



The Meerkatter

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

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Sub-group Season

Observers have been kept very busy this month with the discovery of two new subgroups: Fake-e-plan and Lazuli 3. Fake-e-plan came about after the dispersal of Make-e-plan individuals Bigwig (VMPF022), Kratos (VMPM024), Scylla (VMPF025), Cirilla (VMPF026), Mushu (VMPM028) and Hope (VMPF029) on the 7th. Initially it was thought Make-e-plan had just experienced a group split. However, two days later the missing individuals were all found at Sox Dam in Lazuli territory over 4km from where they were last seen with Make-e-plan. The following morning the heaviest and eldest individual, yearling female Bigwig, was radio collared so the group could be tracked. For a short period the sub-group remained in Lazuli's territory. But by the 17th they had moved off the reserve to a neighbouring farm another 2.5km away. Within a week they had travelled another 2.7km away onto a different property. By the end of the month the group still had not established a territory for their own.



Every member in Fake-e-plan on the alert. The radio-collared individual is yearling female Bigwig (VMPF022). Photo Credit: Life History Coordinator Shaz Alderton

Dominance has not been settled among the individuals at Fake-e-plan. When the group had first been found, yearling female Hope had a wound on her right front leg and the eldest female Bigwig had blood on her head, stomach and right forearm. Observers assumed that a fight likely occurred between them. Hope has since submitted to Bigwig multiple times. Bigwig has also received

submissions and has asserted dominance over yearling female Scylla. It is the remaining female, Cirilla, who is the competitor for the position of dominant female. Cirilla has initiated dominance competitions with Bigwig a handful of occasions, but there has never been a clear winner. More than a week after Fake-e-plan was found, no dominance competitions, assertions or submissions have been observed among the females. On the males' side, Kratos and Mushu have only had a few dominance competitions. There has never been an obvious winner from their interactions.

Meerkats will breed with individuals they are distantly related to but typically avoid mating with their closest kin. As Kratos and Mushu are closely related to the females in Fake-e-plan, observers expect both males to leave in the coming months. Most sub-groups are formed by evicted females joining up with unrelated roving males. The founding of Fake-e-plan involving related individuals of both sexes is a rare occurrence.

The other sub-group, Lazuli 3, were discovered on the 15th with Little Creatures male The Worm's Heart (VCRM010) and Lazuli females Annie (VLF240), Weasel (VLF241) and Squelch (VLF250). Lazuli 3 have also been dispersing over great distances. They have been recorded occupying Lazuli and Little Creatures territory, and the seemingly unoccupied range between the two groups. As the only male in the group, The Worm's Heart is dominant male by default. Female dominance has not yet been established. However, the eldest female Annie has submitted to the adult female Weasel. There have been no dominance-related interactions with the younger female, Squelch. Observers are awaiting to see more interactions between the females to determine if Weasel is dominant.

On the morning of the 21st Weasel was showing signs of estrus and was very receptive to The Worm's Heart's advances. This was indicated by Worm tailing Weasel all morning and her allowing him to mount multiple times. No mating was seen but observers are hopeful that Weasel will show signs of pregnancy in the weeks to come. Pregnancy in meerkats normally starts showing 4-5 weeks following conception, so Weasel will be closely monitored in the coming weeks.



The Worm's Heart (VCRM010) is now considered fully habituated and is often first to climb onto scales to be weighed. Photo Credit: Life History Coordinator Shaz Alderton

Prior to this month The Worm's Heart had never been followed by observers for data collection. But he has allowed research assistants to undertake regular three-hour sessions just as they would for fully habituated groups. We are all very impressed with his progress. Time will tell if Fake-e-plan and Lazuli 3 will remain together and become proper, established groups in the future. We will keep you updated on the life history of both sub-groups.

A New Chapter for Lewie

There was a shock at Namaqua at the beginning of this month; dominant male Lewie (VLM228) was overthrown. The group could not be found on the 2nd, but when an observer tracked them down on the morning of the 3rd they discovered an extra individual acting as part of the group. Sauce (VZUM026) from Elrond's Council had immigrated and was receiving submissions from Lewie. Sauce is among the heaviest of any non-pregnant individual in the population (the only known meerkat with heavier morning weights than Sauce is the Tswana adult male Coquille (VTSM014)). Lewie did not put up any fight over the following days. By the 5th all the natal males had submitted to Sauce, he was confirmed to be the new dominant male. Sauce had been a regular rover at Namaqua since the beginning of the year, so some observers considered this occurrence inevitable.

