both gave birth a day apart from each other. Swift (VWF176) our senior female at the KMP has been dominant for about four years now, and has just given birth to her 20<sup>th</sup> litter on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August! Both groups are babysitting, both dominants are the only lactating females in their respective groups, and we are all impatiently waiting for both litters to emerge! This upcoming breeding season will hopefully bring more pups to the grounds of the warming up Kalahari.

### Pregnancies in August 2019

<b>Females pregnant in August</b>	<b>5</b>
Females who aborted	3
Females who gave birth, litters lost	0
Females who gave birth, litter emerged	0
Females who gave birth, unknown outcome	2
Females still pregnant at the end of the month	0

### Weather at the KMP



August 2019 was surprisingly warm; this time of the year is usually known for being a little bit colder and for having less stable temperatures. But this year, August is marking the start of summer with a minimum of -4.9°C early August, a maximum of 27.2°C and stable temperatures during the day.

### August 2019 Life History Details

#### (Little) Creatures:

- The wild sub-adult male was missing from the group at the end of the month, potentially roving.
- Kanye (VCRM002), left and returned to the group on 5 separate occasions! He also had 8 encounters with Jaxx during the month of August.
- One wild female looked definitely pregnant at the very beginning of August, even though it is very difficult to check on wild females' pregnancies (as they sometimes sit half in a bolthole, behind a shrub or move away which makes it more difficult for volunteers). She did not look pregnant later in the month, it is unclear if she gave birth or aborted.
- All members are in good health.

#### Elrond's Council:

- Elrond's council's habituation is getting better and better, volunteers can follow the group for entire morning sessions and are starting to approach the group to follow them in the afternoon. The group is still a little nervous about the afternoon approaches but are improving!
- Legolas (VECM009) had a little bit of an adventure on the 18<sup>th</sup>, he was found alone still at the sleeping when the volunteer arrived for their afternoon session, fortunately the group returned to the same sleeping burrow later that afternoon and he was reunited with his family!
- The group had two daily group splits.
- The group is in good health.

#### Gold Diggers:

- There were no major events at Gold Diggers this month! Three individuals are really well habituated, volunteers are hopeful that these individuals could possibly be dye marked soon so that they would become identifiable.
- One wild female was considered as definitely pregnant by volunteers at the end of the month.
- All members are in good health.



#### **Hakuna Matata:**

- The four pups are growing bigger and bigger by the day, with all four having lovely large bellies!
- Summer is definitely back with five members of Hakuna Matata leaving; Pet (VCVM001) and Twirl (VHMM014) left to go roving once, Dante (VHMM007) four times, Guacamole (VHMM008) five times.
- Ace (VHMF022) also went on a little adventure and left the group before returning just over 2 hours later.
- Hakuna Matata had seven encounters this month: Whiskers male Pixie (VWM210) approached the group once; Finnick (VLM234) and Fledermaus (VLM242) approached the group twice, and Thursday (VLM239) once.
- Hakuna Matata also had one inter-group interaction in August with Lazuli, and one daily group split.
- Volunteers have noticed bald patches of various sizes on Flint Lockwood (VHMF001), Pet (VCVM001) and Mozzarella (VHMF015). What is causing these bald patches is still unclear, volunteers are keeping a close eye and reporting on any changes.

#### **Jaxx:**

- Baloo (VJXF080) aborted on the 14<sup>th</sup> of August.
- Jaxx had eight separate encounters with Kanye (VCRM002) during this past month!
- All members are in good health.

#### **Lazuli:**

- Sigma (VLF230) gave birth on the 21<sup>st</sup> of the month and the group have been babysitting, the pups should hopefully emerge soon.
- Summer has also returned to Lazuli with six members leaving the group; Finnick (VLM234), Thursday (VLM239) and Fledermaus (VLM242) went roving twice. Nelson (VLM248), Sizzle (VLM252) and Splat (VLM254) left the group in August and are still missing from the group at the end of the month, volunteers hope that they will return to Lazuli soon!
- Lazuli has had eight encounters in August: the Hakuna Matata males Pet (VCVM001) and Twirl (VHMM014) both approached Lazuli once, Dante (VHMM007) and Guacamole (VHMM008) on two occasions. They also had an encounter with Bon-bon (VUBM016) and one with an unknown meerkat.
- Lazuli had two inter group interactions in August one with Hakuna Matata and one with Ubuntu.
- The group are all in good health.

#### **Make-e-plan:**

- Jerry (VMPM032) has sadly disappeared, but his brother Tom (VMPM031) is doing great and is getting bigger by the day.
- Make-E-Plan encountered the two Whiskers boys Bonnie (VWM209) and Clyde (VWM208) twice in August, it seems like they are becoming common rovers around the group as Namaqua is occupying a territory close to Make-E-Plan's. The two groups being that close geographically, they had an intergroup interaction, but Namaqua

retreated very quickly after having realised they were not the only group in the area.

- The group members are all looking healthy.

#### **Namaqua:**

- Clyde (VWM208) and Bonnie (VWM209) immigrated back into Namaqua after their short adventures at Van Helsing and Make-E-Plan! They might not stay still for a very long time and will probably pay more than one visit to neighbouring groups.
- Make-E-Plan and Namaqua were using sleeping burrows in the same area in August, a group encounter could therefore not have been prevented.
- The group also had a short daily group split.
- All members seem to be in good health.

#### **Tswana:**

- August has seen Tswana taking a big step forward, as three individuals now have dye marks! Two pups (one male and one female) and one juvenile female became so comfortable with volunteers that they now have dye marks and are finally consistently identifiable. The habituation of Tswana only started in April, they are progressing at an unbelievably fast rate, and volunteers are working even harder to push them forward even more.
- The group looks healthy.

