



# The Meerkatter

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

<i>Hello Side Quest .....</i>	1-2	<i>Weather at the KMP.....</i>	3
<i>Unexpected Rains .....</i>	2	<i>Life History Details.....</i>	3-5
<i>Pregnancies in June .....</i>	3		

## Hello Side Quest

On the 26th of May a master's student was heading to Zulus to do playback experiments. On her way there, she came across three friendly adult meerkats who seemed used to the presence of humans. The meerkats had four juveniles with them who were clearly a lot less comfortable. The master's student radioed the farmhouse, and a meerkat manager came out with a transponder reader to determine whether these were known individuals. As we suspected from their behaviour, the meerkats had indeed been part of habituated groups before.



The newly discovered group Side Quest. Photo credit: meerkat volunteer Tara Naeser

We discovered that the adults were sisters Pumba (VZUF048) and Timon (VZUF049) and male Legolas (VECM009). Timon left her home group Zulus on the 11th of December 2020 and her sister Pumba followed suit on the 14th. They were seen together the next morning as they tried to approach Zulus, but both got chased away and had not been seen since. Legolas left his home group Elrond's Council on the 14th of February 2021. He had several encounters with Zulus later that day and the day after but was not seen by observers since. All three meerkats were yearlings when they left and have now become adults. As the newly found group consists of only one adult male, Legolas was officially made dominant. Dominant and submissive behaviours by the females, have shown us that Pumba is clearly the dominant female. One of the juveniles is a male, the other three are female. They have been named Sam (VSIM001), Amadu (VSIF002), Sky (VSIF003) and Chewie (VSIF004).

The discovery of a new group of relatively well habituated meerkats meant we could look forward to adding a group to our data collection pool. The adults were amazingly comfortable with observers around, the pups on the other hand were quite skittish. The first few times we visited the group, we just wanted to get them used to our presence at the sleeping burrow as they woke up. Four days later we started approaching them in the afternoons as well. The adults happily came towards us and the juveniles had no choice but to keep up. Next, we focused on following the juveniles while they were foraging. At first, they were nervous and moving grass would startle them, but they soon got used to having us around. The result was that we could start collecting adlib data from the 16th of June – just three weeks after they were found!

At the burrow, the juveniles would keep their distance, while the adults jumped in and out of the scales, hoping to get some egg or water. Sam was the first juvenile to take an interest in egg and was consequently the first one we managed to weigh on the 11th. The three female juveniles have been weighed a few times, but not yet consistently. As soon as they become more comfortable, we can change Side Quest's habituation level from *Incomplete* to *Complete*.

On the 5th an observer believed dominant female Pumba looked pregnant. This was confirmed by other observers over the course of the next few sessions. On the 15th she was officially declared pregnant. We are all extremely excited to meet the new litter in a few weeks.

## Unexpected Rains

We were surprised by a rainy day on the 8th of June. Rain is very atypical this time of the year and meerkats are reaping the benefits of this unexpected gift. We have noticed an increase in weights the weeks after the rain, thanks to more varied and nutritious foraging options. It has also marked the start of a mini breeding season at the Kalahari Meerkat Project. Side Quest's dominant female Pumba (VZUF048) is pregnant. It will be the second litter for the recently formed group and an opportunity



for the juveniles to show us their pup feeding skills as they will assist the adults in rearing the pups.



Even rainy skies look amazing in the Kalahari. Photo credit: meerkat volunteer Arantxa Blecher.

Besides Pumba, there are indications that the dominant females at Jaxx, Elrond's Council and Runaways might also be pregnant. Females were evicted from all three groups at the end of the month. Research has shown that subordinate females get evicted by the dominant female during the latter's pregnancy and that the eldest subordinate females are more likely to be expelled than younger group members. Dominant females have several reasons to evict subordinate females. Firstly, eviction prevents subordinate females from potentially killing the dominant's pups. Secondly, these subordinate females – especially the oldest ones – are their main breeding and dominance competitors. Received aggression from the dominant female could play a role in suppressing and interfering with their reproduction success. Moreover, eviction is costly for expelled females. They experience weight loss and decreased fertility.

Adult subordinate female Orc (VECF012) was evicted from Elrond's Council by the dominant female Galadriel (VECF032) on the 30th, who fought the meerkat and chased her away. Adult subordinate female Eléa (VJXF129) and yearling subordinate female Salamander (VJXF135) both submitted to the dominant female Baloo (VJXF080) at Jaxx and received aggression from her on the 22nd. The next observer only visited the group on the 26th, by which point the females were no longer at Jaxx. No one was there to witness it, but they were probably evicted from the group in that period. Yearling subordinate female Enya (VJXF141) was also evicted from Jaxx on the 30th. Runaways' dominant female Bigwig (VMPF022) attacked and evicted two adult subordinate females Cirilla (VMPF026) and Hope (VMPF029) on the morning of the 29th.

