



The Meerkatter

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

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Pup season is upon us

As mentioned in June's Meerkatter, the unexpected rains marked the start of a breeding season. A few weeks later the newest generation of KMP meerkats started to emerge and the previously evicted females slowly made their way back to their home groups.

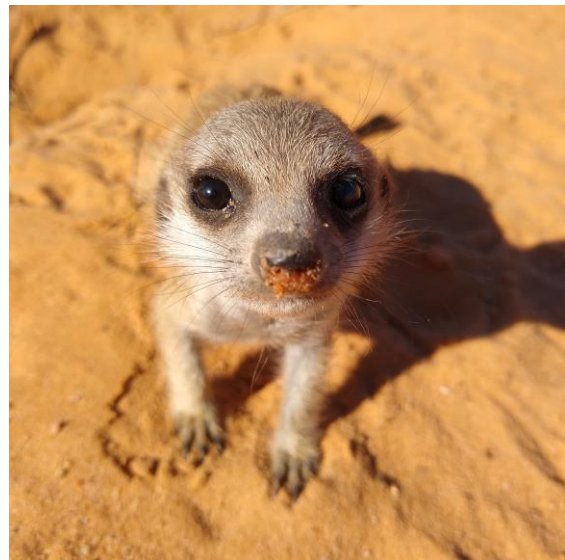
Side Quest's dominant female Pumba (VZUF048) gave birth on the 1st or 2nd of July. A first pup (VSIF005) was seen on the 20th and two days later observers spotted a second one (VSIM006). The tiny meerkats received dye marks so that they could be identified at a distance to ensure accurate data collection. They first emerged respectively on the 21st and 23rd, which is when they made their way past the lip of the burrow of their own accord. The litter had their first burrow move on the 28th and started foraging with the group the next day. Pumba was the only female who lactated for this litter, but her sister, adult subordinate female Timon (VZUF049) did most of the babysitting at the group. Unfortunately, the little male has not been seen since the 4th of August and we assume he was predated. The other meerkat is doing well and has become a proud new member of our smallest group on the reserve.



VSIF005 and VSIM006, the new pups at Side Quest. Photo credit: Meerkat volunteer Tristan Silver.

The next meerkat to give birth was Baloo (VJXF080), the dominant female at Jaxx, around the 25th of July. All five of her pups emerged between the 11th and the 21st of August and started foraging with the group on the 24th. The litter is still complete and well taken care of. Observers have been witnessing plenty of pup

feeds. We have seen the older meerkats feed the pups lizards, mice and huge scorpions, some of which have proven to be a bit too challenging for the little ones to consume. The two females that Baloo had evicted at the end of June were accepted back into the group shortly after the pups were born. Adult subordinate female Eléa (VJXF129) returned on the 8th and adult subordinate female Salamander (VJXF135) followed suit on the 9th. Baloo has been the only lactating meerkat at the group.



One of the new pups at Jaxx. Photo credit: Life History Coordinator Bieke Maex.

Elrond's Council's dominant female Galadriel (VECF032) had her litter around the same time as Baloo. With five new pups the group is currently 25 meerkats strong. The pups first emerged on the 24th and had both their first move and first forage on the 26th. The two evicted females, adult subordinate female Pippin (VECF003) and yearling subordinate female Orc (VECF012), were accepted back into the group on the 27th of July. Galadriel and yearling subordinate female Calypso (VECF027) are sharing the lactation duties at Elrond's Council.

Bigwig (VMPF022), the dominant female at Runaways, only had one pup. The first move and emerge both took place on the 18th and the pup started foraging with the rest of the group on the 23rd.



The little pup is quickly becoming a favorite amongst observers. The dominant male Shiraz (VJXM122) has proven himself to be a protective father and spends a lot of time guarding the pup. Everyone is hoping this provides an opportunity for the meerkat to show off his more mellow side and become a bit calmer around us. He is well known for his anal marking and other dominant behaviours. Bigwig took evictions to the extreme this winter and kicked out all other adult females. Adult subordinate females Cirilla (VMPF026) and Hope (VMPF029) were evicted at the end of June and adult subordinate female Scylla received the same treatment at the end of July. All three were accepted back in the third week of August.

