



The Meerkatter

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

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Who Runs the World?

Here at the Kalahari Research Project, data collection of the meerkats is of the utmost importance. Over the last 30 years, we have recorded the comings and goings of many groups and the rise and fall of many dominants. In this article I will be looking at the youngest and oldest ages that a meerkat became dominant of a group.

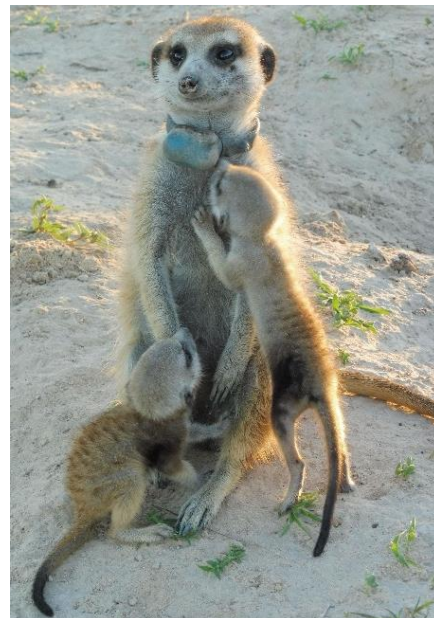
Subordinate females have various ways to become dominant. Though very seldom, they can usurp dominance in their natal group by evicting the current dominant female. More often, they can become dominant by branching out (usually not by choice, but by eviction from the dominant female) and form their own group. Or when the current dominant female dies, the power vacuum results in dominance competitions and assertions. This would ultimately lead to one female obtaining the role of dominant, and the way we record it is when she receives direct submissions from more than half the eligible females in the group.

Males have a different situation. Dominant males can lose their dominance in the same way that females can, by eviction from a subordinate (typically their brother or a male who immigrated with him into the current group) or by death. However, they can also be kicked out of their group by a roving male tries to take over dominance of the group.

The youngest male to become dominant in a group was sub-adult male Polon (VJXM095). He was a very large meerkat for his age category, and the oldest of the Lazuli group at the time, which is why we suspect he was able to obtain dominance at an early age. He was 8 months old, just a sub-adult. He immigrated into Lazuli on the 9th of January 2017 and assumed dominance two days later thanks to the departure of former dominant male LL Cool J (VLM207). He lasted as dominant male until the 13th of December 2019, when he was found predated.

The female meerkat to become dominant of a group at the youngest age was subadult female Kinkaju (VCKF002). She became dominant at Chalibonkas at the age of 6 months because she was the only viable female. Other females who became dominant at 6 months were Attenborough (VMYF005) at Mayans and Firefly (VTYF042) at Toyota. The reason Kinkaju takes the crown for being the youngest meerkat to become dominant, is because Attenborough and

Firefly missed out by a few days, with Attenborough coming second in the race.



Lazuli dominant male Polon (VJXM095) in 2018 with Lazuli dominant female Filthy McNasty's (VLF223) litter. Photo Credit: Laura Salamone, Friends of the Kalahari

Now on to the golden glories, the meerkats that became dominant at the oldest age. Firstly, we have the males. The two males that became dominant at more than 100 months (or 8.3 years) of age, are Zaphod (VVM032) and (S)tinker (VYM005). Adult male Zaphod had three dominance tenures at Whiskers, from 2001 until 2007. In 2007, when he was 8.8 years old, he left Whiskers. After a few encounters with the group Aztecs, he joined the group and, at the age of 8.9, he became dominant male of this group on the 29th of September 2007. He stayed dominant of this group from September until March 2011. Adult male (S)tinker, however, takes the cake. He became dominant of Balrog on the 19th of September 2005, at the age of 9.3. He had already been dominant at the groups Vivian and Gattaca, but that did not stop his streak. He unfortunately did not keep this dominant status at Balrog for long, because he was given his last seen at the end of 2005.

If (S)tinker takes the cake, adult female Monkulus (VWF063) takes the cherry on the top. She became dominant at the wonderful age of 9.9. She was dominant at Mayans until she was left behind one day in 2013. She was only dominant at Mayans for one

month, but she still gets the glory as the oldest recorded meerkat to gain dominance at a group in the whole run of this project.