Subordinate females who are evicted are usually allowed to return to the group after the dominant female has given birth. Several observers believe they have seen signs of pregnancy with the dominants at Jaxx and Elrond's Council. The potential pregnancies have not yet been observed enough times to make them official, but they would explain the group movements that have been taking place. Observers have not picked up on Bigwig's

pregnancy yet, but she might surprise us soon enough.

Not only the females have been moving around in June. We have witnessed several males going off on roving adventures. Usual suspect Jay-A-Rod (VWM216), an adult subordinate male from Zulus, left the group on the 29th, paid his neighbours at Elrond's Council a visit and returned to Zulus by the next morning session. Adult subordinate male Rincewind (VJXM131) left Jaxx for a day and Lazuli's adult subordinate male Slop (VLM253) even left the group twice. Umfana (VZUM034), an adult subordinate male from Elrond's Council, decided to leave his group and try his luck at Namaqua on the 14th. Since Sauce's predation in March, no male has claimed dominance over the group yet and Umfana might become a worthy contestant.

Males can go roving for anything from a single afternoon to several months at a time. During these forays males try to find reproductive opportunities, mainly with subordinate females from other groups. Even though breeding can occur year-round, it primarily takes place from September to March. Of course, we cannot be entirely sure of this, but we have a feeling the unexpected rain has set a few things in motion at the KMP.



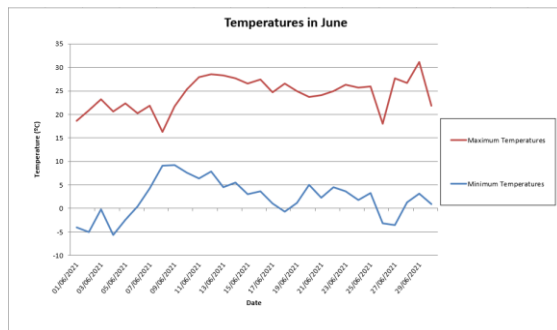
Side Quest's pregnant dominant female Pumba (VZUF048). Photo credit: meerkat volunteer Arantxa Blecher



## Pregnancies in June 2021

<b>Females pregnant in June</b>	<b>1</b>
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	1

## Weather at the KMP



Temperatures are still cooling down with an average maximum of 24.3 °C and average minimum of 2.2 °C. June had 8 nights with temperatures below zero, the coldest one was on the 4<sup>th</sup> with a minimum of -5.6 °C. We had 2.2 mm of rain on the 8<sup>th</sup>.

## June 2021 Life History Details

### Elrond's Council:

- The number of individuals at Elrond's Council has decreased to 19 since adult subordinate male Umfana (VZUM034) emigrated to Namaqua on the 14<sup>th</sup>.
- Yearling female Galadriel (VECF032) has become the new dominant female after receiving submissions from more than half of the other adult females in the group.
- Adult Subordinate male Langa (VZUM033) left the group on the morning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and tried to re-join them shortly after. The group war danced and chased him away. He was accepted back into the group later that day.
- Yearling subordinate female Orc (VECF012) was evicted on the 30<sup>th</sup> by the dominant female.
- They had an individual encounter with adult subordinate male Jay-A-Rod (VWM216) from Zulus on the 29<sup>th</sup>.
- There were no group encounters or group splits observed in June.
- Habituation is still considered Incomplete as especially the dominant female Galadriel is not consistently being weighed and not at ease during close follows. Adult subordinate female Pippin (VECF003) has become much more

comfortable around observers over the course of the past few months. The rest of the individuals are fully habituated.

- All individuals appear to be in good health.

### Gold Diggers:

- There were 23 out of 24 individuals present at the end of June.
- Juvenile male Momo (VGDU025) left the group on the 16<sup>th</sup> and has not been seen since.
- One daily group split occurred on the 1<sup>st</sup> and another one on the 12<sup>th</sup>.
- There were no individual encounters or inter-group-interactions observed this month.
- Gold Diggers' habituation level is in *Advanced Progress* as the group members are all marked, most individuals are weighable and observers have been able to follow the group for 3 hours in the mornings.
- All individuals seem to be healthy.

