



# The Meerkatter

*The Friends of the Kalahari Meerkat Project Report - www.kalahari-meerkats.com - March 2022*

<i>A tumultuous start to Brussels Sprouts.....</i>	1-3	<i>Life History Details.....</i>	3-5
<i>Pregnancies in March .....</i>	3		
<i>Weather at the KMP.....</i>	3		

## **A tumultuous start to Brussels Sprouts**

In the December 2021 issue of the Meerkatter, we were introduced to Make-e-plan 4, a sub-group which had formed. In February of this year, they reached the two-month mark and successfully bred which meant they could officially become a group and get their own unique name. A vote was held among the observers and the name Brussels Sprouts was decided for this quirky bunch of meerkats.

A constant challenge with Brussels Sprouts was the fact that they are an uncollared group. Dominant female Arabella (VMPPF035) had her collar removed on the 9<sup>th</sup> of November 2021 due a high tick load forming under it. This meant when the Namaqua males split from the females, we were only able to find the group through opportunistic sightings and burrow sweeps. A burrow sweep is where an observer visits burrows that the group has been known to frequent, and they look for signs of activity before sweeping the sand smooth. They then select a burrow with the most promising signs of activity and wait to see if the group wakes up or returns there. Sometimes, if incredibly lucky, they will bump into the group on their walk between burrows. If they are unsuccessful at finding the group, the next observer will visit the burrows they have swept. They can conclude if the group has visited in the timeframe between burrow sweeps as there will be signs of activity disturbing the smoothly swept sand.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2022 there was an opportunistic sighting of the group at the road intersection near East Gate, towards the Eastern boundary of the reserve near to Gannavlake. Both Arabella and adult subordinate female Vivienne (VMPPF038) were observed to be definitely pregnant, in the observer's opinion, during this sighting. A pregnancy was created for each of them. The group was lost for 19 days before being found returning to G88A, a burrow 491m West of East Gate. During this short session it was observed that Vivienne had given birth as she was slim and her belly was saggy. Although it was unclear if her pups were alive and at that burrow. This was because there were no signs of lactation and we have no way of knowing if she had given birth at the burrow. An observer was sent the next morning, in the hopes of clearing up this mystery. However, no

meerkats emerged all morning, only one head was seen popping up out of a burrow entrance. Three days later, the next observer was sent for a morning session and found Arabella had given birth. Due to this birth, until DNA testing can be performed, it shall remain a mystery as to whether any of the pups belong to Vivienne. The good news about the birth, other than the delight we feel when new meerkats join our population, is that it meant the group would stay at the same location whilst the pups grew in the burrow. Morning observation sessions were performed and we began to get to know this little group better. They are a great group to visit, as the adults have great temperaments and lovely dispositions. The group is easy to observe, being only three in number at the time, if one individual stayed behind to babysit. They are also all very eggy (keen for their egg reward) which helps when collecting weights. One of our tasks was to determine from their behaviour who was the dominant female between Arabella and Vivienne. Despite us being able to send regular observers, no direct submissions were seen from either female.



Adult subordinate male Gurke (VHMM036) with the Brussels Sprouts' pups (VM42201/VM42202). Photo credit: Meerkat volunteer Emma Brown.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of February, observers started seeing pups in the entrance of the burrow. First there were three little pup faces, then five. On the 12<sup>th</sup>, four pups had their first emerge. The next morning, the fifth and final pup emerged and all five were marked. The first ever individuals with the Brussels Sprouts code were created! Our delight at having five little sprouts soon turned to dismay as the adults decided it was time to change burrows. Bad weather meant it took us four



days to feel certain that the group have moved burrows, which gave the group time to potentially travel quite far.

The other great challenge to finding Brussels Sprouts has been that we do not know where their territory is. Since dominant male Shandy (VHMM023) and adult subordinate male Gurke (VHMM036) joined the group, we have not been able to consistently follow them. This means we do not know which burrows the group likes to use since they have joined. Burrow sweeps began and we had to guess which areas the group may be using based off where their neighbours (Gold Diggers, Namaqua, Alba, Make-e-Plan) were hanging out. Another issue is, with the group being so small, they do not leave many tracks behind to find. For nineteen long days we searched and spirits were low.

