



The Meerkatter

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

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Farewell Tae Bae

We already hinted at it in last month's Meerkatter, but we can now confirm we have given Tayl Baez (VBBF117) her last seen. The dominant female at Elrond's council, nicknamed Tae Bae, was last seen with the group on April 22nd. On the 23rd an observer found a beep coming from her radio collar at a sleeping burrow where the majority of the group was seen. The observer assumed Tae Bae had already gone below and did not think much more of it. Over the next few days, observers noticed that the beep was still coming from that same sleeping burrow, but no one saw any meerkats. That was when we realized something had happened to Tae Bae. It took several search missions by different observers to finally find the rest of the group on the 28th. By then, Tae Bae's collar was still located at the same burrow and we assume she died there.

Tae Bae has led an interesting life and has even surprised everyone by coming "back from the dead" in 2018. She was born into Baobab in 2015 and got evicted as a subordinate yearling at the end of January 2017. She was last seen 5 days after her eviction and then seemingly disappeared. Almost exactly a year later an observer stumbled across a group of wild meerkats, that had two members who were clearly used to being around people. We were able to scan their transponders and discovered that the two habituated meerkats were Tae Bae and her sister Kamala (VBBF116). The females had formed a new group with wild males. They were named Elrond's Council and became a habituation group in early 2018. During their habituation, more habituated individuals from other groups joined them, such as now dominant male Palestrina from Lazuli (VLM221) and adult subordinate brothers Langa (VZUM033) and Umfana (VZUM034) from Zulus. These arrivals have helped massively with the habituation process of the group.

By June of 2018, observers could tell with certainty Tae Bae was the dominant female. During her reign she had 6 litters and gave birth to a grand total of 30 pups. Since their discovery, Elrond's Council have grown to a group of 20 meerkats. The group currently has one wild female, subordinate adult Galadriel (VECF032) who cannot be weighed and is not

comfortable with being followed while the group is foraging. Subordinate adult female Pippin (VECF003) is not too happy either with observers visiting her group regularly, but she loves egg and it is possible to weigh her. Since Tae Bae's disappearance, we believe one of these two females will become the new dominant female at Elrond's Council. So far, however, neither has received enough direct submissions from other females in the group. We agree on a new dominant when at least half of the adults of the same sex have given them direct submissions. Hopefully, we will know more by the time the next Meerkatter comes out.



Elrond's Council sunning before they start their daily foraging. Photo Credit: Life History Coordinator Bieke Maex.

The disappearance of their dominant female was not the only event that Elrond's Council witnessed in May. Jay-A-Rod, the eldest subordinate male at Zulus (VWM216) decided to spend a day with the group but was not made to feel very welcome. He was found with his own group again the next day and



had quite a few injuries, that he got either while he was chased off from Elrond's Council or from Zulus' dominant male Scuzi (VLM213) when he tried to rejoin his natal group after his little trip. Finally, two more meerkats were given their last seen after not being seen for a month. Subordinate yearling male Bliksem (VECM024) was last seen on April 13th and subordinate yearling female Arya (VECF026) went missing on the same day as Tae Bae was last seen. Observers are currently extra keen to visit Elrond's Council. The rare yellow morph of a Crimson Breasted Shrike has been spotted in their territory a few times and all the birders are hoping to catch a glimpse of this magnificent bird.



The elusive yellow morph of a Crimson Breasted Shrike has been spotted by several observers in Elrond's Council's territory. Photo Credit: Master Student Isabel Driscoll.

Jaxx vs Unknown Meerkats

On the afternoon of the 22nd one of the KMP observers was following Jaxx. The session started out completely normal and uneventful. After a while, the observer noticed that the group was on high alert and started war dancing at something. At first, she saw just one lone adult meerkat, then three more adults appeared. The observer thought an inter-group-encounter with Runaways was about to happen, since their territory is the closest to Jaxx'. The approaching group, however, was too small and turned out to be a group of wild unmarked individuals. Jaxx saw the group twice and war danced at them, after which the unknown meerkats fled. Next, Jaxx started sniffing around a burrow system. The other meerkats had probably returned early to this burrow when they came across Jaxx, as at least two of their juveniles had already gone below here. Jaxx started excavating the burrow system and attacked the two juveniles. By the end of this attack, the observer could only see one wounded meerkat, so the second one might have had a lucky escape. The injuries of the remaining meerkat did not look too severe and the observer left it there, in case its group would come back.