### Jaxx:

- There were 18 out of 21 individuals present at the end of the month.
- Adult subordinate female Eléa (VJXF129) and yearling subordinate female Salamander (VJXF135) did not wake up with the rest of the group on the 26<sup>th</sup>. Yearling female Enya (VJXF141) was evicted on the 30<sup>th</sup>. Adult subordinate male Rincewind (VJXM131) left Jaxx during the morning session on the 29<sup>th</sup> and had returned to the group by start of the morning session the next day.
- Jaxx had an encounter with Eléa and Salamander on the 26<sup>th</sup>. The group saw and ignored the females. They had an encounter with an unknown meerkat on the 30<sup>th</sup>.
- One daily group split occurred on the 29<sup>th</sup>.
- There were no inter-group-interactions seen in June.
- All individuals seem to be in good health.

### Lazuli:

- All 15 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Adult subordinate male Slop (VLM253) left the group on the morning of the 15<sup>th</sup> and returned an hour later. He left again on the 27<sup>th</sup> and woke up with the group the next day. Adult subordinate male Captain Barbosa (VLM265) left together with Slop on the 15<sup>th</sup>, but already returned 27 minutes later.
- There were no group splits, individual encounters or inter-group-interactions observed this month.
- Lazuli's habituation level is *Incomplete* as the habituation of Captain Barbosa and the dominant male Odin (VLM266) is ongoing. The males can be followed as part of the group and weighed but they are still uncomfortable with observers approaching within 1-5m while they are foraging.
- All individuals at Lazuli seem to be in good health.



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

- All 22 individuals were present at the end of June.
- A group split was observed on the 2<sup>nd</sup>.
- There were no individual encounters or inter-group-interactions witnessed at Make-e-plan this month.
- All individuals appear to be in good health.

#### **Namaqua:**

- Namaqua consisted of 12 meerkats at the end of June.
- Elrond's Council's adult subordinate male Umfana (VZUM034) immigrated into Namaqua on the 14<sup>th</sup>. Yearling female Chandler (VNQF017) was last seen with the group on the 22<sup>nd</sup>.
- Yearling subordinate males Zuko (VNQM012), Barney (VNQM018) and Cooper (VMQM019) left the group together halfway the morning session on the 28<sup>th</sup> and returned the same evening.
- The status of dominant male is still unknown.
- There were no individual encounters, inter-group-interactions, or group splits in June.
- When she disappeared from the group, Chandler was clearly suffering from TB. She had submandibular lumps, was skinny, showed signs of fatigue and had difficulties breathing. Dominant female Skirmish (VNQF009) was also skinny and fatigued, had submandibular lumps and a lump on each of her wrists. 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 16 unmarked individuals.
- On the 25<sup>th</sup> we were able to capture a juvenile male meerkat, to try and put on a new collar. Unfortunately, the individual was considered too small for a radio collar. We have, however, been able to take a DNA sample and transponder him.
- 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 at Phoenix appear to be healthy.

#### **Runaways:**

- There were 10 out of 12 individuals present at the end of the month.
- Adult subordinate females Cirilla (VMPPF026) and Hope (VMPPF029) were both evicted during the morning session on the 29<sup>th</sup>.
- 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:**

- All 7 members were present at the end of June.
- Dominant female Pumba (VZUF048) was given an official pregnancy on the 15<sup>th</sup> after she was considered definitely pregnant by observers during at least six different sessions.
- Side Quest had two encounters with an unknown meerkat on the 16<sup>th</sup>.
- There were no inter-group-interactions or group splits observed this month.
- Side Quest's habituation level is *Incomplete* as observers are not yet able to consistently weigh all individuals. The adults and two of the juveniles - male Sam (VSIM001) and female Sky (VSIF003) - are comfortable around people. The other two juvenile females Amadu (VSIF002) and Chewie (VSIF004) are a bit more skittish, but observers have seen great improvements in their habituation over the last month.
- All individuals seem to be healthy.

#### **Trackie-Daks:**

- All 15 marked individuals were present at the end of the month. The two unmarked wild yearling females were also present.
- 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 and yearling male Sketchy Bongo (VTSM019) cannot be seen every session.

#### **Zulus:**

- All 13 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Subordinate adult male Jay-A-Rod (VWM216) left the group on the 29<sup>th</sup>. Observers saw that Zulus did not accept him back when he tried to re-join the group that evening. He did, however, wake up with the group the next morning.
- There were no individual encounters, inter-group-interactions, or group splits observed this month.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

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