Honorary mentions for the longest dominance streak are adult female Morgause (VAF005) who was dominant at Young Ones for 8.4 years, adult male Brea (VLM157) at Whiskers for 8.7 years (still ongoing), and last but certainly not least, adult female Mabili (VDF005) who was dominant female at the group Drie Doring for a whopping 10.5 years. She was chased away by her daughter, adult female Makonkie (VDF089), who then became dominant of Drie Doring. Mabili was then given her last seen on the 19th of January 2006.

There we have the rundown of the very impressive dominants of the Kalahari Meerkat Project. We will continue to monitor these great creatures and document their lives.

Meerkat Fight Club

The first rule of meerkat fight club is you do not talk about meerkat fight club. The second rule of meerkat fight club is you write a whole article about meerkat fight club. Inter-group interactions, or IGIs for short, are when two different meerkat groups come face to face with one another. Once that happens, chaos ensues, and what may have started off as a calm session suddenly turns into a frantic attempt to record every single behavior that is going on.

Here at the Kalahari Meerkat Project, we currently have more groups in rotation than we have ever had at any point in the past. With more groups comes more congested territories, and a higher likelihood of groups running into each other. Over the past month, we have witnessed a total of three IGIs. While this number may seem small, IGIs are generally a very rare sight, with meerkat groups usually just staying within the confines of their own territory. With that context out of the way, let us look at the IGIs that took place this month.



Dominant female Baloo (VJXF080) with some group members of Jaxx checking out the lay of the land on Lonely Farm. Photo Credit: Life History Coordinator Annelise van Eeden

Our opening match is between Jaxx and an unknown group. On the 9th, an observer was going about their usual morning with Jaxx when the group suddenly started climbing onto vantage points to gaze down at something unseen by the observer. Upon moving closer, he spotted a group of four meerkats, two of which appeared to be juveniles. Before he could approach any closer and look for more individuals, the group started chasing the individuals, moving so fast that the observer quickly lost sight of them. While looking for the group, the observer came across four individuals who had been separated from the rest of the group amidst all the chaos. Within five minutes though, both the observer and the individuals were reunited with the rest of the group, who were now foraging once more, content with having chased off the intruders. The origin of this group of unknowns remains a mystery to us. Jaxx forage in an area quite far from the rest of our groups, with the nearest known group being Runaways who have a territory approximately 2-3 km away, and so any meerkat groups found close to them are most likely a group of wild meerkats.

Next up on the match card is the IGI that took place on the 30th between Gold Diggers and Dik-Diks. Dik-Diks are one of our newer formed groups comprised of females from Gold Diggers and males from Ubuntu. The group have settled in a precarious territory that overlaps with both Lazuli and Gold Diggers. We suspect Dik-Diks had IGIs with both groups in January, when the group was unknown, and we could not identify the individuals within it. There was no confusion about whether they had an IGI this time though!

Two observers were with Gold Diggers, who were foraging near a well-known Dik-Diks hang out spot in the evening. The large group of Gold Diggers had split into smaller groups to forage more effectively, while remaining close-by to one another. Dik-Diks emerged, sensing their opportunity, tried to run off the smaller subgroup by war-dancing at them. This tactic worked for all of a few seconds until the rest of Gold Diggers returned. No match for a full-strength Gold Diggers, Dik-Diks wisely retreated and are once more at the fringes of Gold Diggers territory.

And finally, our main event! On the 21st, age old rivals Elrond's Council and Alba met once more. These two groups have had IGIs with each other six separate times prior to this meeting. Elrond's Council, with their superior numbers and contingent of adult meerkats, have always had the upper hand, but times have changed since January. Four Elrond's Council males defected into Alba, providing Alba with the numerical advantage for the first time in their short history as a group. They had one IGI on the 17th of February after this swap, but this IGI was, to quote Masters student Zoe Turner; "A bit pathetic!". Both groups ran around before both retreating, with nobody coming out the winner. However, the next encounter gave a clear and definite winner.



