



The Meerkatter

The Friends of the Kalahari Meerkat Project Report - www.kalahari-meerkats.com - February 2023

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Dik-Diks

Shy, sweet, special. These are words to describe one of East Africa's smallest antelope and the name we gave our new meerkat group!

This is the story of five Gold Diggers (nicknamed Goldies) females who met four males from Ubuntu. On the 22nd of September 2022, adult subordinate female Shelby (VGDF022) from Gold Diggers, left her home group. A few months later, on the 12th of December, two other adult subordinate females from Gold Diggers, Juliet (VGDF009) and Fleabag (VGDF005) left as well. While present at Gold Diggers, these three females were being treated as habituation individuals, because they could not be weighed and could only be followed at a distance. When they left the group, we were sad to see them go, because they were very shy and sweet meerkats. Two other yearling subordinate females from Goldies, Poki (VGDF029) and Tuna Fish II (VGDF026) left on the 30th of November and 30th of December respectively. As you can probably guess, there is a reason these meerkats are being singled out.

Now on to the males. Four yearling subordinate males Asani (VUBM045), Rufaro (VUBM046), Kwame (VUBM047) and Jaivyn (VUBM048) left Ubuntu on the 24th of December 2022 in a very sneaky way. We assumed that they were babysitting the litter of that time, but after six sessions of babysitting by elimination, we confirmed that they had left the group to go roving. Asani, Rufaro, and Kwame are all born to the same litter. These males seem to be curious and have no problem with us weighing them and being followed.

Now we are getting to the good part. When we saw these nine individuals acting as part of a group on the 29th of January, we were overjoyed! They were first spotted going down a sleeping burrow together, and one of the five unmarked females was very pregnant. Tuna Fish II was outfitted with a radio collar so that we could track the group.

There were the two Goldies females, Poki and Tuna Fish II, as well as the males, who did not mind being transpondered and marked to figure out who they were. The problem came in when we wanted to work out who the three skittish females were. We assumed that they were Fleabag, Juliet and Shelby, but we had to be sure. Fleabag does not have a transponder, so when one of our very patient observers managed to transponder the three females, by process of elimination, we could assign dye marks and add them to the marksheets.

During the time of uncertainty of who the three females were, the individual we believed was Fleabag had given birth. The meerkat presumed to be Shelby has been a great babysitter and on the 27th of February, two pups emerged.

On the 6th of this month, they had an inter-group interaction with Lazuli. Dik-Diks retreated speedily, because with roughly 26 individuals from Lazuli war dancing straight at them would have made nearly anyone run away.

How are these meerkats now, after not being seen for about two months? Well, Fleabag can now be weighed, but she still does not like to be followed. Shelby has a very unique face for a meerkat, which is why we suspected it was her, even before we managed to double check with the transponder reader. She has a very slender face, and a very spooked look when observers get too close. Juliet still does not like to be followed but she is fine with observers around when they sit at a distance.

When we had to decide on a new group name, the name Cougars came up, since Juliet, Fleabag and Shelby are at least three years older than the males. There were other funny and sometimes quite descriptive names suggested, but when it came down to voting, it was an easy decision. What name could suit these lovely, sweet, shy meerkats better? We hope that they will stay a group and have many wonderful pups to add to the Dik-Dik clan.



The newly formed Dik-Diks group having some fun in the sun – Photo contributed by Zurich Manager Maahir Jusabani.

The End is Nigh for Namaqua

When we last reported on Namaqua in August 2022, we were unsure how much longer the group would survive. It is with great sadness I must report that the

end has approached very quickly for this beloved group. Even though individuals have been showing signs of tuberculosis on and off since late 2019, this always only affected a few meerkats at a time. However, since last winter, group members have started showing symptoms and began disappearing at a much higher rate than before.

As soon as the dominant male Umfana (VZUM034) disappeared at the end of August 2022, former Hakuna Matata and Brussels Sprouts male Shandy (VHMM023) swooped in and took over dominance. Love (VBSM003), the sub-adult male who had been following him ever since they left Brussels Sprouts together, stayed close. After encountering Namaqua and being chased away repeatedly by his Namaqua contemporaries over the course of a month, his hard work finally paid off and he was accepted into Namaqua on the 1st of October. Observers were hopeful that these new immigrants would give the group and its dwindling numbers a boost. That, unfortunately, was wishful thinking. Even though Love was seen mating with dominant female Manzai (VNQF013) while he was roving at the group on the 22nd of August, that did not lead to a new litter. Moreover, we suspect, though can not confirm, that Love and/or Shandy were behind the attack on and ensuing disappearance of the three pups that had just emerged at the group. Since then, adult subordinate female Mia (VNQF027) aborted one litter that same month and lost another one before emergence in November.

