



The Meerkatter

The Friends of the Kalahari Meerkat Project Report - www.kalahari-meerkats.com - March 2021

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Goodbye Sauce

We have some sad news this month at the KMP: dominant male Sauce (VZUM026) from Namaqua was predated.

He was last seen alive on the 9th in the morning. It was just another regular session at Namaqua. The group had just changed burrows four days earlier after staying at the same burrow since the 9th of January. Subordinate sub-adult female Chandler (VNQF017) had recently given birth on the 7th of March and the group was suspected to remain at this new burrow for a while as the females had begun lactating and babysitting was taking place. Sauce was being his usual dominant self during morning weights, anal marking anything (or anyone) near the scale as well as biting the group bag. The observer followed the group for the usual 3-hour data collection session and left them after another slightly challenging lunch weights session, where you need to try and keep a bush between the targeted meerkat and Sauce so that he does not see the scale and chase all the other meerkats out of it. The group was left foraging and another observer was scheduled to join them later for the afternoon data collection session.



Dominant male Sauce of Namaqua who was predated by a martial eagle this month. Photo Credit: Meerkat Volunteer Shaz Alderton

The new observer began tracking the group close to where they were last seen earlier that day. It seemed like it was going to be an easy track as they immediately got a strong signal from their radio telemetry equipment suggesting the group was no

more than 500m away. However, something strange began to happen. As the observer neared the group the beep would suddenly get much weaker. Surely this fully habituated group was not sprinting away? The observer continued to track them, and the signal kept appearing to move away. Eventually the observer caught sight of an adult martial eagle, which appeared to be carrying prey. She noticed that as she got closer to the group the large bird of prey would fly off and the signal would get weaker. Soon she had to conclude that Sauce must have been taken by the eagle and she was currently just disturbing the bird's meal. By the time the eagle had let go of Sauce, the sun had set. The observer could track the radio collar to the last tree the martial eagle was seen at but was unable to find the collar (or potentially Sauce's body) in the darkness.

The next morning a meerkat manager tracked the radio collar to a large camel thorn. About 20 m up on one of the branches was Sauce. It seemed the martial eagle had left the body in the tree mostly intact, with only signs of his internal organs potentially removed. Next the retrieval mission began. As the body was too high up, she would not be able to climb the tree to get it. She went back to base to form a plan on how to retrieve Sauce from the tree. A few hours later she returned with a ladder and some help, but it was too late. Another bird or scavenger must have seen this free meal on display and taken the meerkat from the branch. At the bottom of a different tree 200m away was what remained of Sauce including his radio collar.

While it is rare to witness a martial eagle predation, they are not necessarily uncommon and there has been a noted increase in martial eagle sightings this month. These large raptors are considered dangerous predators for meerkats, with meerkat carcasses often found in their nests. The response of meerkats to sightings of these birds is also generally strong. After a sighting, the group will move below a bolt hole or sleeping burrow and then spend some time under the cover of a bush watching the predator and alarming at it until it flies away. There was another attempted predation of a meerkat by a martial eagle witnessed this month. During a morning session at a neighbouring group a researcher observed one of these large raptors attempt to catch a juvenile meerkat. Luckily for the meerkat, it



managed to escape the birds clutches and run to safety. However, the group was very rattled by the incident and spent the rest of the day on edge often alarming and running to the protection of a bush or bolt hole.

Originally from the group Zulus, Sauce has had an interesting life at the KMP. After reaching adulthood he became an avid rover in the reserve, even during winter months which can be quite unusual. During his roving days he approached several groups including Ubuntu, Gold Diggers and Elrond's Council. Eventually he managed to take dominance at Elrond's Council in October 2019. However, this was short lived as only 22 days later his title was stolen by the current dominant male, Palestrina (VLM228). Eventually he set his sights on Namaqua and after being seen roving near the group for several months he finally made his move in October 2020 and overthrew the then dominant male Lewie (VLM228) to finally take his well-earned place as dominant. During his almost six months of dominance at Namaqua, no pups were born to the group and survived. A litter, assumed to be sired by Sauce, was born last month to dominant female Skirmish (VNQF009) but the litter was lost soon after they emerged. Since his predation, five pups have emerged at Namaqua born to subordinate female Chandler. It is uncertain whether these were sired by Sauce, but once DNA samples are taken from the pups a genetic analysis can determine their parentage. Perhaps Sauce's legacy my live on! For now, there is still no dominant male at Namaqua and the current males in the group have not shown many behaviours suggesting they will be competing for the position. Perhaps a roving male from a neighbouring group will attempt to move in and take Sauce's place. Until then the young dominant female Skirmish will have to learn very quickly how to take the lead if the young pups are to survive.

While Sauce may be gone, this charismatic meerkat will not soon be forgotten by the observers. And just in case they need a reminder, a new waypoint was added to the reserve map this month where the feisty meerkat was found: Sauce Tree.

Ten Teeny Tiny Things

Last month the KMP had a record number of pregnancies. While things have started to slow down as we near the end of the breeding season, we are now beginning to see the outcome of these pregnancies as pups are starting to emerge. One group stands out when it comes to the number of pups: Gold Diggers.