After this encounter, subordinate yearling female Salamander (VJXF135), subordinate juvenile female Lord Kinbote (VJXF051) and subordinate juvenile male The Doctor (VJXM054) were chased away by Jaxx. We have seen this on other occasions during inter-group-interactions and it is possible that this happens because group members are mistaken for individuals from the rivaling group. Lord Kinbote and

The Doctor tried to rejoin the group twice during that afternoon session but were not accepted back. Jaxx are well known amongst the observers as a particularly challenging group to weigh, but they were especially agitated this evening and the meerkats did not want to go in the scales for weights.

The next morning another observer waited for Jaxx to get up from the sleeping burrow to get their morning weights. Before the meerkats emerged, she found the unknown juvenile. It was still lying where it was last seen and had died during the night, either from the cold or internal injuries. As Jaxx woke up, the observer only counted 18 meerkats, which meant the three exiled members had not been able to rejoin yet. While the group started sunning, the observer could see three meerkat heads pop up in the distance as Salamander, Lord Kinbote and The Doctor tried to make their way to the rest of their group. This resulted in Jaxx starting a war dance to chase them away. The observer witnessed this type of behaviour three more times before she returned to the farmhouse at the end of her session and left Jaxx to figure out what to do about their new group composition. When another observer tracked the group the next morning, he found all 21 members coming up to sun together.



The youngest litter at Jaxx, including subordinate juvenile female Lord Kinbote (VJXF051) and subordinate juvenile male The Doctor (VJXM054) who were chased away by Jaxx after their encounter with a group of wild unmarked meerkats. Photo Credit: Life History Coordinator Bieke Maex.

Even though Jaxx spent a few more days near the burrow where all the action took place, the wild unmarked individuals have not been spotted since. We are not sure whether these unknown individuals can be considered a group according to the KMP definition of the term. There should be at least 3 adults in a group consisting of both males and females. A few roving males or evicted females are



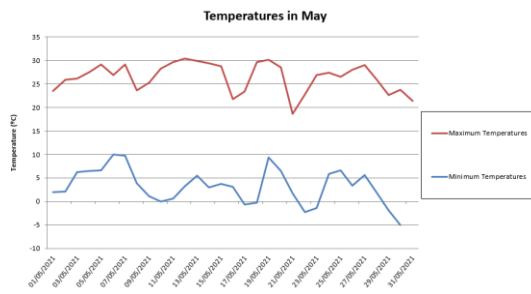
not considered to be a group. As the unmarked meerkats in question had juveniles with them, we can be relatively certain they were a group, but in the heat of the moment, the observer could not get a good enough look to be sure of their sexes.

As extensive research has already shown, meerkat groups defend their territories and regularly engage in aggressive interactions with neighbours. Meerkats make their territory known by depositing faeces and by scent marking both within their territories, e.g. around sleeping burrows and boltholes, and at important locations along the boundaries of their territories. Because of these markings much of the competition between meerkat groups is indirect. Moreover, meerkats can often spot rivaling groups from a distance in their open habitat, which allows for one of the groups to get away before the interaction escalates. Sometimes, however, direct physical aggression takes place. A paper from 2019 explains that group size is a strong predictor of the outcome of an inter-group-interaction, with bigger groups having a higher chance of winning. As Jaxx is 21 meerkats strong, it is no real surprise the wild unknown meerkats lost this confrontation. Despite the sad outcome of this day, observers are always happy to see wild meerkats. The prospect of having more groups to habituate and study gets everyone at the KMP excited.