Following the immigration of Shandy, yearling subordinate male Fredi (VNQM028) left Namaqua at the end of August 2022. He was spotted near several evicted Make-e-Plan females a few times in the weeks that followed and was then not seen until the 7th of January. On that day, and again on the 23rd and 26th, he was seen by himself, looking quite skinny. Even though he surprised us all by surviving so long on his own, we have not seen him since and are unsure whether he is still alive.

At the start of September, observers started noticing potential signs of tuberculosis with Manzai and sub-adult subordinate female Luisa (VNQF031). Luisa never developed lumps but became increasingly skinny and lethargic and was showing laboured breathing. She disappeared from the group on the 10th of October. For weeks, all we noticed was weight loss on Manzai. Gradually, she started getting bald patches, became lethargic and was seen bleeding from her ear. She has not been seen since the 5th of December, and has presumably succumbed to her illness.

We spotted a submandibular lump on Mia at the start of October, which burst two weeks later. Fluid leaked out for a few days and then the lump refilled. It burst again at the end of December. In her last two weeks, she developed lumps behind her ear and on her paw and became increasingly lethargic. When Manzai disappeared, Mia was the only remaining mature female and automatically became the new dominant female. This unfortunately did not turn her luck and

she finally disappeared during the morning session of the 10th of February.

A big submandibular lump was observed on sub-adult subordinate female Pika-Magenta-Sloan (VNQF036) mid-November. She has been missing since the 22nd of February. We first noticed a submandibular lump on sub-adult subordinate male Calen Du Lee (VNQM035) on the 31st of December and he has been missing since the 1st of February. As Love had a bad reaction to the radio-collar, we had to remove it at the end of December. Until we collared Shandy again on the 10th of February, we sometimes struggled to find the group and may have missed the exact moment when the remaining meerkats started showing symptoms.

Love, sub-adult subordinate female Mirabel (VNQF034) and sub-adult subordinate male Bruno (VNQM037) also started showing lumps in that period. Together with her sister Pika-Magenta-Sloan, Mirabel also disappeared on the 22nd of February.

With so many meerkats disappearing in such rapid succession, Namaqua is now down to three remaining individuals: Shandy, Love and Bruno. As these are all males, that means Namaqua can technically not be considered a group anymore. According to our protocol, a group must consist of both males and females, which makes these remaining meerkats a coalition of rovers. Given that all three have TB lumps, it seems unlikely they will try to find new females to join. We will keep track of these meerkats as long as we still can, collecting valuable information for researchers regarding meerkats with TB, but we are all bracing ourselves to say goodbye to this sweet group.



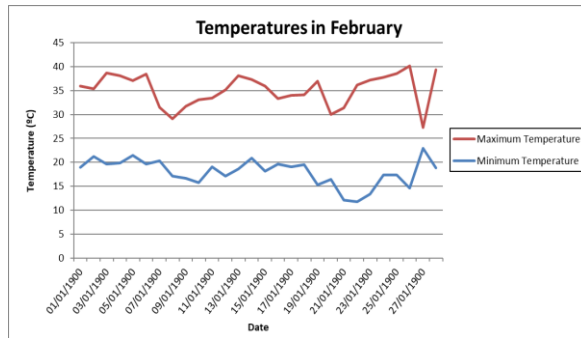
Sub-adult subordinate male Bruno (VNQM037) and dominant male Shandy (VHMM023) sunning in a field of devil's thorn. Photo credit: Zurich Manager Bieke Maex.

Pregnancies in February 2023

Females pregnant in February	16
Females who aborted	1
Females who gave birth, litters lost	1

Females who gave birth, litter emerged	3
Females who gave birth, unknown outcome	5
Females still pregnant at the end of the month	6

Weather at the KMP



Temperatures in February have been fluctuating more frequently than in the previous month. The average maximum temperature was 35.2°C, while the average minimum temperature was 18.0°C. The coldest day was the 22nd at 11.8°C and the hottest day was 40.2°C, on the 26th. The total rainfall was 76.4 mm for the month, which is almost 3 times more than last month.

