



The Meerkatter

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

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Phoenix pups

At the Kalahari Meerkat Project, we have several habituation groups where we do not collect adlib data yet. We are mainly trying to get them habituated to our presence, so that they can become data collection groups in the future. At Gold Diggers and Trackie-Daks we already manage to weigh most of the meerkats and to follow the former while they are foraging. Our third habituation group, Phoenix, is nowhere near that level yet. They are slowly getting more comfortable and, on most mornings, observers are able to sit at 2m from them. We are still greatly working on getting them accustomed to our movements, the scale equipment, water and egg, to be able to approach them more closely and collect data further than basic life history and group composition checks.

Even though many individuals are okay with us being there as they wake up, a few prefer to keep a close eye on us with just their heads poking out of the sleeping burrow. Therefore, it is not easy to determine how many meerkats may be pregnant. In August and September observers believed at least two females at the group were pregnant. One possibly gave birth on the 5th as it seemed that a babysitter was left behind. On the 14th we saw wet sandy rings on two meerkats, which is a sign of lactation.

On the 21st, meerkat volunteer Tara Naeser witnessed a first pup emerge and heard a few more young ones that she was not able to see. There were no more sightings the next week, but on the 28th it was again Tara who had the honour of meeting the litter of our most skittish group.



Two of the new pups at Phoenix. Photo credit: Meerkat volunteer Tara Naeser.

Phoenix had come up and were sunning, getting ready to start their day. Tara then heard little pup noises coming from the sleeping burrow. One by one, three little pups emerged while the adults started to make move calls. The group gradually left and two babysitters stayed behind. They were also making move calls and it seemed like they wanted to take the pups on their first forage. After a lot of coaxing, two pups followed them, but the third one needed to gain a little more confidence first. The two babysitters eventually decided to continue their foraging attempts with the rest of the group and left the pups by the sleeping burrow.



The new litter at Phoenix. Photo credit: Meerkat volunteer Tara Naeser.

This situation of course is not ideal. Meerkats tend to leave babysitters with their pups to ensure they are fed and not at risk to predators, but it is not uncommon to leave the pups on their own every once in a while. Especially when food may be scarce near the babysitting burrow and the pups are strong enough to fend for themselves for a short amount of time, the adults may be more likely to take the risk of leaving them alone so that they may forage for themselves.

We believed this could be a good habituation opportunity to get the pups used to our presence without any influence from the more skittish adults. Therefore, Tara tried to approach them. The little meerkats were not too impressed at first and spat at her. After a while, with a slow approach, they became a lot more comfortable and she was even able to groom them. After a successful habituation session, she allowed them to safely retreat into the mouth of the sleeping burrow before departing.



We hope this will mark the start of a boost in habituation at the group. It is often noticed at other habituation groups that a particular focus on habituating pups, which tend to lend their curiosity to a faster habituation, can have a positive influence on the more skittish adults. It would be wonderful if we could work towards this at Phoenix for a positive step in their habituation progress.

Unsuccessful pregnancies and struggling pups

After the rains in June the meerkats started off a new breeding season at an unusual time. New pups were born in July at Elrond's Council, Jaxx, Runaways and Side Quest.

Several other females were pregnant at the end of August but seem to have been less successful than their counterparts who started breeding a few weeks earlier.

Jaxx's dominant female Baloo (VJXF080) aborted her litter on the 19th, one day after an official pregnancy was created for her. The dominant female at Namaqua (VNQF013) also aborted on the 7th. Adult subordinate female Magali (VUBF023) from Ubuntu possibly aborted on the 20th. Observers believed she might have been pregnant, no official pregnancy had been created for her yet and the abortion was not witnessed, but some observers reported her suddenly looking remarkably slimmer.

Gold Diggers' dominant female Cleo (VGDF013) gave birth on the 2nd. The group initially left babysitters behind for about two weeks. Cleo, as well as adult subordinates Fleabag (VGDF005) and Goldeneye (VGDF007) and yearling subordinate Meghan (VGDF018) were all lactating at one stage. Around the 15th the females stopped lactating and the group changed sleeping burrows a few days in a row. The pups were never seen to have emerged.

A similar scenario took place at Make-e-Plan. Dominant female Bridget (VQLF011) gave birth during the few days we lost track of the group. They were not seen between the 11th and 15th because the dominant male Banksia (VVHM117) – who was wearing the radio collar for the group – went missing. Make-e-Plan also initially left babysitters behind while the rest were foraging and Bridget lactated for about 10 days. We presume the litter was lost around the 25th. The group had two burrow changes, stopped babysitting and lactations ended.

