



The Meerkatter

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

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The Next Bachelorette

There have been many meerkat groups over the years at the Kalahari Meerkat Project. At groups where there are no dominant duos, observers have found that the dominant individual seems to survive well enough. In this article I will discuss the various current groups that have had extended periods where the dominant partner is absent.

The first example is when four of the males at Elrond's Council left their group after an inter-group interaction with Alba on the 19th of January and joined Alba on the 26th of January 2023. The dominant male at Alba at the time, Godric (VZUM053), fought for his spot, but lost his dominant status to adult male Pucky (VECM023). At the time of writing, there has been no known dominant male at Elrond's Council, or any direct submissions observed. Dominant female Snoop Kat (VECF039) has managed to get pregnant by an unknown male, and after the birth of the pups, the group has been very involved in babysitting and pup feeding, especially considering there is only one other female; yearling subordinate female, Mojo Jojo (VECF038) who has not started allolactating.

Interestingly, previous dominant male of Elrond's Council, Palestrina (VLM211) was dominant at Elrond's Council from 2019, but when he left with Pucky and the other Elrond's Council males, he had to forfeit his dominant status because all the other eligible males of the group submitted to Pucky. A possible reason why he would leave the group where he was dominant, to lose his dominant status to a subordinate male, is because Snoop Kat may be his daughter and he would want to avoid inbreeding if possible.

The next dominant female who has been in charge with no partner is dominant female Spruddel (VZUF028) at Zulus. The previous dominant male, Scuzi (VWM213) became dominant in February of 2020, but after two years as dominant, did not wake up with the group in October of 2022. Since then, Spruddel has been alone in the dominant position at Zulus. She has been living a good bachelorette life since then, mating with Gold Digger's subordinate adult male Rogelio de la Vega (VGDM014) on the 16th of November 2020 and other possible males, because she gave birth to pups Sifiso (VZUM069) and Leona (VZUF070), (affectionately known by the observers as The Unit because of her large size when she first emerged on the 28th of January 2023).

She has kept control of the subordinate females in the group, Salazar (VZUF051), Helga (VZUF052) and Rowena (VZUF054), evicting them when they became pregnant or when she was pregnant, and allowing them back into the group when she had given birth and needed helpers to help raise the pups.



Dominant female Spruddel (VZUF028) from Zulus watching the sunset with subordinate yearling male Robin (VZUM066) while pregnant with Sifiso (VZUM069) and Leona (aka The Unit) (VZUF070). Photo credit: Senior observer James Robertshaw

The next group we are looking at is Vetkoeks. Vetkoeks was created in September 2022 and dominant female Mooncake (VHMF053) has been dominant since the other eligible females left the group in November 2022. She has given birth to two litters, possibly fathered from any of the males in the group, since they are not from the same natal groups. She has raised both litters as the only female of the group, but of the most recent litter, none of the pups have survived. This is possibly due to neglect, but most likely predation, because at least one of the pups, Thestral (VVKP005), was seen to be predated by a yellow mongoose on the 14th of April 2023.

On the flip side, when dominant female, Bigwig (VMPF022) of Runaways, was predated on the 19th

of May 2023, dominant male Shiraz (VJXM122) became a lone dominant. Previously, when he had to be weighed, he would readily bite observers' fingers when the scale was out. However, since Bigwig has died, Shiraz has become more placid and has been quite good with being weighed. We are unsure why he is behaving in this way, but it may be because of general habituation. Bigwig's daughter, adult subordinate female Angel (VRWF004) has been acting dominant and asserting dominance over the other subordinates in the group. She has, however, not become officially dominant female yet. This may be bad news for Shiraz because she is most likely his daughter and therefore, he will avoid mating with her if possible. We do not know what the outcome of this will be, if he will leave, and how it will affect the group dynamics.

Well-known and established dominant female Sigma (VLF230) of Lazuli was bitten on the head by a puff adder on the 5th of May. She did not go below with the group in the evening, and her body was recovered the next day. Five days later, adult female Dumpling (VLF272) received enough submissions to become current dominant female of Lazuli. Dominant male Odin (VLM266) is now in a conundrum because Dumpling is probably his daughter, so we do not know if he will try to leave the group and join a group where he will have eligible females to mate with.

Another dominant male who lost his dominant female was dominant male Shandy (VHMM023) at Namaqua. More information will be given in the next article, *Randy Shandy*.