February 2023 Life History Details

Due to the large number of groups we are covering, we have made some changes to the way we are collecting data at the KMP. There are four different levels of data collection, that we will briefly introduce here.

Full data collection group (FDC)

We collect LH data at the group and regularly visit the group for full adlib and weights sessions.

Life History monitoring group (LHM)

Observers tend to visit these groups for shorter amounts of time. We collect LH data and increase our visits when new pups need to be habituated. We do not collect adlib data at these groups but collect morning and evening weights a few times per week.

Habituation group (HAB)

Habituating meerkats to our presence is the main goal at these groups. As the group's habituation progresses, we start collecting LH and weights data as well. In a later stage, we try to follow the group after morning weights, introduce lunch weights and start approaching the group in the afternoon.

Sub-group (SUB)

The amount of data we can collect at these groups depends mainly on whether a radio-collared individual is present. If that is the case, we try to collect LH, weights and adlib data, as it is very interesting to witness group dynamics within these newly formed groups. However, we do not always have a radio collar at these groups. In these cases,

we focus on collecting LH data during opportunistic sightings.

Full Data Collection Groups:

Elrond's Council (FDC):

- All 12 individuals were present at the end of February.
- Male dominance is unknown since the former dominant male Palestrina (VLM211) emigrated to Alba on the 26th of January.
- Adult subordinate male Milo (VECM034) left on the 17th, had 2 encounters with Alba and returned to his home group the next day.
- Elrond's Council had 2 encounters with an unknown male on the 10th.
- They had an inter-group interactions with Alba on the 17th.
- No groups splits were observed this month.
- All individuals at Elrond's Council seem to be in good health.

Gold Diggers (FDC):

- All 20 members were present at the end of February.
- The litter of 6 new pups born to dominant female Goldeneye (VGDF007) had their first emerge, move and forage this month.
- Yearling subordinate male Jojo (VGDM032) was given his Last Seen.
- Adult subordinate male Rogelio De La Vega (VGDM015) left and returned on the 6th.
- They had an encounter with 3 unknown individuals on the 13th.
- No inter-group interactions were observed this month.
- Gold Diggers had 1 group split of uncertain duration.
- Habituation at Gold Diggers is considered *Advanced Progress* with the focus on subadult subordinate female Dizle (VGDF040). Dizle has improved and now allows observers to stand next to her while foraging and can be weighed consistently.
- All individuals at Gold Diggers appear to be healthy.

Jaxx (FDC):

- All 26 meerkats were present at Jaxx at the end of February.
- Dominant female Baloo (VJXF080) is officially pregnant.
- No encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits were observed at Jaxx this month.
- All individuals at Jaxx seem to be in good health.

Lazuli (FDC):

- All 29 individuals were present at the end of February.
- Dominant female Sigma (VLF230) gave birth on the 2nd. Her 5 pups first emerged on the 26th.
- Adult subordinate female Dumpling (VLF272) and yearling subordinate female Pichu (VLF274), who were both absent at the end of

January, were accepted back into the group, on the 5th and 7th respectively.

- Adult subordinate male Moteck (VLM261) left and returned twice this month. Dominant male Odin (VLM266), adult subordinate male Taco (VLM273), sub-adult subordinate males Girdle (VLM287) and Monster (VLM290), juvenile male Thor (VLM292) and juvenile female Coffee (VLF297) all left and returned once.
- Lazuli had an inter-group interaction with Dik-Diks on the 6th.
- They had 3 daily group splits this month.
- All individuals seem to be in good health.

