



# The

# Meerkatter

The Friends of the Kalahari Meerkat Project Report - [www.kalahari-meerkats.com](http://www.kalahari-meerkats.com) - May 2020

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## Winter Babies

The majority of meerkat pups are born in the peak breeding season (September to March), and yet across the past two months we have had at least seven females give birth to litters where pups have survived to emergence or where groups were still showing babysitting and lactation activity by the end of the month. These births have occurred in six out of twelve of the study groups including Elrond's Council, Make-E-Plan, Namaqua, Ubuntu, Jaxx and Lazuli. Female meerkats are able to reproduce up to four times per year, with dominant females usually attempting to breed 2-3 times annually and subordinate females rarely attempting to breed more than once a year.



Boromir (VECM016) babysitting all nine fully emerged pups at Elrond's Council. Photo Credit: Meerkat volunteer Shaz Alderton.

The biggest "baby-boom" occurred at Elrond's Council where an impressive total of 11 pups were dyed across different sessions. Two pups were assumed predated while the remaining nine were seen emerging for the first time on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May. It is thought that all of these pups were born to the dominant female Tayl Baez (VBBF117) as she was the only officially pregnant female in the group at the time of the birth. However, the undyed yearling female was potentially pregnant during that period. She was absent from the group at the time but was

sighted occasionally and from observations was considered to possibly be pregnant but cannot be confirmed. DNA samples have been collected from the nine pups so that we may eventually determine the litter's parentage. Previously, the largest litter recorded has been seven pups sighted. If Tayl Baez is confirmed to be the mother of all of them, she will be the new record-holder. The nine pups at Elrond's Council have since started foraging with the group and all were still present by the end of the month.

Pups have also emerged at Make-e-plan, Namaqua, and Ubuntu, all of which were born to the group's respective dominant females; Bridget (VQLF011), Heatherleigh (VQLF018) and Daisy (VBBF111). Of all the pups born only one, VUBP034 at Ubuntu, was lost after emergence and assumed predated. All the remaining are still alive and have started foraging.

Meanwhile at Jaxx and Lazuli we are awaiting to see if pups will emerge. There has been consistent babysitting at both groups, with dominant female Baloo (VJXF080) and subordinate female Nāvis (VJXF128) lactating at Jaxx. At Lazuli dominant female Sigma (VLF230) and subordinate female Annie (VLF240), who gave birth within two days of each other, have both been lactating. It will be interesting to see how the Winter Babies fare in the months to come.



Three of the young Make-e-Plan pups shortly after their first emerge during May. Photo Credit: Cape Ground Squirrel volunteer Nicole Cashman.



## Sauce's Roving Adventures Continue!

Whilst the month of May is usually a quiet time for the movements and interactions of individuals between different groups, there is one individual who is continuing to be sighted roving – Sauce (VZUM026) at Elrond's Council. Sauce has become a notorious rover this year and is not following normal trends of stopping during the Winter season.

Studies looking into the roving activities of males often find that most activity is experienced between June and December which reflects higher female fertility levels and more instances of evicted females. They also report that subordinate males that reside with their natal group are more likely to have greater roving activity than immigrant males of a similar age, due to the availability of unrelated breeding partners.



Sauce (VZUM026) guarding Elrond's Council territory. Photo Credit: Meerkat volunteer Zoe Turner.

Sauce is originally from Zulus, born in December 2016. Indications of his initial attempts at roving were noted in March 2018 when he left Zulus for the first time, although returned the very same day. Similar behavior was noted again in April 2018, and this became more common in October of 2018 with a total of five days where he left and returned from Zulus. During this time, he was seen approaching Ubuntu on one occasion and this marks his first recorded roving at another group at almost 2 years of age. He remained consistent in his behavior of leaving for very short periods of time, each usually being just a day or two. He proceeded to once again approach Ubuntu in November 2018, and then Gold Diggers in February 2019. Most of his assumed roving activity was not witnessed at other groups, and there may be a few reasons for this. During his period of increased absence from Zulus between October 2018 and April 2019, the territory of Zulus was closest to that of Freetails (a small dispersal group of just one to three individuals at the time), Gold Diggers, and Elrond's Council (both of the latter being habituation groups at the time). Due to the nature of the nearby groups of which he may have been most likely to visit while roving, there was a lower likelihood of observers being present at these neighboring groups to witness his activities. Only when Sauce woke up with Elrond's Council one morning in April 2019 was there any indication that his activities may have been directed towards their territory. This initial immigration into Elrond's

Council was very brief, and he had returned to Zulus just the following day. For the following 6 months, Sauce continued to regularly leave Zulus for short time periods, with no clear indication of where he was going as he was not seen interacting with any other groups. There was just a single occurrence following an inter-group interaction between Zulus and Elrond's Council where Sauce left following this, and so it was assumed that it may have once more been Elrond's Council that was his destination.