It is interesting to note how the dominant individuals behave after their partners have left or died. In my opinion, the dominant individuals will stay in the group where they have a dominant position (and no dominant partner has been established yet), unless they are evicted or in Palestrina's case, leave of their own accord. The groups that have no dominant males possibly rely on wild individuals or roving males from neighbouring groups for the continuation of their genetics and group. Which of the groups will be next to lose their dominant meerkat, and how will their partners survive? We will keep observing them to find out.

Randy Shandy

This article will be a celebration of dominant male Shandy (VHMM023) from Near-Death Experience. He, along with subadult subordinate male Love (VBSM001), did not wake up on the 23rd of May 2023. This left their newly immigrated dominant female Magali (VUBF023) to fend for herself once more. She had joined Shandy and Love on the 13th of April 2023 after the males were roving for a while.

Shandy's life was an interesting one. He was born into Hakuna Matata, along with litter mates Macavity (aka Munchkin) (VHMF019), Duzzy (VHMU020), Shamrock (VHMM021), and Ace (VHMF022) on the 26th of September 2018.

He left Hakuna Matata on the 23rd of December and was seen with subordinate sub-adult male Pingu (VHMM017) and current dominant male of Hakuna Matata, Finnick (VLM234), acting as a trio. They tried to join Hakuna Matata together but were chased off. Shandy managed to rejoin Hakuna Matata but was seen leaving the group for the last time on the 24th of December 2019 (possibly to go buy some Christmas presents), and never came back to his natal group. He was just over a year old at this stage.

On the same day he left Hakuna Matata, observers saw him trying to join the group Ubuntu. For the next two months, he hopped between trying to join Ubuntu and Lazuli, mostly alone and always being chased away, or ignored by the whole group. He did sometimes 'recruit' other males to join him in his quest, such as Hakuna Matata sub-adult male Mugi (VHMM033) or Ubuntu adult male Shrew (VUBM018). Hanging out with Shandy is either incredibly good or bad luck, because Shrew ended up becoming dominant male of Gold Diggers, while Mugi was seen with Shandy at Ubuntu on the 27th of December 2019 and was never seen again.



Dominant male Shandy (VHMM023) of Namaqua standing in a field of devil's thorn flowers. Photo credit: Livio Flueeler

On the 14th of March 2020, Shandy's tenacity paid off and he was seen with Annie (VLF240) and Lennon (VLF246) going below at a sleeping burrow together, and the sub-group Lazuli 2 was created. However, on the 26th of March, the females returned to the parent group Lazuli. At first, Shandy was not accepted into the group, but he managed to join Lazuli on the 6th of April 2020 and stayed with the group until the 2nd of November 2021. In this time, he left many times, mostly with adult males Squeal (VLM251) and Slop (VLM253). He may have felt most drawn to Ubuntu because he was observed to have had many encounters with them in this period.

He even got Lennon and adult male Chūya (VLM276) to join him on one of his escapades.

As an interesting side note, Shandy even showed up on TV in Meerkat Manor: Rise of the Dynasty. He was part of Lazuli while the show was filming, and in the show, he was known as Randy Shandy, which is quite a fitting name.

When he left Lazuli, and was not accepted into Ubuntu, he, along with adult males Gurke (VHMM036) and Slop immigrated into the group Brussels Sprouts (then known as Make-e-Plan 4) on the 11th of December 2021. He became dominant of this group on the 19th of December 2021. While he was dominant male, there was a Brussels Sprouts litter born to either adult females Arabella (VMPPF035) or Vivienne (VMPPF038), which may indicate that he was the father. On the 21st of March 2022, Gurke and Shandy 'borrowed' three of the pups, females Totoro (VBSF001), Lyra (VBSF002) and male Love (VBSM003), when the pups were just two months old. The two adult males and three pups were found on the 29th of April 2022 and an unofficial sub-group was created, Brussels Sprouts 2 (unofficial because there were no eligible females in the group to be considered a proper sub-group).

While in this sub-group, Brussels Sprouts 2 had an inter-group interaction with Namaqua on the 5th of May 2022, probably because they were sharing similar territory. Shandy then also had individual encounters with Namaqua, while part of Brussels Sprouts 2. The sub-group disbanded on the 17th of June 2022, when Gurke, Totoro and Lyra all immigrated back into Brussels Sprouts. This left Shandy and Love as a dynamic duo of roving males. Shandy and Love had many encounters with Namaqua but managed to snag some Make-e-Plan females, because they were seen with adult females Cassie (VMPPF050), Sophie (VMPPF055), Archie (VMPPF057) and Hollie (VMPPF058) on the 9th of August 2022. They became the sub-group Make-e-Plan 5. However, the females always seem to leave Shandy, because these females returned to the Make-e-Plan parent group on the 18th of August, leaving Shandy and Love without a group once more.