Side Quest (FDC):

- All 13 meerkats were present at the end of the month.
- Dominant female Pumba (VZUF048) is officially pregnant.
- Pup Mufasa (VSIP022) went missing on the 3rd and was given its Last Seen later this month.
- There were no encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits recorded this month.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

Ubuntu (FDC):

- There were 15 out of 16 individuals present at the end of the month.
- Dominant female Cthulhu (VUBF035) and adult subordinate female Agazoth (VUBF039) were made officially pregnant on the 15th and 16th respectively.
- Yearling subordinate males Beans (VUBM053) and Donut (VUBM055) left during the month, Beans on the 1st and Donut on the 6th. Beans returned on the 2nd, but Donut did not return by the end of the month.
- Adult subordinate male Captain Barbosa (VLM265) has been immigrated to the group Unknown on the 18th of December, but has been sighted by observers this month. On the 7th, he tried to join the group at the sleeping burrow twice but was chased away both times.
- No inter-group interactions were observed at Ubuntu this month.
- Ubuntu had 1 daily group split on the 2nd of February.
- The meerkats at Ubuntu appear to be in good health.

Whiskers (FDC):

- All 23 members were present at the end of the month.
- Adult subordinate females Laika (VWF236) and Emily Bronte (VWF243) were evicted from the group on the 8th and were accepted back into the group on the same day. They were evicted again on the 13th of February and returned on the 14th. They made appearances on the 13th, where they got chased away. On the 17th, both Laika and Emily Bronte did not wake up with the group. They appeared on the 18th and 20th and were chased off by the group. Laika returned on the 22nd, while Emily Bronte was found at the same

sleeping burrow with the group on the morning of the 24th. Adult subordinate female Virginia Woolf (VWF244) was evicted on the 10th and was accepted back into the group on the 11th.

- Luna (VWF235) gave birth on the 25th of February and 3 pups have been seen and marked.
- Adult subordinate male Lupin (VWM234) and yearling subordinate male Kitkat (VWM249) were given their Last Seen this month.
- Whiskers had 1 encounter with 2 unknown individuals on the 17th and then 1 encounter later the same day.
- They had no inter-group interactions this month.
- They had 1 daily group split on the 2nd of this month.
- All individuals at Whiskers seem to be healthy at the end of the month.

Zulus (FDC):

- 11 out of 12 individuals were present at the end of February. Sub-adult male Spirit (VZUM068) left the group on the 28th of January.
- Adult subordinate females Salazar (VZUF051), Helga (VZUF052) and Rowena (VZUF054) returned to Zulus on the 7th.
- VZUF051 gave birth on the 11th of February. We do not know the outcome of her litter, but it may have been lost. Two of the dominant female Spruddele's (VZUF028) pups emerged on the 27th and they were very large pups. The weight gain may be because they were below a lot longer than normal.
- Zulus had an encounter on the 5th of February with Salazar, Helga and Rowena
- The group had no inter-group interactions or group splits this month.
- All individuals in Zulus appear to be healthy.

Life History Monitoring Groups:

Alba (LHM):

- There were 17 out of 18 individuals present at the end of February.
- Adult male Pucky (VECM023), who immigrated from Elrond's Council at the end of January, has become the new dominant male. He became dominant on the 11th of this month, when more than half of the eligible males submitted to him directly of their own accord.
- Juvenile male Felix Jaeger (VALM009) went missing on the 24th, remaining absent at the end of the month.
- Yearling subordinate male Nigoni (VALM004) was separated from the group during an inter-group interaction with Elrond's Council on the morning of the 17th. He was initially chased off, but later accepted back into his home group.
- Alba had 3 encounters with adult subordinate male Milo (VECM034) from Elrond's Council on the 17th.
- They had 1 daily group split.
- All individuals appear healthy.

Brussels Sprouts (LHM):

- All 9 individuals were present at the end of February.
- Yearling subordinate female Lyra (VBSF002) gave birth on the 20th and dominant female Arabella (VMPF035) on the 26th. Yearling subordinate female Totoro's (VBSF001) litter is thought to be lost before emergence.
- No encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits were seen this month.
- All individuals at Brussels Sprouts seem to be in good health.

Dik-Diks (LHM):

- All 9 members were present at the end of February.
- This new group was discovered at the end of January. It consists of adult subordinate females Fleabag (VGDF005), Juliet (VGDF009), Shelby (VGDF022), and yearling subordinate females Tuna Fish II (VGDF026) and Poki (VGDF029) from Gold Diggers and yearling males Asani (VUBM045), Rufaro (VUBM046), Kwame (VUBM047) and Jayvin (VUBM048) from Ubuntu.
- Dominance has not been settled yet, as the group has not been visited regularly and so we have not been able to notice minimal dominance behaviour.
- One of the females gave birth in January. We believe it was Fleabag but cannot be entirely sure as we had not been able to identify the individuals with a transponder reader yet.
- They had an encounter with juvenile female Coffee (VLF297) from Lazuli on the 6th.
- Just before that, they also had an inter-group interaction on the same day with all of Lazuli.
- No group splits were recorded this month.
- All individuals seem to be in good health.