Elrond's Council dominant female Snoop Kat (VECF039) with a feather on her nose stands sentinel while pregnant, a few days after an inter-group interaction with Alba. Photo Credit: Zurich Manager Maahir Jusabani

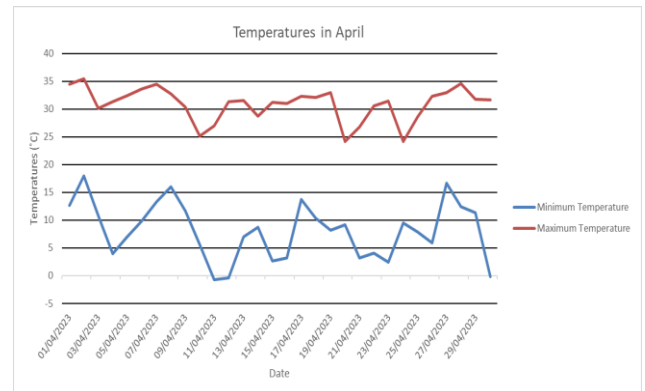
On the morning of the 21st, an observer was with Elrond's Council as they moved south, towards their former territory that had been claimed by Alba. Without warning, the group all stood bipedal, gazing at their archrivals Alba, who were 30m away. Suddenly, the chase was on! This time it was extremely one-sided as Elrond's Council pursued Alba for approximately 400m, stopping constantly to mark copiously at bolt holes on the way, victoriously reclaiming their territory back from Alba. Alba have since been staying in old Namaqua territory, and are yet to try and go back to challenge the mighty Elrond's.

And these are all the inter-group interactions of April, with Jaxx, Gold Diggers and Elrond's Council all coming out victorious. These interactions have a huge impact on the groups, as seen with Alba and Dik-Diks rapidly changing their foraging territory. As resources are scarcer to come by during the lean winter months, who knows where our groups will move next in search of good forage, and which groups they will encounter.

Pregnancies in April 2023

Females pregnant in April	8
Females who aborted	1
Females who gave birth, litters lost	2
Females who gave birth, litter emerged	1
Females who gave birth, unknown outcome	1
Females still pregnant at the end of the month	3

Weather at the KMP



The temperatures in April are showing the changing seasons. There have been very warm days, where the average maximum temperature for the whole month was 30.9°C, and quite cold days, with the average minimum temperature being 8.1°C. The coldest day was the 11th at -0.7°C and the hottest day was 35.4°C, on the 2nd. The total rainfall was 3 mm for the month, which shows the decrease in rainfall that the winter season brings.

April 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 April.
- Male dominance is still unknown, but there has been some dominance behaviour from adult subordinate males Milo (VECM034) and Survivor (VECM042).
- Dominant female Snoop Kat (VECF039) is officially pregnant.
- Elrond's Council had no encounters, or group splits observed this month.
- They did have one inter-group interactions with Alba on the 21st.
- All individuals at Elrond's Council seem to be in good health.

Gold Diggers (FDC):

- There were 18 out of 19 members present at the end of April.
- Sub-adult subordinate female Triss Merigold (VGDF045) left the group on the 20th and was still absent at the end of this month.
- They had no encounters or group splits this month.
- One inter-group interaction was observed this month, with Dik-Diks, on the 30th.
- All the individuals at Gold Diggers appear to be in good health.

Jaxx (FDC):

- All 22 meerkats were present at Jaxx at the end of April.
- Only one pup from Baloo's litter was marked, pup Jaxx Spratt (VJXP183).
- Yearling subordinate female Quetzal (VJXF163) and Jaxx Spratt were given their Last Seen this month. Sub-adult subordinate male VJXM175 was moved to the group unknown, because he disappeared at the end of the breeding season, so he has been given two months until his Last Seen.
- Adult subordinate female Jub Jub (VJXF160) was made officially pregnant this month.
- Adult subordinate male Cigarette Smoking Man (VJXM153) and yearling subordinate male Howard Moon (VJXM165) left the group for a short period and returned back to the group on the same day.
- No encounters and group splits were observed at Jaxx this month.
- There was one inter-group interaction between them and an unknown group of individuals on the 9th of April.
- All individuals at Jaxx seem to be in good health.