As seen in this article, Shandy seemed to enjoy the bachelor lifestyle. I think he possibly chose to go out with a bang, by joining Namaqua, a group notorious for having tuberculosis (TB). He did become dominant male of the group on the 29th of August 2022, because there were no other eligible males, and he was displaying dominance behaviour. He took the dominant position alongside dominant female Manzai (VNQF013) and when Manzai possibly succumbed to TB, he stayed dominant while yearling female Mia (VNQF027) took over as dominant female. When she, along with the other females in the group, probably succumbed to TB, it left him, Love, and sub-adult subordinate male Bruno (VNQM037) as a band of roving males. Bruno disappeared on the 18th of March 2023.

In a weird twist of fate, Shandy and Love managed to attract a female, former Ubuntu adult female Magali

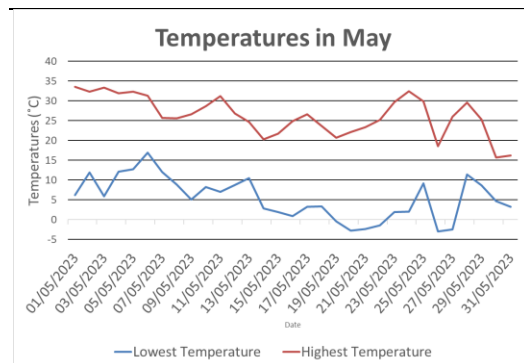
(VUBF023). They formed a sub-group, Ubuntu 4, and became an official group on the 13th of April 2023, where the group was called Near-Death Experience. The reason for this is because the male individuals in this group had a brush with death by joining the Namaqua group. Unfortunately, at the time, Shandy and Love were displaying symptoms of TB, and most probably succumbed to it around the 23rd of March 2023.

This is the very eventful life of Shandy. There were dwarves (dwarf-meerkats like Slop and Munchkin), giants (Shandy being amongst the largest of the weighed meerkats at the project, reaching weights of around 940g), kidnappings (or pup-nappings) and many damsels (sometimes in distress, sometimes not). My goal is to have a life as adventure filled as Shandy.

Pregnancies in May 2023

Females pregnant in May	2
Females who aborted	0
Females who gave birth, litters lost	1
Females who gave birth, litter emerged	1
Females who gave birth, unknown outcome	0
Females still pregnant at the end of the month	0

Weather at the KMP



The temperatures in May have been decreasing steadily. There was an unusually warm week at the end of May, oscillating with a huge drop in temperature. There was a storm with an unseasonable amount of rain, on the 7th and 29th, with 14.4mL and 8.4mL, respectively. The average maximum temperature was 26.7°C, and the average minimum temperature was 5.5°C. The warmest day was the 1st of May, with 33.6°C. The coldest day was the 26th, with -3.0°C.

May 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:

Brussels Sprouts (FDC):

- All 8 individuals were present at the end of May.
- Yearling subordinate female Totoro (VBSF002) left the group once on the 17th and returned on the same day. Adult male James (Sawyer) (VGDM011) left Brussels Sprouts twice on the 17th, once with Totoro and once alone, and returned the same day. He also left the group on the 20th of May and returned again shortly thereafter.
- One encounter with an unknown adult occurred on the 24th of May.
- No inter-group interactions or group splits were seen this month.
- All individuals at Brussels Sprouts seem to be in good health.
- Brussels Spouts is now a full data collection group and regular *Adlib* is being collected on the individuals, due to an increase in the volunteer team.

Elrond's Council (FDC):

- All 14 individuals were present at the end of May.
- Male dominance is still unknown, but there has been continuous dominance behaviour from adult subordinate males Milo (VECM034) and Survivor (VECM042). No direct submissions have been observed however, and we therefore can not confirm any new dominant male.
- Dominant female Snoop Kat (VECF039) gave birth on the 4th of May and 2 pups have emerged from this litter.

- Elrond's Council had no encounters, inter-group interactions or groups splits observed this month.
- All individuals at Elrond's Council seem to be in good health.