Namaqua (LHM):

- Only 3 out of 7 members remained at the end of February. As these are all males, Namaqua can technically no longer be considered a group.
- Sub-adult subordinate male Calen Du Lee (VNQM035) has not been seen since the 28th of January. Dominant female Mia (VNQF027) has been missing since the 10th. Sub-adult subordinate females Mirabel (VNQF034) and Pika-Magenta-Sloan (VNQF036) disappeared from the group on the 22nd.
- No encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits were seen in February.
- The last remaining individuals all show signs of tuberculosis. Dominant male Shandy (VHMM023) has an inguinal lump and 2 small submandibular ones. Yearling subordinate male Love (VBSM003) has an inguinal and a submandibular lump. Yearling subadult male Bruno (VNQM037) has 2 submandibular lumps, a small lump under his eye, is very lethargic and has lost a lot of weight.

Runaways (LHM):

- 16 out of 18 members were present at the end of February.

- Sub-adult subordinate female Shallan (VRWF013) left on the 11th and her littermate Lift (VRWF014) on the 23rd. Both remain absent at the end of the month.
- Dominant female Bigwig (VMPF022) and subordinate female Elsa (VRWF002) both gave birth in February. No pups have emerged yet.
- Runaways had no encounters; inter-group interactions or group splits recorded this month.
- All individuals seem to be in good health.

Vetkoeks (LHM):

- All 7 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Dominant female Mooncake (VHMF053) is officially pregnant.
- Male dominance is still unsettled.
- Pup Mooncupcake (VVKP001) disappeared from the group between the 21st of January and the 7th of February. It has been given its Last Seen this month.
- No encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits were seen this month.
- All individuals appear healthy.
- We put a radio collar on Mooncake and are now able to invest more time in the habituation of the pups. All 3 eat egg and are getting used to being followed and touched.

Habituation Groups:

Hakuna Matata (HAB):

- Hakuna Matata were not seen this month.

Make-e-Plan (HAB):

- All 20 individuals were present at the end of February.
- Dominant female Bridget (VQLF011) gave birth and 2 pups have been observed.
- No encounters, inter-group interactions and group splits were observed in February.
- The group's habituation is classed as *In Progress*. Most of the group are interested in eating egg, some being almost too eager, and the next focus is to get them habituated to grooms, which the younger individuals are very wary of. We are also working on approaching the group in the evenings. Some of the group are fine with our arrival, while others panic, so we clearly need to invest time in this. Subadult subordinate male Jude (VMPM071) is still the wariest individual and will stay approximately 10-20 m away from observers at all times.
- All individuals in the group appear to be healthy.

Phoenix (HAB):

- Phoenix have been visited multiple times in February. During those visits we have seen approximately 10-14 individuals within the group.
- Of the litter that was born to the unknown female last month, 4 have emerged. 2 of the 4 eat egg, so consistency is key to their habituation.

- The group's habituation status is still *In Progress*. We are currently trying to get them habituated to the presence of a cage as well as getting them to eat egg. One female, one juvenile and possibly 2 of pups are eating egg and we hope to eventually habituate them to the cage in order to capture them and outfit an individual with a radio collar on one of the older individuals.
- All individuals at Phoenix appeared to be healthy.

Trackie-Daks (HAB):

- 20 out of 21 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Pup Kleine Krab (VTDM026) has been given his Last Seen on the 24th of February, when his absence was first noted.
- There were no encounters, inter-group interactions, or group splits observed during the month.
- The habituation level is currently *In Progress*. Habituation efforts are focused on dominant male Coquillet (VTSM014) and Moon-Moon (VTSM022). Neither have been weighed in February, but Coquillet is fine when observers sit near him at the burrow and nearly climbed into the scale for water. Moon-Moon is unbothered by being followed, while Coquillet will not allow follows closer than 3-10m. The 3 pups from subordinate female Hachi's (VWF238) litter have been fully habituated; they eat egg, drink water and are good with hands.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

The following author contributed to this report:

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