One of the adult females at Trackie-Daks that still requires a lot of habituation work, appears to have given birth on the 24th. The two females have since been marked. Now that they both have been marked, we can be sure we are getting accurate data on them. We assume it was BB (VTDF010) who was pregnant and we suspect her to be the dominant female of the group. As they are quite difficult to approach, it is challenging to see whether they are currently lactating. The only two other females at the group are not. We have not seen any pups yet and the group has already moved burrows several times since, so we are not entirely sure whether this will be a successful litter.

The pup season is far from over. We have confirmed pregnancies for dominant females in a few other groups. Sigma (VLF230) at Lazuli, Bridget (VQLF011) at Make-e-Plan, Spruddel (VZU028) at Zulus, Manzaï (VNQF013) at Namaqua and Cleo at Gold Diggers are all expecting pups. Observers are even speculating whether Pumba might already be pregnant again.

A pregnancy starts to be physically visible and noted by observers approximately 30-40 days into their pregnancy, which is half-way through their 70 to 77-day long gestation period. Important clues to look out for are a round lower belly, weight gain and visible nipples. Moreover, behavioural changes can also be a very important sign. Pregnant dominant females typically display a lot of dominance assertions towards the adult subordinate females and the subordinates will submit to her in return. It is quite likely that more females will get evicted soon from the groups where pregnancies have been recorded.

Pups are a big highlight in the career of any meerkat volunteer at the KMP. Working on the habituation of the pups is very rewarding and well habituated pups can have a positive impact on the behaviour of less comfortable adult meerkats.

A strange stand-off

On the morning of the 20th observers were having quiet adlib sessions at Namaqua and Make-e-Plan until they suddenly noticed that their colleagues were unusually close. They quickly realized that an inter-group-interaction – better known as an IGI in the KMP volunteer lingo - was waiting to happen. The

two groups have bordering territories, so they do interact every once in a while. Their last two IGIs happened on the 17th of July and were very short lived. Make-e-Plan is 22 meerkats strong, whereas Namaqua only has 11 group members. During their last IGI, the predictable thing happened. Namaqua was intimidated by the much bigger group that successfully war danced at them and chased the 11 meerkats off.

This interaction was different though. The two groups spent more than an hour at a distance of about 70m from each other. Each group found a dead tree to use as their IGI basecamp and constantly had at least one meerkat on guard to keep an eye on their rivals. From a safe distance the two groups would regularly war dance a few meters and then retreat again. It never turned into a full-on confrontation or chase.



Thorn (VMPM027) on guard for Make-e-Plan. Photo credit: Life History Coordinator Bieke Maex.

When the groups first saw each other, a few males saw an opportunity and left towards the other group on a little roving expedition. While the rest of Make-e-Plan was war dancing in one spot, five males took off towards Namaqua. Yearling subordinate males Maverick (VMPM034), Kanyonyi (VMPM036), Doby (VMPM037), Priscilla (VMPM046) and sub-adult subordinate male Thimbletack (VMPM053) approached Namaqua multiple times. Namaqua was not too impressed and war danced at the males each time they came closer, but the five stayed nearby for quite some time.

In the meantime, three Namaqua males had left their home group to go do the same thing 70m up the dune. Yearling subordinate males Zuko (VNQM012), Barney (VNQM018) and Cooper (VNQM019) had several encounters with Make-e-Plan but were also unsuccessful in joining the group as far as the



observers could see. This stand-off was still ongoing by the end of the morning session and we were curious to see what composition we would find the meerkats in during their next session. When the groups were re-joined by observers later that day everything had returned to normal and both groups were complete again. Some IGI's are simply a matter of one group chasing another one away, others turn into a full-blown fight and this one was something else altogether.