Gold Diggers (FDC):

- There were 17 out of 18 members present at the end of May.
- Sub-adult subordinate female Triss Merigold (VGDF045) has been given her Last Seen this month.
- Adult subordinate male Beatrice (VGDM014) left on the 15th of May and returned on the same day. Juvenile female Panash (VGDF052) left with sub-adult subordinate male Corndog (VGDM044) on the 20th, however, only Panash came back to the group, and Corndog is still absent at the end of this month.
- They had no encounters or group splits observed 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 May.
- Sub-adult subordinate male Pippens (VJXM175) was given his Last Seen this month.
- Adult subordinate female Jub Jub (VJXF160) gave birth on the 3rd of May, but the one pup that was seen, pup Vorpall Blade (VJXP184), from this litter was eaten by dominant female Baloo (VJXF080) on the 4th of May. Since Vorpall Blade did not emerge on its own, this litter was considered lost before emergence.
- 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):

- 26 individuals were present at the end of May.
- Former dominant female Sigma (VLF230) was bitten by a snake on the 5th. She did not go down with the group and her body was recovered the next day.
- The new dominant female is adult female Dumpling (VLF272) after receiving enough direct submissions on the 10th from the other eligible females in the group.
- Adult male Moteck (VLM261) did not wake up with the group on the 14th but returned to the group later in the morning of the 14th.
- Lazuli had no encounters observed this month.
- They had one inter-group interaction with Dik-Diks on the 14th of May.
- They had two daily group splits on the 7th and 26th of May.
- All individuals seem to be in good health.

Side Quest (FDC):

- All 11 meerkats were present at the end of the month.

- Yearling subordinate male Sam (VSIM001) was given his Last Seen this month.
- There were no encounters or group splits recorded this month.
- There was one inter-group interaction against Cape Crusaders on the 17th of May.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

Ubuntu (FDC):

- 17 out of 18 individuals present at the end of the month.
- After the death of former dominant female Cthulhu (VUBF035), adult females Agazoth (VUBF039) and Masekind (VUBF037) have received submissions from the other females in the group. The observers think that Agazoth is acting most dominant, anal-marking a lot and asserting dominance on the other Ubuntu individuals.
- Adult subordinate male Captain Barbosa (VLM265) was seen by observers on the 8th, 9th, and 11th of May. He did not go down with the group and only appeared to forage at the edge of the group, with none of the group members reacting.
- No encounters were observed at Ubuntu this month.
- There were 2 inter-group interactions between Ubuntu and Vetkoeks, both occurring on the 17th.
- There was one daily group split this month, on the 2nd of May.
- The meerkats at Ubuntu appear to be in good health.

Whiskers (FDC):

- There were 23 out of 26 meerkats present at Whiskers at the end of the month.
- Adult subordinate females Laika (VWF236), Emily Bronte (VWF243) and Crunchie (VWF250) as well as yearling subordinate female Candy Land (VWF256) left on the 30th of May and returned on the same day.
- Sub-adult subordinate female Thunderbird (VWF261) left on the 16th of May and sub-adult subordinate male Pit Lord (VWM260) left on the 3rd with both these individuals still absent at the end of this month. Thunderbird was bitten by a puff adder on her right rib on the 16th of May and was seen going below at the sleeping burrow. She was not seen again.
- Pup Cricket (VWM270) left on the 19th of May and was given his Last Seen on the 29th.
- The group has had no encounters or inter-group interactions this month.
- They had two daily group splits this month, on the 2nd and 25th.
- 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 May.
- 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 May.
- Yearling subordinate female Ganga (VALF005) and adult subordinate female Kilie (VECF036) left the group on the 23rd before returning to the group on the same day.
- Alba had no encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits this month.
- All individuals appear healthy.

Dik-Diks (LHM):

- 10 out of 10 members were present at the end of this month.
- The dominance status of this group has still not been settled, with no direct submissions having been observed by observers of either males or females.
- Adult subordinate female Poki (VGDF029) has been given her Last Seen, along with juvenile subordinate male Geralt (VDDM002) and yearling subordinate male Asani (VUBM045). Geralt went missing on the 6th of this month and Asani went missing on the last day of April.
- There have been no encounters or group splits observed this month.
- Dik-diks had an inter-group interaction with Lazuli on the 14th.
- Habituation at this group is considered *Advanced Progress*. The majority of the group is comfortable with being followed. However, adult subordinate females Fleabag (VGDF005), Juliet (VGDF009) and Shelby (VGDF022) are the least comfortable around observers, with the closest comfortable distance being 3 meters. The juveniles all readily eat egg. More hand habituation with the juveniles is necessary.
- All individuals seem to be in good health.