We believed one of the two adult females at Trackie-Daks, who were still unmarked at the time, gave birth at the end of August. It was hard to determine whether anyone was lactating, because the two adult females – now marked and known as BB (VTDF010) and Scarface (VTDF011) - are still quite skittish. Observers often only see them with their heads poking out of the sleeping burrow. They changed burrows three times during the following week and no pups were ever seen.

Sencha (VHMF030), the dominant female at Hakuna Matata, gave birth on the 29th of August. Two pups (VHMP055 and VHMP056) emerged on the 21st of September. VHMP055 was last seen on the 23rd and VHMP056 on the 26th. As per usual, we will wait ten days for them to hopefully resurface, but this litter may have been lost. Especially as it was reported that VHMP055 did not look healthy. The pup had blood around its nose, was skinny and fatigued, and showed signs of laboured breathing. Moreover, observers also noticed Hakuna Matata shared their birth burrow with two monitor lizards, who definitely have meerkat pups as part of their diet.

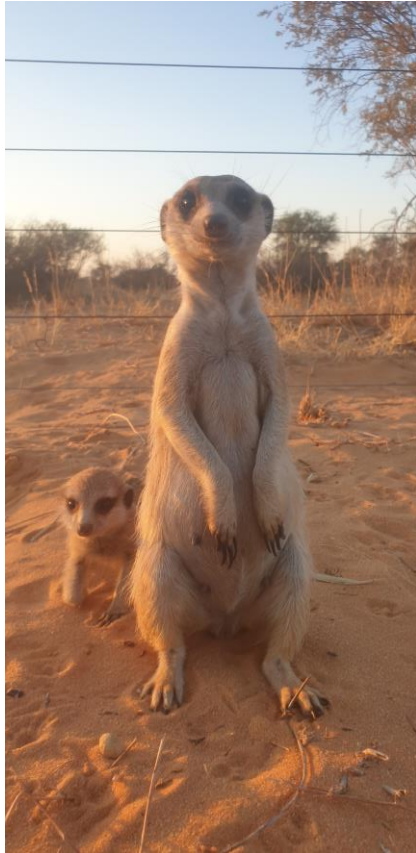


Tiny pups at Hakuna Matata. Photo credit: Life History Coordinator Bieke Maex.

The dominant female at Zulus, Spruddel (VZUF028), gave birth mid-September. One pup was seen on the 28th but looked very weak. We do not yet know whether there are any more pups and whether the first pup will actually survive.

Luckily, there is more positive news as well. As mentioned in the previous article Phoenix had three pups. The dominant females from Lazuli (Sigma, VLF230) and Side Quest (Pumba, VZUF048) both gave birth in September, but their pups have not emerged yet. Finally, Pippin (VECF003), an adult subordinate female at Elrond's Council, is now pregnant. She is the first subordinate meerkat of the season to become pregnant and we hope her litter will survive.

As we start to enter summer, and the usual time for the breeding season to begin, we hope there will be many more pregnancies to come – and that they will show greater success. We hope this summer will bring the rains we have all long been waiting for, and that the meerkat groups will benefit greatly from the boost in food they provide.



Adult subordinate female Pippin (VECF003) and one of the juveniles at Elrond's Council. Photo credit: Meerkat volunteer Tara Naeser.

Temperatures are still increasing in the Kalahari. The average maximum was 30.5 °C and the average minimum 6.7 °C. The 27th was the hottest day, with temperatures rising to 38.5 °C. It did not rain in September.

September 2021 Life History Details

Elrond's Council:

- All 24 members were present at the end of the month.
- Adult subordinate female Pippin (VECF003) is pregnant.
- Yearling subordinate male Arwen (VECM014) left the group on the 8th and returned by the morning of the 10th.
- Elrond's Council had 1 daily group split on the 16th.
- No individual encounters or inter-group-interactions were observed this month.
- Habituation is still considered *Incomplete*. Both dominant female Galadriel (VECF032) and Pippin 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 meerkats were present at Gold Diggers at the end of the month.
- The dominant female Cleo (VGDF013) gave birth on the 2nd. However, we never saw any pups and the litter is considered lost before emergence.
- There were no individual encounters or inter-group-interactions observed this month.
- Gold Diggers had 2 daily group splits this month.
- Gold Diggers' habituation level is in *Advanced Progress* as the group members are all marked, most individuals are weighable and quite comfortable with follows during the morning. The group is not always comfortable with being approached and followed during the afternoon, so that is where our current focus lies.
- All individuals seem to be healthy.