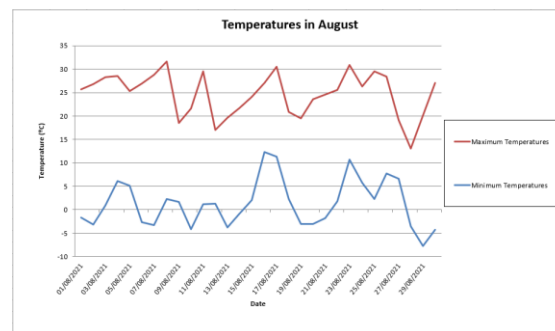
As discussed in one of the recent Meerkatters, meerkats actively defend their territories during these inter-group interactions. Research has shown that not all group members, however, invest an equal amount of resources into defending their territories. Intruding males are often in search of breeding opportunities and therefore form a bigger threat to the home group's males than to the females. The males will try to repel prospectors, both to defend their dominant position and to prevent female extra-group mating. This likely explains why the majority of chases are led by dominant male meerkats. Older subordinate males also tend to spend a lot of energy on these chases. It is thought they do this to protect their safe position in the group from which they can easily go on roving expeditions.

The dominant females at Make-e-Plan (Bridget, VQLF011) and Namaqua (Manzaï, VNQF013) are currently pregnant. It will be very interesting to see if the dominant males (Banksia, VVHM117 and Umfana, VZUM034) impregnated them or if rovers during the previous IGI had anything to do with it. Only the DNA samples of the next litters will be able to give us conclusive answers.

Pregnancies in August 2021

Females pregnant in August	5
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	5

Weather at the KMP



Temperatures are slowly increasing again in the Kalahari. The average maximum was 24.7 °C and the average minimum 1.2 °C. The coldest morning was on the 29th with a temperature of -7.8 °C. The warmest day was on the 8th when temperatures rose to 31.6 °C. We had 0.6 mm of rain on the 26th.

August 2021 Life History Details

Elrond's Council:

- The number of individuals at Elrond's Council has increased to 24 with the addition of 5 new pups born to dominant female Galadriel (VECF032) at the end of July. The pups first emerged on the 24th and had both their first move and first forage on the 26th.
- No individual encounters, inter-group-interactions or group splits were observed this month.
- Habituation is still considered *Incomplete*. Both Galadriel and adult subordinate female Pippin (VECF003) are being weighed on a regular basis but are still not too comfortable with close follows while they are foraging. The rest of the individuals are fully habituated.
- All individuals appear to be in good health.

Gold Diggers:

- All 23 members were present at the end of the month.
- The dominant female Cleo (VHDF013) is pregnant.
- Yearling subordinate males Jack (VGDM010) and James Sawyer (VGDM011) returned together after they went roving for about two weeks at the beginning of the month.
- There were no individual encounters or inter-group-interactions observed this month.
- Gold Diggers had 4 group splits this month; 3 were daily and 1 was of uncertain duration. The group was not visited the day after the split but was found with all individuals present 2 days later.
- Gold Diggers' habituation level is in *Advanced Progress* as the group members are all marked, most individuals are weighable, and observers have been working hard to let Gold Diggers adjust to being followed for 3 hours in the mornings. We also added approaches and departures to our habituation routine and are



trying to get the group accustomed to being joined by observers in the afternoon.

- All individuals seem to be healthy.

Jaxx:

- Jaxx consists of 25 meerkats since the dominant female Baloo (VJXF080) gave birth to 5 pups at the end of July. They gradually emerged between the 11th and the 21st of August, started foraging with the group on the 24th and had their first move on the 26th.
- Adult subordinate female Eléa (VJXF129) and yearling subordinate female Salamander (VJXF135) were accepted back into the group shortly after.
- Sub-adult male The Doctor (VJXM154) was given his Last Seen after having been missing from the group for a month.
- There were no individual encounters, inter-group-interactions or group splits seen in August.
- All individuals seem to be in good health.

Lazuli:

- All 15 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- The dominant female Sigma (VLF230) is pregnant.
- Adult subordinate males Shandy (VHMM023) and Slop (VLM253) left the group on the 4th and returned later that day. Slop left and returned one more time on the 13th.
- No individual encounters or inter-group interactions took place.
- Lazuli had a daily group split on the 4th.
- Lazuli's habituation level is *Incomplete* as the habituation of Captain Barbosa (VLM265) is ongoing. He is being weighed consistently but is still uncomfortable with observers coming too close while he is foraging.
- All individuals at Lazuli seem to be in good health.