Then, on 9<sup>th</sup> of March, after another failed burrow sweep, the dejected observer was cycling to Namaqua for a short session to see who was babysitting. As they were approaching the Water Pump House on the Eastern boundary of the reserve just North of East Gate, they heard pup calls and saw meerkats diving for cover under a dead log. Leaping off the bike they inspected the group to see if they could identify anyone. Vivienne, as a very distinctive meerkat due to the snake bites which have caused her left eye to be partially closed and scarred, was recognised immediately. When her face appeared from under the log the observer's joy and relief were immense. Observers stayed with the group throughout the whole day so their sleeping burrow could be ascertained and the next morning a collar could be placed on Arabella, who we suspected was the dominant female.



Adult subordinate female Vivienne (VMPF038) on guard for Brussels Sprouts. Photo credit: Life History Coordinator Lila Chillingworth.

Now that the group was collared and we could follow them, our next challenge began: pup habituation. After spending the majority of their emerged life without the presence of observers they were

incredibly skittish. When first found, the pups would separate themselves from the adults, running to the outskirts of the group in order to distance themselves from the observer. However, it is testament to the good habituation and temperament of the adults as by the end of the day the pups were comfortable enough to move around the observer, under one meter, as long as the observer did not try to interact with them. Our mission then was to get them interested in egg and comfortable with the scale. Within a week we had all pups eating egg, they would come into the scale to be weighed and female pup Minnow (VBSF004) was drinking water.



From left to right, Pup Lyra (VBSP002), female pup Minnow (VBSF004) and Dominant female Arabella (VMPF035) grooming Lyra. Photo credit: Life History Coordinator Lila Chillingworth.

We had hoped this would be the end of the drama with Brussel Sprouts. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of March, Vivienne was seen submitting to Arabella, and Arabella was determined as dominant. All was calm and uneventful. However, this was not to last. Brussel Sprouts are surrounded by quite a few large groups, one of these being Gold Diggers who have been using a burrow near Whiskers Crossing in the centre of the reserve as a babysitting burrow. Over the next couple of weeks after the group was collared, Brussel Sprouts started heading west towards Whiskers Crossing. This had us biting our nails as an inter-group interaction with Gold Diggers would not go in their favour, being a much smaller inexperienced group with pups. On the 21<sup>st</sup>, our fears were confirmed. Late into the morning session, Brussel Sprouts were resting on a fallen tree when Arabella, who was on guard at the time, alarmed. Ninety meters away were Gold Diggers. The whole group snapped to attention and then gathered up and ran! They ran about one hundred meters all the way back to their sleeping burrow where they felt safe enough to start foraging again. It was here the observer left them.

When this same observer went to find them again in the afternoon disaster had struck! The group only

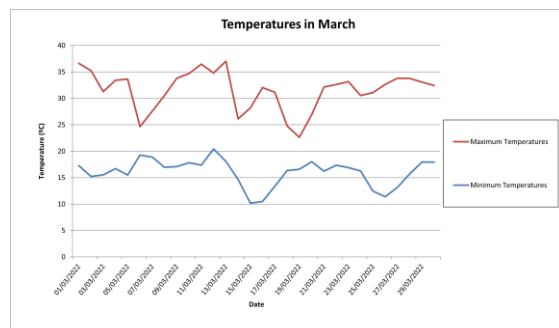


consisted of Arabella, Vivienne and two pups: Minnow and male pup Chilli (VBSP005). We have no way of knowing what happened over the lunch break. They could have had another inter-group interaction with Gold Diggers, in which some pups were killed and the group got split up. However, we are crossing our fingers that maybe they had to flee from Gold Diggers again, and in their haste, Shandy, Gurke and the pups, Totoro (VBSP001), Lyra (VBSP002) and Love (VBSP003), got separated in the waist-high grass. The tall grass has been a challenge for a lot of groups as we have been observing individuals leaving the group and then returning back later because they have become lost from their group in the long grass. For quite a few sessions following the split, Arabella and Vivienne were observed being very vigilant and the group stayed in the area for the next couple of days. However, at the time of writing this, the males have not been seen or returned to the group. Arabella has moved her group back towards the East of the reserve to G88A, which seems to be one of their favourite burrows. Hopefully, this is Shandy's plan as well and that him and Gurke have all three pups alive and well. We are all hoping they will be reunited soon.

