



The Meerkatter

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

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Introducing Trackie-Daks

Trackie-Daks (formerly known as Tswana 2) officially has a dominant male, adult Coquillette (VTSM014). In order to declare a meerkat dominant within a group, more than half of the individuals of the same sex within that group need to be observed submitting to that meerkat. In March, the first meerkat, yearling male Sushi (VTSM006), was observed submitting to Coquillette. Coquillette was then observed displaying dominance assertion behaviours, chinning yearling male Jiminy Cricket (VTSM007) and Sushi, and anogenital sniffing yearling male Petit Lu (VTSM011), who all submitted. Finally, on the 8th of April sub-adult male Marvin Gaye (VTSM21) was observed submitting to Coquillette, confirming his rank of dominant male of Trackie-Daks.

Trackie-Daks was initially formed late last year after the habituation group Tswana was assumed disbanded. A group of only nine meerkats from Tswana were found without a dominant female since mid-November 2020. The only female in the group was a female pup, and so once the new group had remained apart from the other individuals for several weeks, and the female pup had become a juvenile, they could be declared a subgroup and were then known as Tswana 2. Then, on the 10th of January this year, two unknown pregnant females were found to have joined the group. In February, the group was able to be considered a fully established group as a litter of pups emerged and they were given their official name, Trackie-Daks.

On the 22nd of February, four pups emerged as the first official meerkats born into Trackie-Daks. Observers are always excited when pups are born into habituation groups as they are more easily habituated than wild adults. However, this excitement was short lived as once the group changed sleeping burrows the pups disappeared. They were missing for over 10 days and were all assumed predated. After not being seen for almost three weeks the hope that they had survived their first burrow move was all but lost. Then, on the morning of the 19th of March an observer was surprised to hear the obvious sounds of a pup calling as the group began to emerge. Out of the burrow popped a now slightly larger pup with a very faded mark. It was Tara, (VTDF001), the sole

survivor of the first Tackie-Daks litter. It is uncertain exactly what happened with the litter and why Tara was not seen for so long, but the observers were very happy to see the young meerkat. Since Tara's reappearance another litter has been born into the group. On the 29th, while an observer was patiently sitting at the sleeping burrow working on the habituation of the adult meerkats and enjoying the company of the now very well habituated Tara, she again heard the obvious sounds of pups calling. Four miniature meerkats briefly emerged from the burrow before running back down, startled by the sound of a nearby vehicle. Since their first emergence two pups have been marked and observers hope that more pups may yet emerge in May.



Sub-adult subordinate male Moon Moon (VTSM022) just over a month after part of his left hind leg was amputated. Photo Credit: Life History Coordinator Sian Seymour.

During the disappearance of Tara and her litter mates, subordinate sub-adult male Moon Moon (VTSM022) also had a short vanishing act. He was



last seen with the group on the 6th of March. It was approaching the point where he was going to be considered to have left the group - individuals at habituation groups are given a longer period of time before they are considered to have left as they tend to be more skittish, sometimes hide from observers, and are also visited less regularly - but then the same day Tara reappeared so did Moon Moon. While this event should have been a joyous one for the observer, it soon became concerning as she noticed that Moon Moon seemed to be limping. On closer inspection she found that the meerkat's left hind leg seemed to be mummified. The injury was immediately reported and the meerkat managers and onsite vet went out to the group to investigate. Sadly, it seemed that Moon Moon had gotten his leg ensnared. As the injury was most likely caused by a man-made object, due to the nature of the injury it was decided that an intervention was necessary. On the 21st of March the leg was amputated. Before the procedure Moon Moon was reported to be emaciated. Soon following the procedure, this diagnosis changed to skinny, and by the end of April he was showing signs of gaining weight and seems to have made a full recovery. Moon Moon is still able to move around on the amputated leg and has amazingly adjusted very well. Observers feel optimistic that despite this handicap, Moon Moon will still be able to function as a wild meerkat, showing the incredible resilience of these animals.

Trackie-Daks currently has a habituation status of '*In Progress*' due to the presence of the two wild unmarked females. The majority of the group originally from Tswana are fairly well habituated with subordinate sub-adults Fergalicious (VTSF020), Moon Moon and Marvin Gaye, and subordinate yearling males Jumper (VTSM017), Sushi and Petit Lu often successfully being weighed and comfortable with observers sitting at less than 1 m. The two wild females as well as yearling subordinate male, Sketchy Bongo (VTSM019) are the least habituated meerkats within the group, tolerating observers at a distance of 7-10 m on most days. Trackie-Daks is a well-liked group at the Kalahari Meerkat Project, and the observers are happy to spend the time and patience necessary to improve their habituation even further so that we will have another data collection group in the near future.

