



The Meerkatter

The Friends of the Kalahari Meerkat Project Report - www.kalahari-meerkats.com - February 2024

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All eyes on her

As with every breeding season, many new pups have made their first appearance into the KMP meerkat population. Dominant females have been indeed very busy. Pregnancy after pregnancy, observers have seen dominant females looking more and more like balloons. But it is not only the dominant females' bellies that are growing. Subordinate females have been also busy this season. Profiting of their dominant's inability to constantly monitor them, they managed to sneakily mate either with unrelated males living in the same group, or with roving males from other groups (1). However, they could not hide for long their misdeeds. At Zulus, adult subordinate females Salazar (VZUF051), Helga (VZUF052) and Rowena (VZUF054) showed first signs of pregnancies in mid-December. At Dik-Diks, adult subordinate female Shelby's (VGDF022) chunkiness was visible at the end of December as well as for Lazuli's adult subordinate female Tuna Fish IV (VLF283). And dominant females did not ignore these signs.

Pregnancies of subordinate females represent a serious cost for dominant females. Helpers do not discriminate between pups born to the dominant female and those born to other subordinates and will readily feed all pups, independent of who the mother is. This means that there is higher competition between foraging pups for access to helpers (2), and every pup's daily weight gain is reduced (3), which consequently reduces their survival chance. It is therefore in the dominant female's best interest to suppress any reproductive attempts of subordinates, thus ensuring the survival of her own pups.

What happens if there is no control of subordinate females' breeding at all? We observed such a scenario at Whiskers. Since former dominant female Luna (VWF235) was last seen in December 2023, leaving the dominant female position vacant, over the course of two months all eight adult Whiskers females have been pregnant, yet no pups ever emerged. As the group changed burrows several times and no consistent sign of lactation was observed, we have assumed that none of the litters survived.

At Zulus, pregnant dominant female Spruddel (VZUF028) did not waste any time. By the end of December 2023, within a few days, she had evicted Salazar, Rowena and Helga, as well as adult subordinate female Spoekies (VZUF062), who still

did not show any sign of transgression. Evictions are usually very stressful moments for subordinates, the risk to abort or to interrupt the conception therefore increases (4). Rowena has not been seen since her eviction. Salazar and Helga on the other hand have been spotted again later in time: Helga was seen mid-January as having given birth during an opportunistic sighting, while Salazar during an encounter in February appeared slim and non-pregnant but showed signs of lactation. While we cannot draw any conclusion on their litters' survival, with these evictions Spruddel prevented any possible competition for her future pups, but in doing so she also lost four helpers in her group.

Dik-Dik's dominant female Juliet (VGDF009) chose a different approach. Mid-January, once Shelby's growing belly was difficult to ignore, Juliet who was also highly pregnant at the time, evicted the transgressive subordinate. But, after Juliet's pregnancy ended without success on the 11th of January, she probably saw no loss in accepting back Shelby on the 2nd of February. It was clear, Shelby had given birth, as she had lost weight and was showing signs of lactation. However, we did not know whether she had given birth in or out of the group. After a few weeks, four pups emerged, which we can only assign to be Shelby's offspring.



Baloo's litter at Jaxx. Photo Credit: Megan Huggins, Meerkat Volunteer.

At Jaxx, new dominant female Jub Jub (VJXF160) was not able to fully control her subordinates' breeding, as is often the case immediately after a new female ascends to the dominant position (1). Adult subordinate female Baloo (VJXF080) and yearling subordinate females Miss Tick (VJXF173) and Qhawekazi (VJXF180) became pregnant. While Qhawekazi aborted, Baloo was able to give birth to four pups who are currently being fed by the group members together with Jub Jub's pups.

Lazuli dominant female Dumpling (VLF272) also showed signs of mercy towards adult subordinate female Tuna Fish IV (VLF283) or did not realize that the returning female had brought some pups with her. Tuna Fish IV was accepted back into the group appearing slim and lactating on the 5th of February, just a few days after Dumpling had given birth on the 28th of January. Both Dumpling and Tuna Fish IV most probably gave birth during the same week. When eight pups emerged it was our best guess to assume that the two litters had been mixed up. For us it was not possible to know which pup belonged to which female, most probably also Dumpling could not recognize her own pups. Now both Jaxx and Lazuli have to face the challenging task of rearing up not one, but two litters at the same time. Whether all pups will survive their first critical months of life remains an open question.



6 of 8 pups at Lazuli and a very busy helper. Photo credit: Megan Huggins, Meerkat Volunteer.

But what about him?

During the last months groups have experienced the loss of many dominant females. At Cape Crusaders, dominant female Sky's (VSIF003) was assumed predated as her body remains were found in February, while Alba dominant female Tolkien (VECF019) died following a snake bite at the end of January. Before that, Make-e-Plan's dominant female Bridget (VQLF011) was last seen in early January, and Trackie Daks' dominant female Fly (VWF237) was found dead at the end of December. The loss of a dominant individual may have important

implications for the stability of the group, as was the case at Make-e-Plan. The group was not able to keep together anymore, with most individuals emigrating and joining the subgroup Gold Diggers 4. But what happens to the dominant male once his partner goes missing?