Sauce (VZUM026) seen roving at Namaqua. Photo Credit: Former meerkat volunteer and life history Siomha Campbell.

His efforts may not have been fully observed, however when he finally immigrated into Elrond's Council on the 4<sup>th</sup> October 2019, he also became the first confirmed dominant male of the group, with existing Elrond's Council males submitting to him. At last, his efforts had paid off! Unfortunately, this was not for long as Palestrina (VLM211) the long-term dominant male from Sauce's home group of Zulus, also decided to make the journey to Elrond's Council just a few of weeks later and took dominance from Sauce on the 26<sup>th</sup> October 2019.

Since then, Sauce has remained with Elrond's Council but has not stopped his roving attempts. This time he has focused his efforts to nearby Namaqua where he has been encountered a total of 12 times since January 2020, with four of these in May alone. While his behavior is unusual for what would be expected as there are very few evicted females and peak breeding season has passed, there could be other influences for his behavior. As mentioned before, subordinate immigrant males are less likely to prospect at other groups than natal males, although this is not always the case when an individual is older, in strong body condition, and in years of higher rainfall. Sauce is indeed the eldest subordinate male of our population in the current time, making it also more difficult to compare his roving efforts to those of other subordinate males. As well as being the eldest he is one of the largest



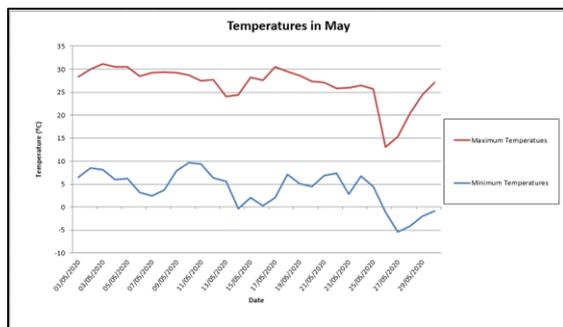
males in the population, regularly weighing around 900g! He is of good body condition which is indeed helped by the good rainfall experienced this year of 146.5mm from November 2019-April 2020.

We closely monitor all his adventures, awaiting the day that he may finally take dominance at a group for longer than 22 days! We can only expect that as we again enter breeding season in the upcoming months, that his movements will only increase once more.

### Pregnancies in May 2020

<b>Females pregnant in May</b>	<b>6</b>
Females who aborted	1
Females who gave birth, litters lost	0
Females who gave birth, litter emerged	0
Females who gave birth, unknown outcome	5
Females still pregnant at the end of the month	0

### Weather at the KMP



Temperatures have followed a more stable trend this month of a gradual decrease in temperature, with a low spike at the end of the month. The highest temperature for May was 31.2°C, while our coolest temperature was -5.5°C. On average, daily temperatures are ranging from a low of 3.8°C to a high of 26.8°C. There was no rain this month, reflecting that we have now fully entered winter and the dry season.

### May 2020 Life History Details

#### Elrond's Council:

- The group has increased in size this month with the dominant female Tayl Baez (VBBF117) giving birth at the end of April. There were 22 out of 23 individuals present at the end of May, with the undyed subordinate yearling female present as well. One of the pups (VECF020) from the subordinate female, Pippin's (VECF003), last litter was given her last seen this month as she was assumed to have been predated.
- A total of 11 pups were first seen from the 19<sup>th</sup> May, this is potentially a mixed litter with the dominant female Tayl Baez confirmed to have given birth and the undyed subordinate yearling female possibly given birth whilst evicted.

- Nine pups fully emerged on the 25<sup>th</sup> May and have consistently been seen since and foraged with the group. VECF021 was assumed to be predated and given their last seen this month, with VECF029 also absent at the end of May.
- The undyed subordinate yearling female and Pippin (VECF003) returned to Elrond's Council this month.
- Sauce (VZUM026) left and returned to the group five times this month, during these times he was seen at Namaqua's sleeping burrow once and encountered Namaqua during foraging four times.
- Pippin appeared twice at Elrond's Council and the yearling female appeared four times before they both returned to the group.
- There was an encounter with an unknown meerkat this month, although it was unclear as to whether this may have been the yearling female as she was still absent from the group at this time.
- All group members appear to be of good health.