The average tenure for males to hold dominance is approximately 14 months, according to a study that analysed 12 years' worth of data collected here at the Kalahari Meerkat Project. Lewie was not too far off that mark, having been Namaqua's dominant male for 12 consecutive months. Now deposed, he had to take to something he had not done since 2019 – go roving. On the 16th he approached Namaqua's ancestor group, Make-e-plan, which his mate Heatherleigh (VQLF018) had been evicted from 2 years ago. Lewie's attempts were unsuccessful as the group repeatedly war danced and chased him off. The only females remaining in Make-e-plan following the dispersal of multiple individuals, included the heavily pregnant dominant female Bridget

(VQLF011) and sub-adults Arabella (VMPF035), Vivienne (VMPF038), Dusty (VMPF047) and Millewa (VMPF048). With no luck there Lewie returned to Namaqua.

On the afternoon of the 17th there seemed to have been a group split at Namaqua, with Lewie, Heatherleigh, Cooper (VNQM019) and Megara (VNQF020) all absent. Observers suspected that perhaps Lewie and Heatherleigh had left to mate, although Heatherleigh had not recently shown any signs of estrus. Upon their return to Namaqua one evening, Sauce went into a frenzy and viciously attacked Lewie. The whole group got involved in the fight. Sauce ultimately won, with Lewie submitting after the attack. Both males were inflicted with wounds to their faces, arms, neck and shoulders. Sub-adult females Manzaï (VNQF013) and Mononoke-hime (VNQF014) were also wounded but recovered quickly.



It was exactly a year ago that Lewie (VLM228) took back dominance at Namaqua. Until this month his position was never challenged. Photo credit: Life History Coordinator Shaz Alderton.

In spite of his wounds, Lewie left Namaqua the next day. He was next sighted at Ubuntu on the 19th. Ubuntu initially ignored his presence, Lewie managed to sneak down the same sleeping burrow with them for the night. Unfortunately for him, the group chased him off the following morning. His next attempt was observed at the very end of the month at Zulus, led by Whiskers-born male Scuzi (VWM213) and natal dominant female Spruddel (VZUF028). Scuzi, subordinate male Jay-A-Rod and the rest of Zulus relentlessly chased and war-danced Lewie away multiple times over the course of 2 hours one morning. Once again Lewie had no luck with attracting a female.

Back at Namaqua, relative peace has returned to the group. Heatherleigh, even in her extremely poor condition due to tuberculosis, has retained dominance over the females. Sauce, being 200g heavier than any other individual in the group, is unchallenged as dominant male. He has become



aggressive towards observers and regularly attempts to anal mark and bite hands, legs and backpacks. His behaviour does not come as a surprise to some research assistants, Sauce acted exactly in this manner when he was last a dominant male at Elrond’s Council, until he was ousted by the current dominant male Palestrina (VLM211). Sauce’s actions make weighing attempts for every individual significantly more challenging. Because of this, sessions at Namaqua are definitely not the same as they used to be.



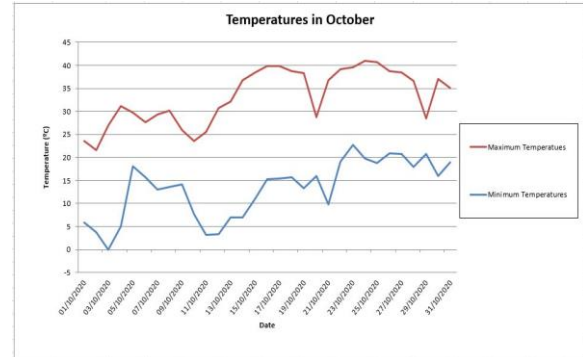
Namaqua’s new dominant male Sauce (VZUM026), who emigrated from Elrond’s Council. Photo credit: Meerkat Volunteer Rebecca Schober

Observers are keeping their eyes out for Lewie in the hopes that he will remain on the reserve and meet up with some females to form a new group. As he is still radio collared, he can still be tracked. However, he is dispersing over a wide area, making it increasingly difficult to determine his location. Male meerkats have been known to disperse over 5km in search of unrelated females. Rovers commonly leave the reserve and are never seen again. Because of this, observers consider every sighting of Lewie to be valuable. No one knows if it will be the last we see of him.