Make-e-Plan:

- All 22 individuals were present at the end of August.
- The dominant female Bridget (VQLF011) is pregnant.
- Yearling subordinate males Maverick (VMPPM034), Kanyonyi (VMPPM036), Doby (VMPPM037), Priscilla (VMPPM046) and sub-adult subordinate male Thimbletack (VMPPM053) left the group during an inter-group interaction with Namaqua on the 20th. They had all returned to their home group by the next adlib session.
- Make-e-plan had an encounter with yearling subordinate male Barney (VNQF018) from Namaqua during that same interaction.
- No group splits were observed at the group.
- All individuals appear to be in good health.

Namaqua:

- All 11 meerkats were present at Namaqua at the end of August.
- The new dominant female Manzaï (VNQF013) is pregnant.

- Namaqua had an inter-group interaction with Make-e-Plan on the 20th.
- During that IGI yearling subordinate males Zuko (VNQM012), Barney (VNQM018) and Cooper (VNQM019) left the group and were seen trying to approach Make-e-Plan.
- At the same time, they had encounters with yearling subordinate males Maverick (VMPPM034), Kanyonyi (VMPPM036), Doby (VMPPM037), Priscilla (VMPPM046) and sub-adult subordinate male Thimbletack (VMPPM053) from Make-e-Plan.
- There were no group splits observed in August.
- The remaining meerkats at Namaqua are still not showing any signs of TB.

Phoenix

- The only identifiable individual, the radio collared yearling female Pinky (VPHF001), was present at the end of the month along with 18 unmarked individuals.
- At least one unmarked female seems to be pregnant.
- 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 12 out of 13 individuals present at the end of the month. The dominant female Bigwig (VMPPF022) gave birth to 1 pup on the 30th. It had its first move and emerge on the 18th and started foraging with the group on the 23rd.
- Sub-adult female Brownie (VRWF003) has been missing from the group since the 5th.
- Adult subordinate females Scylla (VMPPF025), Cirilla (VMPPF026) and Hope (VMPPF029) were all accepted back into the group after their earlier eviction.
- Adult subordinate male Grigio (VJX126) left the group three times.
- Runaways had no individual encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits this month.
- All individuals appear to be in good health.

Side Quest:

- The number of group members at Side Quest decreased to 8 this month.
- One of the 2 new pups went missing on the 4th. He (VSIM006) is assumed predated.
- Side Quest had no encounters, inter-group-interactions or group splits this month.
- All individuals seem to be healthy.

Trackie-Daks:

- The official number of group members increased to 16 this month. We finally managed to mark the 2 skittish females and could therefore add them to the database as they are now identifiable. We named them BB (VTDF010) and Scarface (VTDF011).



- Juvenile female KB1 (VTDF009) was given her Last Seen after being absent from the group for a month.
- One of the adult females appeared to be pregnant in August and gave birth on the 23rd. We believe this was the female we have now identified as BB, however we cannot be certain with the pregnancy occurring before this.
- Yearling subordinate male Petit Lu (VTSM011) and yearling subordinate female Fergalicious (VTSF020) both left the group once and returned.
- Yearling subordinate males Sushi (VTSM006) and Jumper (VTSM017) left the group and were spotted roving at Ubuntu. They were accepted back into Trackie-Daks upon their return a few days later.
- There were no individual encounters, inter-group-interactions, or group splits observed this month.
- Trackie-Daks' habituation level is *In Progress* as the newly marked females BB and Scarface, yearling male Sketchy Bongo (VTSM019) and dominant male Coquette (VTSM014) still need a lot of habituation work.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

Zulus:

- All 13 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- The dominant female Sprudde (VZUF028) is pregnant.
- There were no individual encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits observed this month.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

The following authors contributed to this report:

Bieke Maex. Life History Coordinator