#### Gold Diggers:

- At the end of May, the group consisted of 8 marked individuals, one wild individual, and an unknown number of pups just began to emerge.
- An adult female seemed to have given birth at the beginning of May. She and one additional adult female were seen to be lactating and babysitters were left. Since the birth, the two adult females have now been dyed (VGDF012 and VGDF013), although it is not yet confirmed which is dominant, and which was the pregnant individual.
- Five pups were seen emerging on the 26<sup>th</sup> May, however none of these have been dyed and so it is unclear if this is the total number of pups yet.
- All individuals look to be healthy.

#### Jaxx:

- Jaxx has a full group composition of 16 individuals and an unknown number of pups of the dominant female Baloo (VJXF080) giving birth this month.
- Denzel (VJXM133) was given his last seen this month after being missing for more than a month.
- Didah (VJXF112), the eldest subordinate female of the group, returned in May after she left the group in April. Whilst away from the group, she appeared a total of five times in May, and was chased away on each occurrence.
- Subordinate female Nāvis (VJXF128) left the group at the beginning of the month. She has since returned and appeared to no longer be pregnant. It has been determined that she aborted as there were no lactations or babysitters recorded.
- All individuals look to be in good health.

#### Lazuli:

- The group ended the month of May with a full group of 14 individuals and an unknown number of pups below ground.
- Both Sigma (VLF230) and Annie (VLF240) gave birth this month within a few days of each other.



There have been lactations and babysitting recorded, although it will remain unclear as to which litter any potential pups may be from.

- Gaimen (VLM258) was given his last seen this month after being absent since the end of April.
- Lazuli are making progress with their habituation to being followed again. On good days they have been able to be followed for up to 1 ½ hours, with most sessions being comfortable for 20 to 40 minutes.
- All group members are of good health.

#### **(Little) Creatures:**

- 5 out of a total of 6 individuals were present at the end of May, along with a wild individual also being present. Hange (VCRF012) left this month with unknown reason and has not been seen since.
- Subordinate female Mildred (VCRF009) gave birth towards the end of this month. The outcome of this birth is unknown, since there have been no lactations or babysitters recorded yet.
- All individuals look to be in good health.

#### **Make-e-Plan:**

- Make-e-Plan has increased in size and ended the month with a full composition of 19 individuals.
- Following dominant female Bridget (VQLF011) giving birth at the end of April, five pups have emerged and successfully began foraging with the group.
- Bigwig (VMPF022) returned to the group at the start of May after being absent for almost a month.
- There were no encounters or interactions this month at Make-e-Plan.
- The group appears to be in good health.

#### **Namaqua:**

- The group has increased to 16 members and all members were present at the end of the month.
- Five pups emerged for the first time on the 13<sup>th</sup> May and foraged and moved to a new sleeping burrow for the first time on the 20<sup>th</sup>.
- There were no pregnancies, group movements or group splits this month.
- Sauce (VZUM026) from Elrond's Council encountered Namaqua four times this month. On every occasion Sauce retreated as Namaqua repeatedly war-danced and chased him away.
- The group is in good health.

#### **Tswana:**

- By the end of the month there were 12 out of 15 members present in Tswana with Jude St Francis (VTSM008), Adam (VTSM010) and Lady Penelope (VTSM016) absent.
- On the 20<sup>th</sup> May Tswana had an inter-group interaction with Hakuna Matata in which the two groups war-danced and attacked. Both groups retreated once, Hakuna Matata re-grouped during their retreat and war-danced and chased, resulting in Tswana retreating a second time.

The following day Coquille (VTSM014) and VTSM018 left Tswana and encountered Hakuna Matata. By the 22<sup>nd</sup> both males had returned to Tswana as they emerged with the group.

- There was a group split of uncertain duration on the 16<sup>th</sup> May in which Endorphine (VTSM005), Jiminy Cricket (VTSM007), Jude St Francis, Adam, Lady Penelope and VTSM019 did not emerge with the rest of the group. Endorphine and Jiminy Cricket had returned by the following day and VTSM019 was seen with the group again on the 24<sup>th</sup>. Adam, Lady Penelope and Jude St Francis have not returned since.
- Endorphine had her collar removed on the 13<sup>th</sup> May after observers noticed a wound under the collar. During the removal the wound was cleaned, and observers are monitoring the injury. The radio collar has been transferred onto Ocytocine (VTSM003). The group responded well to the capture with most individuals tolerating the presence of two observers.
- The rest of the group remains to look in good health.