Runaways (LHM):

- 12 out of 17 members were present at the end of May.
- Dominant female Bigwig (VMPF022) gave birth in April and 4 pups emerged on the 18th of May.
- On the 19th of May, an observer went out to the group and found the predated body of Bigwig. The group had split, presumably after the predator attack, and adult subordinate female Elsa (VRWF002) and yearling subordinate female Hrairoo (VRWF008) as well as the 4 pups, Thunder (VRWP021), Flame (VRWP022), Fire (VRWP023) and Storm (VRWP024) were found alive near where Bigwig was found. Later the rest of the group was found, and adult female Angel (VRWF004) was collared. Angel has been acting as dominant. We have not made her officially dominant yet. We have lost track of Elsa and Hrairoo by the end of the month but before we did, the 4 pups were not seen anymore.
- Yearling subordinate male Kaladin (VRWM015) left on the 3rd, was briefly seen on the 18th, and then left the group again on the 19th of May. Dominant male Shiraz (VJXM122) left before the 25th and returned on the 25th.

- Thunder and Storm were given their Last Seen this month, as they were last seen on the 21st.
- At the end of this month, Elsa, Hrairoo, Fire and Flame, are still absent, along with Kaladin.
- Runaways had no encounters; inter-group interactions or group splits recorded this month.
- All individuals seem to be in good health.

Vetkoeks (LHM):

- 7 out of 8 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Male dominance is still unsettled.
- Pup Flicka (VVKF008) went missing on the 19th of May and is still absent at the end of the month.
- Pups Seabiscuit (VVKP006) and Arvak (VVKP007) have been given their Last Seen this month.
- No encounters or group splits were seen this month.
- There were two inter-group interactions with Ubuntu, both on the 17th of May.
- All individuals appear healthy.

Habituation Groups:

Cape Crusaders (HAB):

- Dominance at this group is currently unknown.
- Cape Crusaders had one inter-group interaction with Side Quest on the 17th of May.
- No encounters or group splits were observed.
- 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 group does not feel comfortable leaving the sleeping burrow when an observer is nearby.
- The group's individuals appear to be healthy.

Make-e-Plan (HAB):

- All 19 individuals were present at the end of May.
- No inter-group interactions or group splits were observed in May.
- An encounter with an unknown adult meerkat occurred on the 19th of May.
- The group's habituation is classed as *In Progress*. The group has improved and most individuals barring yearling subordinate male Jude (VMPM071) can be weighed. Longer morning follows have been implemented to habituate the group to having observers around. Thus far the group does not mind observers walking between the group members while they forage. However, the habituation of Jude has possibly regressed. He stays a minimum of 10m away, and as far away as 50m while observers are doing follows. At the sleeping burrow, he is more comfortable and will sometimes allow observers as close as 1-2m from him.
- All individuals in the group appear to be healthy.

Phoenix (HAB):

- Phoenix have been visited multiple times in May. During those visits we have seen approximately 12-14 individuals within the group.

- The group's habituation status is still *In Progress*. We focused on distance training this month. The group is more comfortable with observers when the observers stand near the group, at about 4-5m, as well as arm movements from observers. However, the group does not like leg movements, and will bolt when observers crouch. There is still only one juvenile that will consistently eat egg.
- All individuals at Phoenix appeared to be healthy.

Trackie-Daks (HAB):

- 22 out of 23 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Pups Combat (VTDP031) and Popcorn (VTDP032) were given their Last Seen this month, after being absent from April.
- Yearling subordinate female Flatsen (VTDF018) left the group around the 13th of May and was found foraging with the group again on the 16th. Sub-adult subordinate male Chipmunk (VTDM027) left around the 12th of May and has not returned to the group at the end of this month. He had submandibular lumps and wounds around his neck before he disappeared.
- There were no encounters, inter-group interactions, or group splits observed during the month.
- The habituation level is currently *In Progress*. Dominant male Coquilletette (VTSM014) is still the focus of habituation. All other individuals are consistent in all other aspects of habituation, including Moon-Moon (VTSM022) as he has been better with weighing, marking, hand habituation, egg, and water. Coquilletette is most comfortable at the sleeping burrow or if observers stay around 3m away. He does allow observers to touch him, and he does sometimes drink water, but is wary of the scale. The habituation of the pups has also gone well. There is only one pup, VTDP035, that needs hand habituation. She eats egg but will not let observers touch her.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

Disintegrated Groups:

Near-Death Experience:

- Only dominant female Magali (VUBF023) is still alive. Adult male Shandy (VHMM023) and yearling subordinate male Love (VBSM003) were tracked using Shandy's radio collar and did not emerge from their sleeping burrow on the 23rd of May, and after checking in the evening again using Shandy's collar, were thus presumed dead. They were displaying symptoms of tuberculosis (TB). We believe they succumbed to TB.
- The sub-group became an official group on the 13th of May. However, now that the males are dead, the group has disintegrated.

The following author contributed to this report:

Annelise van Eeden, Life History Coordinator