#### **Ubuntu:**

- Daisy (VBBF111) and The Native (VUBF020) both aborted in August and lost their round bellies.
- Bon Bon (VUBM016) has become a common rover and has not failed to his habits as he left Ubuntu, visited Lazuli and returned.
- In return, Finnick (VLM234) and Thursday (VLM239) had an encounter with Ubuntu, and the group also had an intergroup interaction with Lazuli.
- All members are in good health.

#### **Van Helsing:**

- VVHM136 returned early August.
- Clyde (VWM208) and Bonnie (VWM209) emigrated out shortly after their immigration and were not seen at Van Helsing again.
- The group had two daily group splits and one overnight group split in August. Additionally, one of the juveniles, Azote (VVHF133), left and returned within the same day.
- On the 14<sup>th</sup> of August, Tim Tam (VVHF127) and Quincy (VVHF129) got euthanised due to suffering from severe TB symptoms. The Kalahari Meerkat Project had decided to stop following the group, so the four juveniles, the dominant male and one wild male were seen for the last time running away from the sleeping burrow. We wish them a lucky and happy future!
- The juveniles seemed to be healthy, and so were the wild males.



**Whiskers:**

- Swift (VWF176) gave birth to her twentieth litter on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August, she is lactating, and the group is babysitting.
- Two males left roving this past month, Pixie (VWM210) approached Hakuna Matata, and Lilac (VWM214) was seen by himself an afternoon before returning to his home group.
- All members look healthy.

**Zulus:**

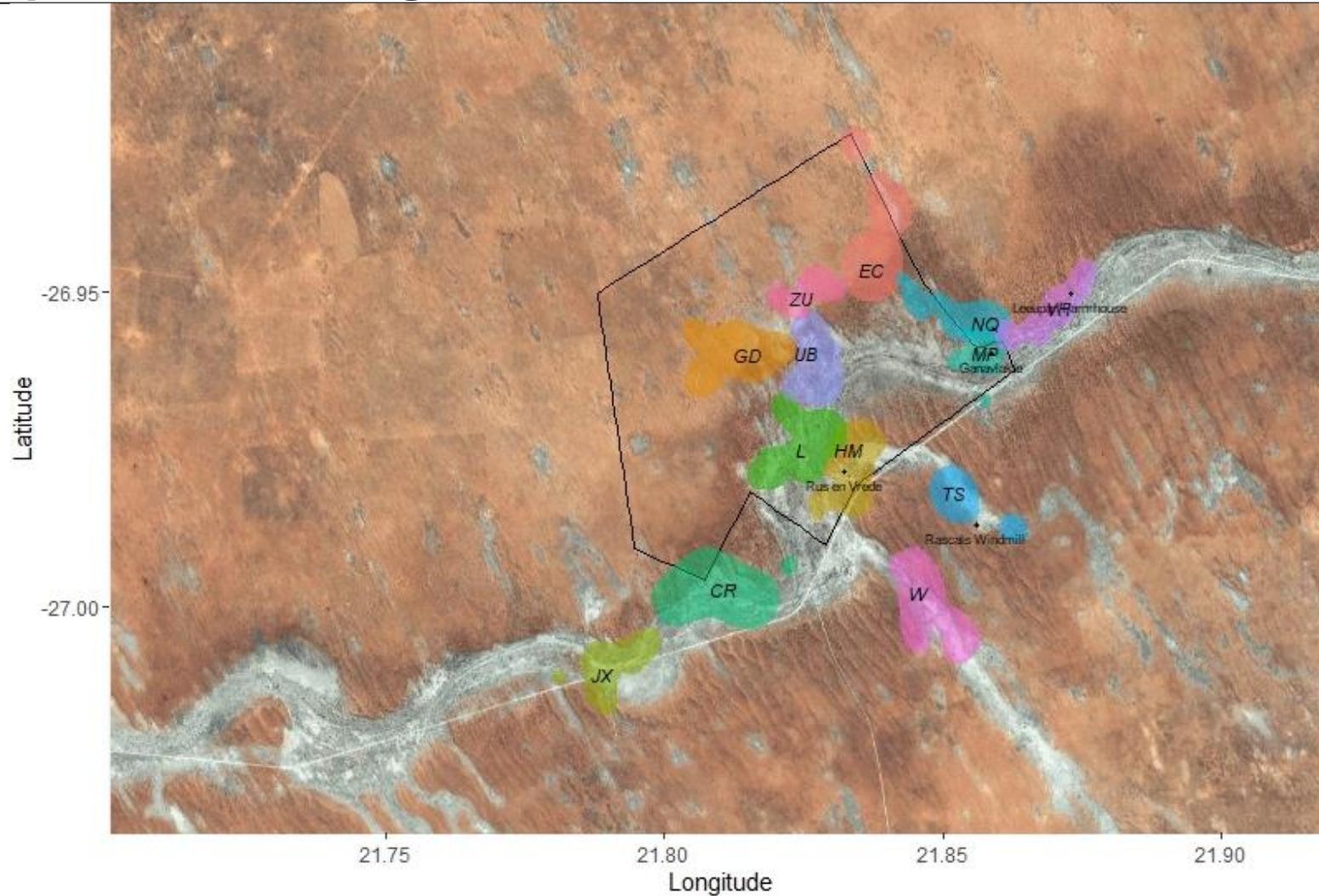
- Timon (VZUF049) and Pumba (VZUF048) turned juveniles early August, they were already heavy pups and are still getting bigger!
- Sauce (VZUM026) only left Zulus once to go roving and returned the same day.
- The group had an encounter with an unknown meerkat, volunteers are suspecting the presence of a wild group around Zulus territory.
- The group is looking healthy.

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**The following authors contributed to this report:**

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Siomha Campbell, Life History trainee

## Group Territories August 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.