Pregnancies in October 2020

Females pregnant in October	7
Females who aborted	1
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	4

Weather at the KMP



Temperatures have been increasing this month with the highest temperature of 41.0°C recorded on the 24th. The coldest temperature was -0.1°C on the 3rd, recorded before sunrise. The total rainfall for the month was approximately 0.2ml.

October 2020 Life History Details

Elrond’s Council:

- There were 18 out of 21 individuals present at the end of the month with Pippin (VECF003), Galadriel (VECF032) and Cake (VECM030) absent.
- Dominant female Tayl Baez (VBBF117) was pregnant.
- Sauce (VZUM026) emigrated out of the group on the 1st. He appeared at Elrond’s Council the following day but was chased off. He immigrated into Namaqua on the 3rd.
- Subordinate female Pippin left the group three times and returned twice. She was evicted on the 6th and re-joined the group on the 14th. Subordinate female Galadriel left twice and returned once. Tolkien (VECF019) left the group on the 15th but had returned by the 17th. Sub-adult male Cake (VECM030) left the group at the end of the month and did not return.
- There was one group split of uncertain duration.
- Elrond’s Council’s habituation level is still Incomplete as Galadriel requires further habituation. Little progress has been made this month due to her being mostly absent.
- All individuals appear to be in good health.

Fake-e-plan:

- Make-e-plan individuals Bigwig (VMPF022), Kratos (VMPM024), Scylla (VMPF025), Cirilla (VMPF026), Mushu (VMPM028) and Hope (VMPF029) were discovered on the 9th acting as part of a new sub-group, Fake-e-plan.
- Dominance has not yet been established.
- The heaviest female, Bigwig, has been radio-collared so the group can be tracked.
- There have been no splits, encounters, group movements or other major events.
- All individuals appear to be in good health.

Gold Diggers:

- All 12 marked individuals were present at the end of the month.
- The position of dominant female is still unclear.



- The unnamed adult female VGDF013 was pregnant.
- The group had an encounter with an unknown adult on the 29th. Gold Diggers war danced and chased the unknown individual, who retreated in response.
- The group's habituation level is in Advanced Progress as all individuals are marked. Observers have made good progress this month and can sometimes follow Gold Diggers for 1-3 hours.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

Jaxx:

- There were 17 out of 18 individuals present at the end of the month with subordinate male Rollie (VJXM101) absent.
- Rollie left the group on the 13th.
- Dominant female Baloo (VJXF080) gave birth on the 17th. No pups had been seen by the end of the month. Baloo is the only female lactating and the group is babysitting.
- Subordinate female Didah (VJXF112) was evicted and accepted back into Jaxx on two occasions.
- There was one group split during the day.
- All individuals seem to be in good health.

Lazuli:

- There were 7 out of 11 individuals present at the end of the month.
- Annie (VLF240), Weasel (VLF241) and Squelch (VLF250) emigrated out of Lazuli on the 7th and formed the sub-group Lazuli 3.
- Juvenile male Pegasus (VLM271) was Last Seen.
- Shandy (VHMM023), Squeal (VLM251), Slop (VLM253), Wallace (VLM264) all left the group on four occasions and returned three times. All four males were absent at the end of the month. On the 26th dominant male Odin (VLM266), sub-adults Caramel Iced Latte (VLM257) and Moteck (VLM261) and subordinate male Captain Barbosa (VLM265) left the group but returned within 2 hours.
- Rupert Holmes (VUBM024) encountered Lazuli once and was chased off.
- The group had one inter-group interaction with Ubuntu in which Lazuli eventually retreated.
- There was one group split that occurred during the day.
- Lazuli is no longer considered a Habituation group. Their habituation level is Incomplete as the three previously wild males, Odin, Wallace and Captain Barbosa, require further progress. Currently they can be followed as close as 3m and all three can be weighed.
- All individuals in Lazuli appear to be healthy.

Lazuli 3:

- Discovered on the 15th with Little Creatures male The Worm's Heart (VCRM010) and Lazuli females Annie (VLF240), Weasel (VLF241) and Squelch (VLF250). All 4 individuals were present at the end of the month.