Lazuli (FDC):

- All 27 individuals were present at the end of April.
- Both sub-adult subordinate male Heimdall (VLM295) and juvenile subordinate female Freya (VLF299) were given their Last Seen this month, after leaving the group in March.

- Sub-Adult subordinate male Thor (VLM292) possibly left the group on the 6th of this month, because he did not wake up with the group on the 7th but was found foraging with the group in the afternoon of the 7th.
- Lazuli had no encounters or inter-group interactions observed this month.
- They had three daily group splits on the 9th, 12th, and 13th as well as one overnight group split on the 9th.
- All individuals seem to be in good health.

Side Quest (FDC):

- All 11 meerkats were present at the end of the month.
- Yearling subordinate female Brie (VSIF005) was given her Last Seen this month. Yearling subordinate male Sam (VSIM001) was emigrated out of the group but is yet to be given his Last Seen.
- There were no encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits recorded this month.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

Ubuntu (FDC):

- 18 out of 19 individuals present at the end of the month.
- Dominant female Cthulhu (VUBF035) died at the start of this month, on the 5th, after being hit by a truck on the main road outside of the reserve.
- Pup Whippersnapper (VUBM065) was given his Last Seen this month.
- Adult subordinate male Captain Barbosa (VLM265) appeared to the group on the 1st of April but was chased off by the dominant male Greebo (VHMM048).
- No encounters or inter-group interactions were observed at Ubuntu this month.
- There were two daily group splits this month, one on the 13th and one on the 17th of April.
- The meerkats at Ubuntu appear to be in good health.

Whiskers (FDC):

- There are a total of 26 meerkats present at Whiskers at the end of the month.
- Of the litters born to yearling subordinate females Crunchie (VWF250) and Flake (VWF247), three pups have emerged and been marked.
- The group has had no encounters or inter-group interactions this month.
- They had two daily group splits this month, on the 27th and 29th, and an overnight split on the 24th.
- All individuals at Whiskers seem to be healthy at the end of the month.

Zulus (FDC):

- All 10 individuals were present at the end of April.
- The group had no encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits this month.
- All individuals in Zulus appear to be healthy.

Life History Monitoring Groups:

Alba (LHM):

- All 17 individuals were present at the end of April.
- Adult subordinate male Palestrina (VLM211) left the group on the 8th before returning to the group on the same day.
- Alba had no encounters or group splits this month.
- Alba had one inter-group interaction with Elrond's Council on the 21st.
- All individuals appear healthy.

Brussels Sprouts (LHM):

- All 8 individuals were present at the end of April.
- Pup Pocket Dinosaur (VBSP010) was determined to have left the group last month and was given her Last Seen this month.
- 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):

- 12 out of 13 members were present at the end of this month.
- There is still unsettled dominance at this group, with no direct submissions having been observed by observers of either males or females.
- Adult subordinate female Poki (VGDF029) was missing from the group on the 10th and has yet to return.
- There have been no encounters or group splits observed this month.
- Dik-diks had an inter-group interaction with Gold Diggers on the 30th.
- Habituation at this group is considered *Advanced Progress*. Adult subordinate females Fleabag (VGDF005), Juliet (VGDF009) and Shelby (VGDF022) have all been habituation individuals since their time in Gold Diggers. Fleabag has improved and is consistently weighable but is wary of observers closer than 1m. Juliet and Shelby are both difficult to weigh and watch observers who are closer than 2-5m. Juliet will go bipedal for water though.
- All individuals seem to be in good health.

Runaways (LHM):

- 16 out of 16 members were present at the end of April.
- Yearling subordinate female Adolin (VRWF012) gave birth on the 2nd. However, with the group changing burrows and no lactations seen, that litter is considered to be born and lost before emergence. Dominant female Bigwig (VMPF022) was made officially pregnant at the start of the month and gave birth on the 26th, with the outcome of the litter currently unknown.
- Runaways had no encounters; inter-group interactions or group splits recorded this month.
- All individuals seem to be in good health.