### Pregnancies in March 2022

<b>Females pregnant in March</b>	<b>18</b>
Females who aborted	0
Females who gave birth, litters lost	3
Females who gave birth, litter emerged	3
Females who gave birth, unknown outcome	7
Females still pregnant at the end of the month	5

### Weather at the KMP



The average maximum temperature was 31.6 °C and the average minimum temperature was 16.1 °C. On the 13<sup>th</sup> temperatures rose to the highest recorded temperature this month of 37 °C. The coldest morning was on the 15<sup>th</sup>, with temperatures dropping to 10.2 °C. March was a very rainy month, with a total of 130.4mm.

### March 2022 Life History Details

#### Alba:

- All 12 members were present at the end of the month.
- No encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits were observed in March.
- Habituation at the group is *Incomplete*. Pippin is being weighed on a regular basis; however, she often does not like to fully commit to getting all the way into the scale. She is comfortable with being followed at 1m and you can sit with her under 1m. The rest of the individuals are fully habituated.
- All individuals appear healthy.

#### Brussels Sprouts:

- There were 4 out of 9 meerkats present at the end of March.
- Brussels Sprouts had an inter-group interaction with Gold Diggers on the morning of the 21<sup>st</sup>. They possibly had another encounter later that day, as the dominant male Shandy (VHMM023), adult subordinate male Gurke (VHMM036) and pups Totoro (VBSP001), Lyra (VBSP002) and Love (VBSP003) have all been absent from the group since that afternoon.
- Female dominance is settled now that we have observed submissions from adult female Vivienne (VMPF038) to her littermate Arabella (VMPF035).
- No encounters or group splits were observed.
- All individuals at Brussels Sprouts seem to be in good health.

#### Elrond's Council:

- There were 18 out of 19 meerkats present at the end of the month.
- Former dominant female Galadriel (VECF032), disappeared from the group on the 4<sup>th</sup>, remaining absent at the end of the month.
- Yearling female Calypso (VECF027) took over dominance on the 25<sup>th</sup>.
- Adult subordinate males Smaug, (VECM013), Arwen (VECM014) and Boromir (VECM016) were given their Last Seen.
- Observers witnessed Calypso give birth to 3 stillborn pups on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. No babysitters were ever left, no individuals started lactating and the group changed sleeping burrows on the 24<sup>th</sup> so the litter (VEC2201A) was given the outcome aborted.
- Galadriel's litter (VEC2201) was given the outcome of born and lost before emergence as after her disappearance, no other individuals started lactating and the group changed sleeping burrows and left no babysitters.
- No encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits were observed this month.
- Until Galadriel is given her Last Seen, habituation will be considered *Incomplete*. She was still skittish with sudden movements and hands but otherwise could be approached at 1-2m with minimal barking. She voluntarily approached the scale and was keen to hop in for some egg. The rest of the individuals are fully habituated.





- Calypso has been in poor health following the birth of stillborn pups. She has lost a lot of weight, is lethargic, and seems to have genital prolapse.