Make-e-plan Meerkat Mobbers

The morning of the 23rd started as a normal and fairly uneventful session at Make-e-plan. As per usual, the dominant female Bridget (VQLF011) and dominant male Banksia (VVHM117), subordinate adult male Thorn (VMPM027) and yearling subordinate female Vivienne (VMPP038) were taking their guarding duties seriously, while the rest of the group spent the morning foraging. Suddenly, the group started making a lot of noise around a dead tree. The observer approached the tree and saw a huge monitor lizard burst out and retreat into a hole. The meerkats were mobbing the lizard and chased it out of its resting spot. They continued to mob the hole for a few more minutes, but then decided to return to

foraging. Less than 15 minutes later the group came across a second dead tree and found a new animal to mob. This time the observer heard a lot of growling that did not sound like meerkats and reached the tree just in time to see a Cape fox make a run for it. After that encounter, the group remained highly vigilant for the rest of the session.

When meerkats mob an animal, several or all group members approach it with their tails raised while uttering calls. They do not only do this to chase away potential predators. According to a paper published in 2013, mobbing also helps meerkats gather information about the threat another animal can pose to the group and to try and determine the predator's motivation. Finally, it is considered to be a tool to recruit other meerkats to join in on the mobbing bout and possibly to transfer information to group members. Passing on adequate information about the potential threat can help meerkats avoid unnecessarily spending energy on fleeing, having less time for foraging or needlessly moving on to a potentially less successful foraging area.



Make-e-plan being extra vigilant after their cape fox encounter. Photo Credit: Life History Coordinator Trainee Bieke Maex.

Monitor lizards and Cape foxes are not considered to be meerkat predators – although monitor lizards may feed on small pups left alone in burrows or bolt-holes - so it is more likely that this mobbing bout indeed served as a means to assess the danger and attract or inform other group members. With many young individuals in the group, including six juveniles, this was likely a great experience to learn the potential dangers and appropriate response for future encounters with such species.

Continuing with their inter-species interactions, a week after the monitor lizard and Cape fox encounter, the same observer spent another morning session at Make-e-plan. Several individuals spent a considerable amount of time on guard at various locations on the edge of the foraging group. Except for a few alarm calls towards white-backed vultures flying overhead, the session was relatively quiet. Following a short grooming break in the shade, Make-e-plan crossed the riverbed and started to run towards a fallen tree on the other side. Again, a lot of growling could be heard, and the observer made it there just in time to see a pair of Cape fox ears bolt through the high grass. After this encounter the meerkats were clearly more vigilant and decided to stay close to the tree, as it proved to be an ideal



guarding and hiding spot. Half a dozen individuals displayed sentinel behaviour and quickly started alarming at a black-breasted snake eagle overhead. The other members hid inside the dead tree and did not return to foraging before the end of the session.



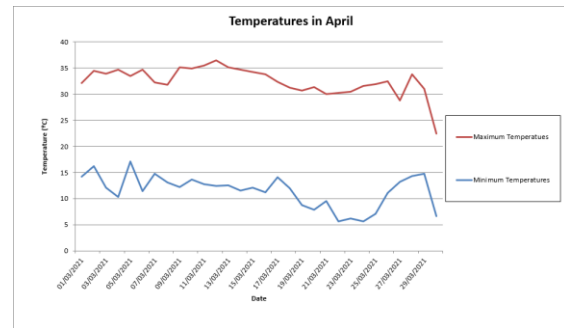
A Cape fox caught on a camera trap in 2020. Sightings have been quite frequent recently with one observer even witnessing meerkats mobbing a Cape fox on two occasions. Photo Credit: Kalahari Meerkat Project Camera Trap.

It is not only the meerkats having fox encounters. The observers have been lucky at the Kalahari Meerkat Project and have been coming across more Cape and bat eared foxes lately. The high sour grass makes it more difficult for the foxes to move around and they have been coming out onto the open roads in recent months. Some observers have even managed to spot a few pups. With the start of winter, other exciting sightings may become possible as the crepuscular and nocturnal species begin to forage during dawn and dusk for longer periods of time, extending even well after sunrise and before sunset. Many of the observers cannot wait to spot their first aardvark of the season soon!

Pregnancies in April 2021

Females pregnant in April	2
Females who aborted	1
Females who gave birth, litters lost	0
Females who gave birth, litter emerged	1
Females who gave birth, unknown outcome	0
Females still pregnant at the end of the month	0

Weather at the KMP



Temperatures are cooling down with an average maximum of 32.5 °C and average minimum of 11.5 °C. There was a maximum temperature of 36.4 °C on the 12th and a minimum temperature of 5.6 °C recorded on the 22nd. The total rainfall for April was 2.2 mm.