Vetkoeks (LHM):

- 8 out of 10 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Male dominance is still unsettled.
- 4 pups emerged as part of dominant female Mooncake's (VHMM053) litter. Unfortunately, pup Thestral (VVKP005) was seen being taken down a sleeping burrow by a yellow mongoose and has not been seen since. Pups Seabiscuit (VVKP006) and Arvak (VVKP007) also disappeared on the 20th and 17th, leaving pup Flicka (VVKF008) as the only remaining pup in the litter.
- No encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits were seen this month.
- All individuals appear healthy.

Habituation Groups:

Cape Crusaders (HAB):

- Dominance at this group is currently unknown.
- Pups Saturn (VCCP001), Ariane (VCCP002) and Soyuz (VCCP003) from the litter in March went missing at the end of the month and were given their Last Seen this month. This leaves just 1 pup remaining from that litter.
- The habituation level of this group is classed as *In Progress*. The adult females of this group are already habituated. Most habituation work is focused on the adult males and juveniles, who remain the wariest of observers. The pup is well habituated and will constantly investigate the scale on their own.
- The group's individuals appear to be healthy.

Hakuna Matata (HAB):

- Hakuna Matata were not seen this month.

Make-e-Plan (HAB):

- All 19 individuals were present at the end of April.
- Dominant female Bridget (VQLF011) gave birth at the start of the month. However, with no lactations recorded and the group moving burrows soon after, this litter is deemed born and lost before emergence.
- Pup Kelsier (VMPP090) disappeared from the group on the 3rd and was subsequently given its Last Seen later in the month.
- No encounters, inter-group interactions and group splits were observed in April.
- The group's habituation is classed as *In Progress*. The group has improved well and most individuals barring yearling subordinate male Jude (VMPP071) can be weighed. The group have also improved with evening approaches and are rarely startled. Longer morning follows are being implemented to habituate the group to having observers around. Jude still is not comfortable having observers closer than 10m while foraging but can be approached as close as 1m while at the sleeping burrow.
- All individuals in the group appear to be healthy.

Phoenix (HAB):

- Phoenix have been visited multiple times in April. During those visits we have seen approximately 10-11 individuals within the group.
- The group's habituation status is still *In Progress*. This month we have mainly focused on distance training, in order to have them let observers approach closer and observe their behaviour. We also try to get them to consistently eat egg, of which there is currently one juvenile that will consistently eat egg.
- All individuals at Phoenix appeared to be healthy.

Trackie-Daks (HAB):

- 23 out of 25 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- 6 pups emerged as part of dominant female Fly's (VWF237) litter. However, Pup Biekie Baker (VTDP030) disappeared on the 10th and was given their Last Seen at the end of the month. Pups Combat (VTDP031) and Popcorn (VTDP032) also went missing this month and are yet to be seen as of the end of the month.
- There were no encounters, inter-group interactions, or group splits observed during the month.
- The habituation level is currently *In Progress*. Habituation efforts are still currently focused on dominant male Coquillet (VTSM014) and Moon-Moon (VTSM022). Coquillet has good habituation days where he will allow observers 2-3m away when followed, but Moon-Moon is unbothered by being followed. Moon-Moon has improved this month and has been able to be weighed more consistently. We have also been focusing habituation efforts on the pups, who all enjoy an egg reward but need improvement on hand habituation.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

Sub-groups:

Ubuntu 4 (SUB):

- On the 13th, dominant female Magali (VUBF023) was found waking up with adult subordinate male Shandy (VHMM023) and yearling subordinate male Love (VBSM003).
- Magali had been given her Last Seen after disappearing from Ubuntu last year on the 8th of July.
- The sub-group will become an official group next month if they stay together for at least a month now that we are out of the breeding season.
- Both Shandy and Love are displaying symptoms of tuberculosis (TB). We believe they contracted this from their previous group Namaqua.

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