#### **Zulus:**

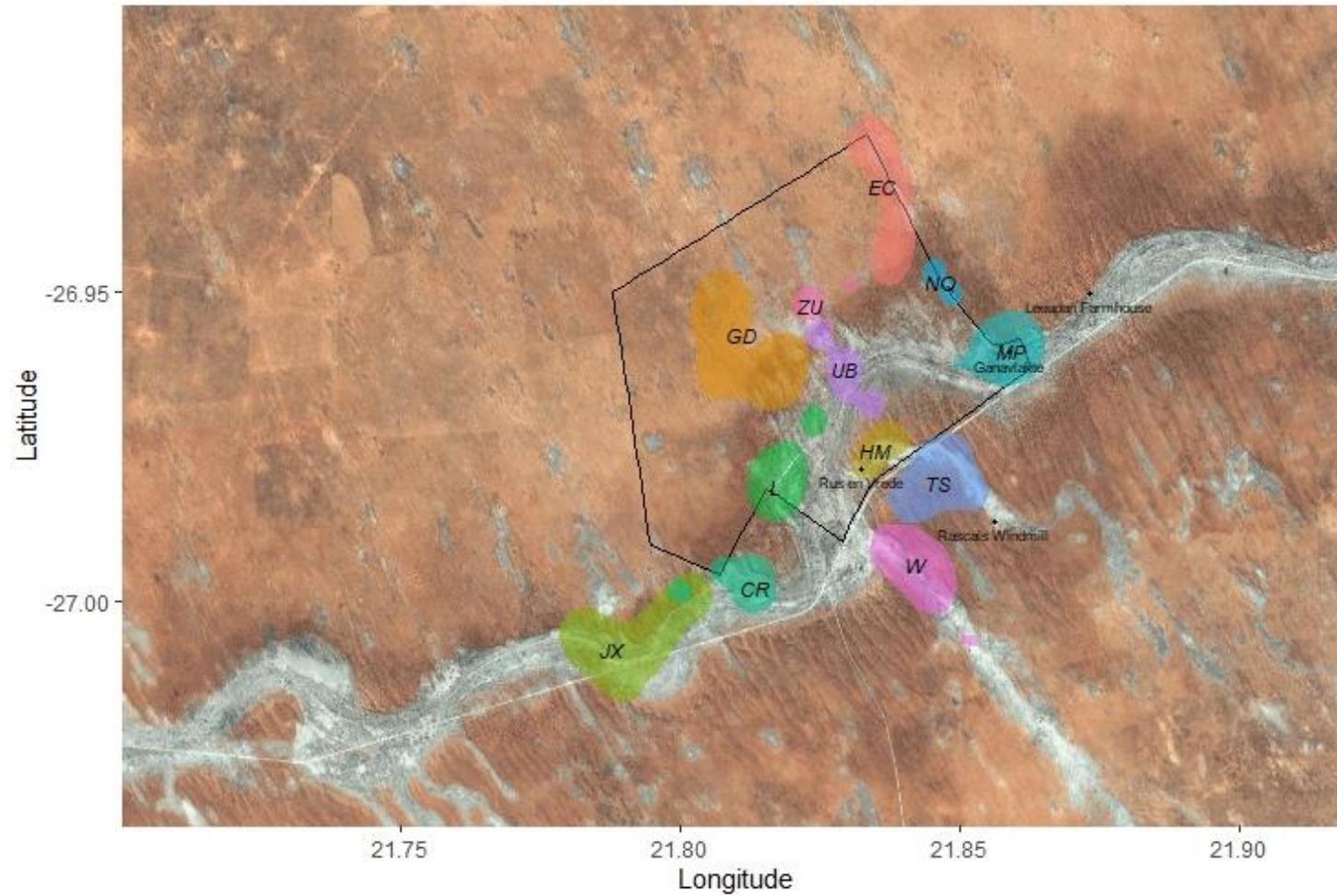
- The group had 13 out of 15 members with Pixie (VWM210) and Jay-a-Rod (VWM216) absent at the end of the month.
- Jay-a-Rod left the group at the end of the month and was seen roving at Ubuntu. Pixie had returned to the group on the 6<sup>th</sup> after being absent at the end of April. During May he has then left and returned on two further occasions with a final leave towards the end of the month. He continues to be absent. During his absences, he is regularly seen near to the group and has interacted a total of 11 times. In some instances, the group see Pixie but no further interaction is made, while on other occasions dominant male Scuzi (VWM213) has asserted his dominance and attacked Pixie, resulting in Pixie retreating away. Pixie also approached Jay-a-Rod to initiate dominance competition but was interrupted when Scuzi charged in and attacked, with the rest of Zulus joining in to chase Pixie away.
- Zulus had one inter-group interaction where they saw Ubuntu and repeatedly war-danced and watched the group, while Ubuntu did not see Zulus and so no reaction was recorded.
- All group members are healthy.

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

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## Group Territories May 2020



**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, W: Whiskers, ZU: Zulus.