- The Worm's Heart is dominant male by default as is the only adult male present. The position of dominant female is unclear.
- The group is considered fully habituated as all individuals allow observers to follow, weigh, approach, and collect data on them without any issues.
- There have been no splits, encounters, group movements or other major events so far.
- All individuals seem to be healthy.

(Little) Creatures:

- There were 7 marked individuals present at the end of the month along with one unmarked wild male.
- Adult male The Worm's Heart emigrated on the 10th and formed Lazuli 3 with Lazuli females.
- Three pups, born in a potentially mixed litter by dominant female Debbie (VCRF013) and subordinate female Mildred (VCRF009), emerged on the 7th. The pups moved to a new burrow on the 9th and foraged for the first time on the 17th.
- Little Creature's habituation level is still In Progress as the wild individual has not yet been marked.
- All individuals appear to be in good health.

Make-e-Plan:

- Make-e-plan have dropped from 18 to 11 members this month after the yearlings Bigwig (VMPPF022), Kratos (VMPPM024), Scylla (VMPPF025), Cirilla (VMPPF026), Mushu (VMPPM028) and Hope (VMPPF029) emigrated on the 7th. They were found on the 9th acting as part of a sub-group now called Fake-e-plan.
- Dominant female Bridget (VQLF011) was pregnant by the end of the month.
- Sub-adult Irwin (VMPPM045) has been Last Seen.
- Eldest subordinate male Thorn (VMPPM027) left and returned to the group on two occasions. During one of his absences he appeared at the edge of the group and was war-danced away. Sub-adult Maverick left the group for half an hour on the 30th and was accepted back in.
- The group encountered one unknown adult on the 30th, and Namaqua's adult male Lewie (VLM228) on the 16th.
- There was one group split of uncertain duration on the 7th.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

Namaqua:

- There were 11 out of 13 members present at the end of the month with Quarrel (VNQM010) and Lewie (VLM228) absent.
- Quarrel struggled to keep up with the group this month and was separated from them three times. Twice he managed to return. He has not been seen since the 17th. He was severely emaciated and showing other signs of tuberculosis infection.
- Yearling males Melee (VNQM007) and Tussle (VNQM008) have been considered Last Seen.



Both were showing symptoms of tuberculosis before their disappearance.

- At the beginning of the month Sauce (VZUM026) from Elrond's Council encountered Namaqua. Two days later he immigrated in and was observed receiving submissions from dominant male Lewie. On the 5th Sauce was confirmed to be the new dominant male.
- After being overthrown, Lewie left Namaqua four times and returned three times. His final return coincided with the end of a small group split that included the dominant female Heatherleigh (VQLF018) and sub-adults Cooper (VNQM019) and Megara (VNQF020). Sauce attacked Lewie upon his return and both males suffered considerable wounds. Lewie left for the fourth time the following day.
- Sub-adult female Mononoke-Hime (VNQF014) left the group on the 24th but returned within an hour. Sub-adult male Barney (VNQM018) left the group briefly on the 28th after emerging at a different hole and being chased off by the group. He re-joined Namaqua that same morning.
- Tuberculosis is still present in the group with Heatherleigh, Quarrel and yearling female Skirmish (VNQF009) showing symptoms. Manzaï (VNQF013), who was thought to be showing symptoms in September, did not show any symptoms this month.

Phoenix

- The only identified individual, Pinky (VPHF001) was present at the end of the month along with 19 wild individuals.
- Two pups were seen emerging on the 2nd and were observed foraging with the group on the 10th.
- Phoenix's habituation level is still In Progress, they now tolerate observers as close as 15m.
- Pinky seems to be in good health. There appears to be no sign of disease in the group.

Tswana:

- There were 14 out of 15 marked individuals present at the end of October with Dopamine (VTSM004) still absent after leaving last month.
- Three pups emerged on the 7th and were seen foraging with the group for the first time on the 17th.
- Tswana's habituation level is still in Advanced Progress as all individuals are marked. However, the group cannot yet be followed.
- All individuals in Tswana appear to be in good health.

Zulus:

- All 15 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Dominant female Spruddel was pregnant but aborted on the 22nd.
- Pixie (VWM210) left and returned to the group on three occasions. Jay-A-Rod (VWM216) left and re-joined once.
- Zulus had an encounter with two unidentified adult individuals on the 29th and one with

Namaqua's subordinate male Lewie (VLM228) on the 31st.

- All individuals in Zulus seem to be healthy.

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