Late last month and early this month three females gave birth at this group. First was subordinate yearling female Meghan (VGDF018) who gave birth on the 27th of February. Next were adult subordinate females Goldeneye (VGDF007) and Fleabag (VGDF005) who gave birth sometime between the 28th of February and the 2nd of March. As mentioned in the previous Meerkatter, Goldeneye was witnessed predated one of Meghan's pups. After this event - and considering that all litters were born to

subordinate females -the survival of any of these litters was very uncertain. However, on the morning of the 20th an extremely excited observer witnessed the emergence of nine tiny pups! Three days later another observer noticed that this number had increased to 10! All pups were marked to keep track of them. Since their emergence, the pups have had their first burrow move and their first forage.

The first forage was a morning of chaos. It started off with the pups remaining at the burrow while being babysat by the dominant female, Cleo (VGDF013). After about an hour and a half the group returned to the burrow for a short 20 minutes before moving off to forage again. This time nine of the ten pups decided to join the adults as they slowly moved away from the burrow. It was only VGDF025 who did not join the group and stayed at the safety of the sleeping burrow. Yet, this may not have been the smartest decision as the entire group had gone foraging and the tiny pup was left all on its own. The adults then spent the morning keeping track of the nine pups and had their paws full with pup feeds. By the afternoon when the group was re-joined by another observer, all 10 pups were present. Perhaps the 10th pup realised that foraging was safer than being left alone and joined the group, or maybe one of the adults went back to the burrow to fetch it. By the end of the month all pups were still with the group and had foraged with the adults several times. With so many mouths to feed and pups to keep track of we will have to wait and see how many of the pups will make it to adulthood. Luckily for them, this month has had a large amount of rainfall and food is still very abundant in the Kalahari giving them a better chance of survival.



Ten pups from a mixed litter born to subordinate yearling female Meghan (VGDF018) and adult subordinate females Fleabag (VGDF005) and Goldeneye (VGDF007) from the habituation group, Gold Diggers. Photo Credit: Life History Coordinator Sian Seymour.

Gold Diggers is one of three habituation groups currently on the reserve. The group was made official in August 2017 when a wild male was collared. Habituation started out slow and observers usually stayed at a distance of up 50m from the group. Today the group is considered to be in "advanced progress" with researchers able to get within less than 1 m from the majority of the group members. The group size currently sits at 25. Only two individuals are still considered 'wild', the dominant female Cleo and the subordinate yearling female Meghan. The group is



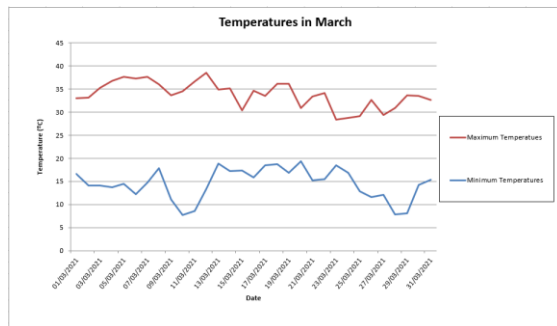
also being habituated for group follows, with some observers being able to follow the meerkats for up to three hours at a distance of up to 5 m. Currently there are about 19 weighable individuals.

Habituation is an integral part of the work done at the KMP. While the process can often be slow it is extremely rewarding. With so many pups now at Gold Diggers, observers are optimistic that the habituation level of the group will only improve as the pups are more easily habituated than wild adult meerkats. Hopefully soon the group will become fully habituated and as observers spend more time with them and witness more of their daily routine, they may become more frequent subjects here in the Meerkatter.

Pregnancies in March 2021

Females pregnant in March	6
Females who aborted	1
Females who gave birth, litters lost	0
Females who gave birth, litter emerged	3
Females who gave birth, unknown outcome	1
Females still pregnant at the end of the month	1

Weather at the KMP



Temperatures are beginning to cool down with an average maximum of 33.8 °C and average minimum of 14.5 °C. Weather conditions are still fluctuating with a maximum temperature of 38.5 °C on the 12th and a minimum temperature of 7.7 °C recorded on the 10th. March was a month of high rainfall with 46.6 ml recorded.

March 2021 Life History Details

Elrond's Council:

- All 23 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Adult subordinate female Pippin (VECF003) who was absent at the end of last month had returned on the 2nd. Yearling subordinate female Galadriel (VECF032) had immigrated back into the group on 2nd since emigrating on the 8th of January. Galadriel left and returned to the group once since immigrating.

- There was an inter-group encounter between Elrond's council and Zulus on the 16th. Elrond's Council chased and war danced multiple times towards Zulus who then fled.
- There were no individual encounters in March.
- A daily group split occurred in the early evening of the 17th.
- Habituation is now considered incomplete as the wild female Galadriel has returned to the group. The rest of the individuals are fully habituated.
- All individuals appear healthy.