#### **Gold Diggers:**

- All 19 members were present at Gold Diggers at the end March.
- 3 new pups, born to yearling subordinate female BMO (VGDF020), emerged on the 24<sup>th</sup>. BMO's littermate Shelby (VGDF022) gave birth on the 26<sup>th</sup>. We do not yet know how many pups she had.
- The dominant male Shrew (VUBM018), adult subordinate females Fleabag (VGDF005) and Goldeneye (VGDF007), yearling subordinate females BMO, Shelby, Tuna Fish II (VGDF026) Poki (VGDF029) and Yorki (VGDF033), adult subordinate male Jack (VGDM010) and yearling subordinate males Beatrice (VGDM014), Rogelio De La Vega (VGDM015), Baymax (VGDM028) and Jojo (VGDM032) were all seen away from the dominant female on the 29<sup>th</sup>. They re-joined her and 2 other females half an hour later. Only Jack and Shelby did not return immediately but were back the next day. Jack did not wake up with the group on the 31<sup>st</sup> but was seen foraging with the rest of Gold Diggers later that same morning.
- No encounters were observed in March.
- Gold Diggers had an inter-group encounter with Brussels Sprouts on the 21<sup>st</sup>.
- They had a daily group split on the 14<sup>th</sup>.
- All individuals seem to be healthy.

#### **Hakuna Matata:**

- Hakuna Matata were only seen twice in March and have again spent most of the month on the Heights farm. 18 meerkats were present.
- The dominant female Sencha (VHMF030) was pregnant when she was last sighted at the start of February. When we saw the group on March 18<sup>th</sup>, they had 4 small pups with them.
- As adult subordinate female Azizi (VHMF039) was still absent from the group, she has been given her Last Seen.
- No individual encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits were observed.
- All individuals appeared healthy when they were last seen.

#### **Jaxx:**

- There were 19 out of 20 meerkats present at Jaxx at the end of March.
- Yearling subordinate male Mulder (VJXM152) did not wake up with Jaxx on the 10<sup>th</sup> and was still absent at the end of the month.
- Yearling subordinate male Nibs (VJXM137), who was absent at the end of February, returned on the 5<sup>th</sup>. He left and returned once more in March. Adult subordinate male Rincewind (VJXM131) left and returned twice. Yearling subordinate females Scully (VJXF149), Gray (VJXF150), sub-adult female Queen Jane (VJXF158) and sub-adult male Johanna (VJXM157) all left and returned once this month.

- Rincewind appeared at the group while he was absent on the 15<sup>th</sup>.
- Jaxx had 2 encounters with an unknown meerkat on the 3<sup>rd</sup>.
- No inter-group interactions or group splits were seen this month.
- The dominant female Baloo (VJXF080) gave birth on the 14<sup>th</sup>. We do not yet know how many pups she had.
- All individuals at Jaxx seem to be in good health.

#### **Lazuli:**

- The total number of meerkats increased to 19 with the arrival of 6 new pups. All members were present at the end of the month.
- Adult subordinate male Slop (VLM253), who had been absent from the group since the end of January, was given his Last Seen.
- Yearling subordinate female Pichu (VLF274) and the 6 pups (VLM286, VLF287, VLF288, VLF289, VLM290 and VLM291) woke up at the babysitting burrow without the rest of the group on the 14<sup>th</sup>. The other individuals probably went below at a different burrow when it started to rain during the evening of the 13<sup>th</sup> and re-joined the babysitter and pups the next morning.
- No individual encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits were seen this month.
- All individuals seem to be in good health.

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

- All 17 meerkats were present at the end of March.
- Yearling subordinate female Emma (VMPF060) was given her Last Seen.
- The dominant female Bridget (VQLF011) is pregnant again.
- The group had an encounter with former group member yearling female Millewa (VMPF048) on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. She was spotted near the group several times throughout the month. On the 9<sup>th</sup> she was still definitely pregnant. When she was seen again on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, she was no longer pregnant and showed no signs of lactation. It is quite likely her litter was aborted or lost before emergence.
- No other individual encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits were seen this month.
- Make-e-Plan became a habituation group after the arrival of adult males Sketchy Bongo (VTSM019) and Sushi (VTSM006) from Trackie-Daks at the end of November. Sketchy Bongo is a very skittish individual and we are working hard on his habituation. He is getting more comfortable with our presence at the sleeping burrow (around seven meters at the end of the month), but we cannot follow him easily while foraging as he often remains a large distance away from us.
- All individuals appear to be in good health.