Pregnancies in May 2021

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

Weather at the KMP



Temperatures are clearly cooling down with an average maximum of 26.5 °C and average minimum of 3.1 °C. Temperatures are going into the minuses with a minimum of -5 °C on the 30th. The total rainfall for May was 1.2 mm.

May 2021 Life History Details

Elrond's Council:

- The number of individuals at Elrond's Council has decreased to 20 since dominant female Tayl Baez (Tae Bae) (VBBF117), yearling subordinate female Arya (VECF026) and yearling subordinate male Bliksem (VECM024) have been given their last seen. Tayl Baez was last seen on the morning of the 22nd of April. She did not re-emerge from the burrow she was last seen at and she is assumed to be dead. Arya was given her last seen after being absent from the group for a month and Bliksem after being absent from 2 months.
- Elrond's Council had a group encounter with Zulus on the 3rd.
- They had an individual encounter with adult subordinate male Jay-A-Rod (VWM216) from Zulus on the 4th.
- There were no group splits observed this month.
- Habituation is still considered *Incomplete* as wild yearling subordinate female Galadriel (VECF032) is not being weighed and not at ease during close follows. The rest of the individuals are fully habituated.
- All individuals appear to be in good health.

Gold Diggers:

- The group consisted of 24 individuals by the end of May.
- Pup VGDU025 was given its last seen after being absent from the group for over 10 days.
- 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, most individuals are weighable and up to 2 hour follows are possible.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

Jaxx:

- All 21 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Jaxx had 2 encounters with 4 unknown adults on the 22nd. Later that day, Jaxx excavated the unknown group's sleeping burrow and attacked 2 of their juveniles. One was found dead near the burrow the next morning.
- After this encounter 3 members of Jaxx; yearling subordinate female Salamander (VJXF135), juvenile subordinate female Lord Kinbote (VJXF051) and juvenile subordinate male The Doctor (VJXM154) left the group. All 3 returned the next day after several attempts to rejoin Jaxx.
- On the 13th yearling male VJXM139 left the group, but he had returned by the start of the afternoon session.
- All individuals seem to be in good health.



Lazuli:

- All 15 individuals were present at the end of the 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 May.
- 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:

- The group number decreased to 12 this month after pup VNQF025 was assumed predated after not being sighted for over 10 days. All 12 members were present by the end of May.
- The status of dominant male is still unknown.
- 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. Both meerkats currently have sub-mandibular lumps and have lost weight. Other symptoms of TB are lumps in other regions, fatigue and laboured breathing. The other individuals at Namaqua 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 17 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.
- There were no individual encounters, inter-group-interactions and group splits at Runaways this month.
- All individuals appear to be in good health.

Side Quest:

- A new group has been found at the end of May consisting of former Elrond's Council adult male Legolas (VECM009), Zulus adult sisters Pumba (VZUF048) and Timon (VZUF049) and 4 juveniles. Pumba and Legolas are the dominant female and male at Side Quest.
- More updates in the next Meerkatter!

Trackie-Daks:

- The group number increased to 15 marked individuals by the end of the month with the addition of another 3 marked pups. There were 2 unmarked wild yearling females present at the end of May.
- There were 5 pups present by the end of the month. 1 of the five had its first emerge on the 5th whereas the other four had emerged at the end of April. All pups are now marked. All 5 pups had their first move on the 9th.
- There were no individual encounters, inter-group-interactions, or group splits observed this month.
- Trackie-Daks habituation level is *In Progress* as there are still two wild unmarked females in the group.
- All other individuals appear to be healthy.

Zulus:

- All 13 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Subordinate adult male Jay-A-Rod (VWM216) left the group on the 3rd and had returned by the afternoon of the 4th.
- Zulus had an inter-group-interaction with Elrond's Council on the 3rd. Elrond's Council war danced towards Zulus who then fled.
- There were no individual encounters or group splits observed this month.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

The following authors contributed to this report:

Bieke Maex, Life History Coordinator
Sian Seymour, Life History Coordinator