Gold Diggers:

- The group's total number increased to 25 individuals this month with the addition of a mixed litter of 10 pups born to adult subordinate females Fleabag (VGDF005) and Goldeneye (VGDF007), and yearling subordinate female Meghan (VGDF018) between the 27th of February and the 2nd of March. The pups emerged from the 20th, had their first move on the 24th and their first forage on the 29th.
- Yearling subordinate female Melania (VGDF012) was given her last seen after being absent from the group for over a month. Subordinate sub-adult male Elliot (VGDM016) was considered emigrated after being absent for over a month.
- There were no individual encounters, group splits or inter-group-interactions observed this month.
- Gold Diggers' habituation level is in Advanced Progress as the group are all marked. Follows have been successful this month with observers able to follow the groups for up to 2 hours.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

Jaxx:

- All 21 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- There were 6 pups present at the end of March.
- Dominant female Baloo (VJXF080) was given an official pregnancy on the 11th. She aborted before the 15th.
- Subordinate sub-adult male Cubby (VJXM138) left the group on the 3rd in the evening. He returned later that same session.
- There were no group splits, individual encounters or inter-group-interactions observed this month.
- All individuals seem to be in good health.

Lazuli:

- The group number increased to 16 after the emergence of 5 pups born to dominant female Sigma (VLF230) last month. 15 out of 16 individuals were present at the end of the month with subordinate yearling male Caramel Iced Latte (VLM257) absent.
- 5 pups had their first move on the 13th, their first emerge on the 14th and their first forage on the 18th.
- There were no pregnancies this month.
- Caramel Iced Latte returned to the group on the 1st in the morning and left the group later that same day.



- There were no group splits, individual encounters or inter-group-interactions observed this month.
- Lazuli's habituation level is Incomplete as the habituation of subordinate yearling male Captain Barbosa and the dominant male Odin (VLM266) is ongoing. The males can be followed and weighed but are still uncomfortable with observers approaching within 1-5m when they are foraging.
- All individuals in Lazuli seem to be healthy.

Make-e-Plan:

- All 23 individuals were present by the end of March.
- There were 7 pups present at the end of March.
- Dominant female Bridget (VQLF011) was made officially pregnant on the 24th and was still pregnant by the end of the month.
- There were no group movements, individual encounters, inter-group-interactions or group splits observed at Make-e-plan this month.
- All individuals appear to be in good health.

Namaqua:

- The group number increased to 14 individuals by the end of March.
- The dominant male within the group is unknown after dominant adult male Sauce (VZUM026) was predated by a martial eagle on the 9th.
- There are 5 pups present at Namaqua born to subordinate sub-adult female Chandler (VNQF017) on the 7th. All pups had their first emerge on the 31st.
- Subordinate yearling female Hiccup (VNQF016) was made officially pregnant on the 21st. She was found slimmer on the 24th and has suspected to have aborted as she was still early on in her pregnancy.
- Yearling subordinate females Mononoke Hime (VNQF014) and Manzaï (VNQF013) immigrated back into the group by the 9th and the 10th after emigrating out of the group in January.
- There was an individual encounter with an unknown adult in the morning of the 8th. Namaqua alarmed at the individual and chased it. The unknown adult retreated.
- There were no other individual encounters, inter-group-interactions, or group splits in March.
- All individuals seem to be healthy.

Phoenix

- The only identifiable individual, the radio collared yearling female Pinky (VPHF001), was present at the end of the month along with at least 18 unmarked individuals.
- Five pups, born to an unmarked female, were present by the end of March. None of the pups have been marked.
- No other events were witnessed.
- The group's habituation status is still In Progress. On most days' observers are tolerated at 5-10m.
- All individuals in Phoenix appear to be healthy.

Runaways:

- There were 13 individuals present at the end of the month following the emergence of one more pup from the mixed litter born to dominant adult female Bigwig (VMPF022) and subordinate adult females Scylla (VMPF025), Cirila (VMPF026) and Hope (VMPF029) in February. All 13 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- There were 7 pups present at the end of March. All pups had their first move on the 7th and their first forage on the 11th.
- There were no individual encounters, inter-group-interactions and group splits at Runaways this month.
- All individuals appear to be in good health.

Trackie-Daks:

- There were 10 marked individuals present by the end of the month and 2 unmarked wild yearling females.
- The position of dominant male and dominant female is unknown.
- 3 pups were considered predated after last being seen on the 1st. 1 pup is still present. It had its first move on the 6th and first forage on the 22nd.
- Yearling subordinate male Sketchy Bongo (VTSM019) left the group by the 3rd and returned to the group by the 28th.
- No other events were observed at Trackie-Daks in March.
- Subordinate sub-adult male Moon Moon (VTSM022) was not seen for multiple sessions from the 6th. He was seen again on the 19th with a mummified left hind leg. It was suspected that the leg had been ensnared by a man-made object. The leg was amputated on the 21st. Moon Moon has been reported to still be emaciated, but the wound from the amputation is healing well. Pup Tara (VTDP001) also had a small wound on their tail base and left thigh at the end of the month.
- All other individuals appear to be healthy.

Zulus:

- All 13 individuals were present at the end of the month, including the three pups.
- There was an inter-group encounter with Elrond's council on the 16th.
- No other events were observed at Zulus in March.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

The following authors contributed to this report:

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