#### **Namaqua:**

- The total number of meerkats increased to 15 with the arrival of 4 new pups. There were 13 individuals present at the end of March.



- Juvenile females VNQF032 and VNQF033 went missing on the 7<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup>, respectively, and remained absent at the end of the month.
- Pup VNQM030 did not return to the group and was given his Last Seen. Former adult male Zuko (VNQM012) and yearling males Barney (VNQM018) and Cooper (VNQM019) were given their last seen.
- Yearling subordinate female Megara (VNQF020) was not part of the group on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, but returned on the 26<sup>th</sup>, just before the group went below.
- No encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits were observed in March.
- Megara is still showing signs of tuberculosis, with small submandibular lumps on both sides, protruding collarbones and hips and lethargic behaviour. No other Namaqua meerkats are showing signs of TB and seem to be healthy.

#### Phoenix

- 16 unmarked individuals were present at the end of the month, including 4 pups.
- No encounters or interactions were witnessed this month.
- The group's habituation status is still *In Progress*. On most days observers are tolerated at around 5m at the sleeping burrow. Some of the meerkats sniff egg when sprinkled around their sleeping burrow.
- All individuals at Phoenix appear to be healthy.

#### Runaways:

- The total number of individuals increased to 16 with the emergence of 5 pups and all individuals were present at the end of the month.
- On the 4<sup>th</sup>, dominant female Bigwig (VMPF022) gave birth.
- No individual encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits were seen this month.
- All individuals seem to be in good health.

#### Side Quest:

- The total number of individuals present at the Side Quest has increased to 14 with the emergence of dominant female Pumba's (VZUF048) 3 pups.
- On the 4<sup>th</sup>, adult subordinate female Timon (VZUF049) returned to the group, meaning all members were present from this point onwards.
- As mentioned earlier Pumba gave birth this month, between the 28<sup>th</sup> of February and the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March. Timon also gave birth this month on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March. We are yet to see if she was successful and if any pups emerge from her litter.
- There were no individual encounters, inter-group interactions, or group splits observed during the month.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

#### Trackie-Daks:

- All 19 members were present at the end of the month.

- This month, adult subordinate female Fly (VWF237) was pregnant. However, on the 31<sup>st</sup> she aborted her litter.
- There were no individual encounters, inter-group interactions, or group splits observed this month.
- The habituation level is currently *In Progress*. The main focus this month has been the pups as they are quite skittish. At the beginning of the month, they all ate egg but were very skittish around observers. Now all 10 pups enjoy egg in the scale and 9 will jump in unaided. 6 pups drink water and all pups are now comfortable with the observer's presence. We have also been trialling short follows with the group. Excluding dominant male Coquette (VTSM014), all other individuals are surprisingly fine with the follows. Coquette continues to be the biggest obstacle to improvement at Trackie-Daks. His comfort levels remain unchanged this month.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

#### Ubuntu:

- All 24 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- On the 9<sup>th</sup>, yearling subordinate female Moon (VUBF040) left the group and then returned on the 12<sup>th</sup>.
- No encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits were observed this month.
- Habituation is still considered to be *Incomplete*. The habituation of adult subordinate male Captain Barbosa (VLM265) is continuing. He is much better at weights as has grown in confidence although can still be a bit skittish. This growth in confidence means he is quicker and easier to weigh in-between the other confident and more boisterous individuals. Observers can sit and stand next to him at a distance of 0.5 to 2 meters and follow or move around him at 1 to 4 meters. He will approach observers for egg.
- All individuals appear to be in good health.

#### Whiskers:

- The total number of individuals at Whiskers increased to 21 with the emergence of 6 pups. All individuals were present at the end of March.
- No encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits were observed this month.
- All individuals at Whiskers seem to be healthy.

#### Zulus:

- All 12 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Dominate female Spruddel (VZUF028) and adult subordinate female Rowena (VZUF054) are pregnant.
- No individual encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits were seen this month.
- All individuals at Zulus appear to be healthy.

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