April 2021 Life History Details

Elrond's Council:

- There were 20 out of 23 individuals present at Elrond's Council by the end of the month. Dominant female Tayl Baez (Tae Bae) (VBBF111), yearling subordinate female Arya (VECF026) and yearling subordinate male Bliksem (VECM024) were absent.
- Tayl Baez was last seen on the morning of the 22nd. A beep from her radio collar was found at burrow G1255A for several days. She is assumed but not confirmed to be dead. Arya had left the group by the morning of the 22nd. Bliksem had left the group three times during April and returned twice.
- There were no individual encounters, inter-group-interactions or group splits observed this month.
- Habituation is still considered incomplete as wild yearling subordinate female Galadriel (VECF032) is present at the group as not yet fully habituated with weights and close follows. The rest of the individuals are fully habituated.
- All individuals appear healthy.

Gold Diggers:

- All 25 individuals were present by the end of April including 10 pups.
- Sub-adult subordinate male Elliot (VGDM016) was given his last seen after being absent from the group for two months.
- Yearling subordinate males Jack (VGDM010) & James (Sawyer) (VGDM011) & female pup VGDF031 had left the group by the 9th and had returned to the group by the 20th.
- A daily group split occurred on the 26th.
- There were no individual encounters 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 was one daily group split in the afternoon of the 23rd.
- There were no individual encounters or inter-group-interactions observed this month.
- All individuals seem to be in good health.

Lazuli:

- The number of individuals at Lazuli has decreased to 15. Subordinate yearling male Caramel Iced Latte (VLM257) was considered emigrated after being absent from the group for a month.
- 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 adult male Captain Barbosa and the dominant male Odin (VLM266) is ongoing. The males can be followed and weighed but they are still uncomfortable with observers approaching within 1-5m when they are foraging.
- All individuals in Lazuli seem to be in good health.

Make-e-Plan:

- All 22 individuals were present by the end of April.
- Female pup Ruairi (VMPP061) was last seen on the 7th and is assumed to be predated after not being seen for over 10 days.
- Dominant female Bridget (VQLF011) was last seen pregnant on the 2nd but was found slimmer on the 5th. No babysitting or lactation has occurred since and she is suspected to have aborted.
- There were no individual encounters, inter-group-interactions or group splits observed at Make-e-plan this month.
- All individuals appear to be in good health.

Namaqua:

- There were 12 out of 13 individuals present at the end of April, including 3 pups. Female pup VNQF025 was absent.
- Female pup VNQF025 left the group on the 27th. Unknown pup VNQU026 was given its last seen on the 20th after not being seen for 10 days. The pup is assumed to be predated. Pups VNQP027 and VNQM028 both appeared to be left under a dead tree away from the group this month, but had both returned later the same day.
- There were no individual encounters, inter-group-interactions, or group splits in April.
- Dominant female Skirmish (VNQF009) and subordinate female Chandler (VNQF017) were showing symptoms of TB at the end of the month. The other individuals are not showing symptoms at this stage.

Phoenix

- The only identifiable individual, the radio collared yearling female Pinky (VPHF001), was present at the end of the month along with at least 16 unmarked individuals.
- No group composition changes, major life history events, encounters or interactions were witnessed this month.
- 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:

- All 12 individuals were present at the end of the month, including 6 pups.
- Male pup Mickey (VRWM007) was given his last seen on the 30th after not being seen for 10 days. He is assumed to be predated.
- 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:

- The group number increased to 12 marked individuals by the end of the month with the addition of 2 marked pups. There were 2 unmarked wild yearling females present at the end of April.
- Adult male Coquille (VTSM014) was declared dominant after over half of the males in the group were witnessed submitting to him. The identity of the dominant female is still unknown.
- 4 pups born to an unmarked adult female had their first emergence on the 29th. Only 2 pups have been marked.
- There were no individual encounters, inter-group-interactions, or group splits observed this month.
- Subordinate sub-adult male Moon Moon (VTSM022) appears to have recovered from his leg amputation (due to likely being caught in a snare) and is gaining weight. All other individuals appear to be healthy.
- 5 pups emerged on the 2nd and had their first forage on the 6th.
- There were no inter-group-interactions, individual encounters or group splits in April.
- All individuals at Whiskers seem to be healthy.

Zulus:

- All 13 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- There were no individual encounters, inter-group-interactions and group splits at Zulus this month.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

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