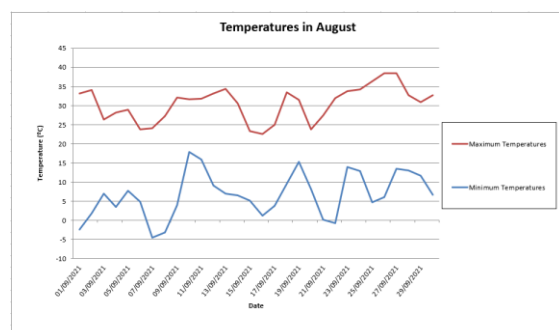
Jaxx:

- All 25 members were present at the end of the month.
- The dominant female Baloo (VJXF080) aborted mid-September.
- Adult subordinate male Rincewind (VJXM131) left on the morning of the 7th and returned later that same day. Adult subordinate female Salamander (VJXF135) did not wake up with the group on the 15th. She returned to Jaxx the next day.
- Jaxx had 1 daily group split on the 14th.
- There were no individual encounters or inter-group-interactions observed in September.
- All individuals seem to be in good health.

Pregnancies in September 2021

Females pregnant in September	10
Females who aborted	2
Females who gave birth, litters lost	3
Females who gave birth, litter emerged	1
Females who gave birth, unknown outcome	3
Females still pregnant at the end of the month	1

Weather at the KMP





Lazuli:

- All 15 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- The dominant female Sigma (VLF230) gave birth on the 8th. We do not yet know how many pups she had.
- No individual encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits took place.
- Lazuli's habituation level is *Incomplete* as the habituation of adult subordinate male 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:

- There were 21 out of 22 individuals present at the end of September.
- The dominant male Banksia (VVHM117) went missing around the 15th. We lost the group for a few days because we could not get any beeps from his radio collar. When we found the group again, he was not with them and he has not been seen since.
- The dominant female Bridget (VQLF011) gave birth during the 4 days we lost track of the group. Her pups never emerged and are considered lost as the group has already moved burrows several times, is no longer leaving babysitters and no one is lactating anymore.
- Adult subordinate male Thorn (VMPM027) left the group during the morning of the 6th and returned later the same day. Yearling subordinate male Kanyonyi (VMPM036) left on the 2nd and came back a few hours later. Yearling subordinate male Doby (VMPM037) was seen at Namaqua on the 9th. He woke up with Make-e-Plan the next morning.
- Make-e-Plan had an inter-group interaction with Namaqua on the 9th.
- 4 daily group splits were observed this month.
- Make-e-Plan had no encounters in September.
- All individuals appear to be in good health.

Namaqua:

- All 11 meerkats were present at Namaqua at the end of September.
- The dominant female Manzaï (VNQF013) aborted on the 7th.
- Yearling subordinate males Zuko (VNQM012) and Barney (VNQM018) tried to join Make-e-Plan during an inter-group interaction on the 9th. Both returned to Namaqua before the group went below for the night.
- During that IGI the group had an encounter with yearling subordinate male Doby (VMPM037) from Make-e-Plan.
- There were no group splits observed in September.
- Yearling subordinate female Hiccup (VNQF016) had a submandibular lump of 0.5cm at the end of the month, which is a symptom of tuberculosis.

Phoenix

- The only identifiable individual, the radio collared yearling female Pinky (VPHF001), was present at the end of the month along with 20 unmarked individuals.
- One of the unmarked females has given birth. Observers have seen 3 pups so far, but we have not been able to mark them.
- No encounters or interactions were witnessed this month.
- The group's habituation status is still *In Progress*. On most days observers are tolerated at 2-10m.
- All individuals at Phoenix appear to be healthy.

Runaways:

- All 12 members were present at the end of the month.
- Sub-adult subordinate female Brownie (VRWF003) did not return to the group and was given her Last Seen after being missing for a month.
- Runaways had no encounters, inter-group-interactions or group splits this month.
- All individuals appear to be in good health.

Side Quest:

- All 8 meerkats were present at the end of September.
- The dominant female gave birth on the 19th. We have not seen any pups yet.
- Side Quest had no encounters, inter-group-interactions or group splits this month.
- All individuals seem to be healthy.

Trackie-Daks:

- 15 out of 16 individuals were present at the end of September.
- Yearling subordinate female Fergalicious (VTSF020) was evicted on the 4th. She approached the group 3 times during the following week but has not been seen since.
- We never observed any pups at Trackie-Daks after we thought one of the unmarked females had given birth.
- Yearling subordinate male Jumper (VTSF017) was seen roving at Ubuntu on the 16th and woke up with Trackie-Daks again on the 19th.
- There were no individual encounters, inter-group-interactions, or group splits observed this month.
- Trackie-Daks' habituation level is *In Progress* as the adult females BB (VTDF010) and Scarface (VTDF011), 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 Spruddel (VZUF028) gave birth on the 15th. 1 very weak looking pup was seen on the 28th. We are not sure yet whether it will survive and whether it has any litter mates.
- Zulus had 1 daily group split on the 28th.
- There were no individual encounters or inter-group interactions observed this month.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

The following authors contributed to this report:

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