Coquillette looking into the distance at Trackie-Daks. Photo credits: Whitney Fourie, Meerkat Volunteer.

Adult subordinate male Palestrina (VLM211), AKA the former dominant male at Alba, is a good example of how the loss of a dominant female may result in a profound change in the dominance hierarchy of a group. Palestrina, at the ripe old age of 10 years, has collected some impressive dominance experience. Firstly, at Zulus, where he immigrated in 2016, he took control of the group for over three years until he left to join Elrond's Council In 2019. There he was able to gain dominance and keep it for another three years, when he left once more and this time immigrated into Alba in January 2023. In September 2023, he usurped Alba's former dominant male Ozzie (VECM033) who sustained various injuries. He seemed to have finally regained dominance until his dominant partner, Tolkien, perished to a snake bite on the 25th of January. The death of the dominant female destabilized the already fragile dominance hierarchy in the group: after a few weeks Palestrina was repeatedly observed submitting to both adult subordinate males Pucky (VECM023) and Charlie (VECM031). Now Palestrina, after years of successful dominance, has surrendered his position, and Charlie and Pucky are currently competing for it, as they have been repeatedly observed fighting against each.

At Trackie-Daks, since the sudden death of the dominant female Fly, dominant male Coquillette

(VTSM014) has also started showing a change in his movements. Since 2020, he never showed any interest in leaving. But since Fly's disappearance two months ago, he has left the group seven times, indicating a clear shift in his moving behaviour. Indeed, both remaining females at Trackie Daks, yearling subordinate females Boubou (VTDF028) and Chinchilla (VTDF029), are most likely his daughters, meaning that now Coquillet's breeding within the group is constrained. Also, since one of the adult females, Boubou and Chinchilla are to replace their mother's dominant position, they likely attract unrelated males from outside the group (5). The time has therefore arrived for Coquillet to look around and check for potential new groups to join, as Trackie Daks is getting more and more constricting for him.

References

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³ Clutton-Brock, T.H., Hodge, S.J., Flower, T.P., Spong, G.F. & Young, A.J. (2010) Adaptive suppression of subordinate reproduction in cooperative mammals. *The American Naturalist*, 176, 664–673.

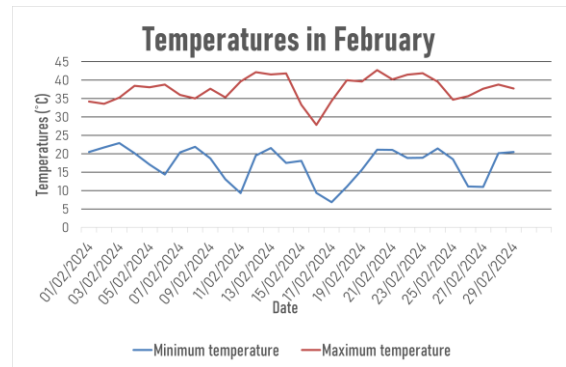
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⁵ Thavarajah, N. K. (2009). BSc thesis: Behavioural changes due to partner loss in the cooperatively breeding meerkat *Suricata suricatta*.

Pregnancies in February 2024

Females pregnant in February	14
Females who aborted	1
Females who gave birth, litters lost	0
Females who gave birth, litter emerged	3
Females who gave birth, unknown outcome	5
Females still pregnant at the end of the month	5

Weather at the KMP



The temperature has stayed in the mid-twenties this month. The average minimum temperature was 17.3°C and the average maximum temperature was 37.7°C. The hottest day was on the 20th of February, at 42.7°C. The coldest day was on the 17th and was a mild 6.6°C. There was rain on the 1st, 2nd, 9th, 20th, 23rd and 24th for a total of 5.4mm of rain this month.

February 2024 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:

Alba (FDC):

- All 12 individuals were present at the end of February.
- Dominant female Cleopatra (VALF008) gained dominance on the 26th of January following the death of dominant female Tolkien (VECF019), since she is the only eligible female in the group.
- Adult subordinate male Palestrina (VLM211) lost dominance once he submitted to adult subordinate male Charlie (VECM031) on the 17th and in the following days also to adult subordinate male Pucky (VECM023).
- Tolkien, who was bitten by a snake on the 25th of January, was confirmed dead this month after her body was retrieved on the 12th.
- Enough time has passed for yearling subordinate male Tiramisu (VALM007) and yearling subordinate male Pantalaimon (VALM012) to be officially emigrated out of the group.
- On the 5th, in the morning, Pucky left the group and returned on the same day.
- On the 17th, the group had an encounter with Gold Diggers 4 yearling subordinate female Mikasa (VGDF042) who was chased away.
- Alba had two inter-group interactions with Gold Diggers 4 on the 26th and on the 27th. On both occasions Alba wardanced and chased Gold Diggers 4 away.
- There were no group splits this month.
- All individuals appeared healthy at the end of the month.

Brussels Sprouts (FDC):

- All 5 members of the group were present at the end of the month.
- Adult subordinate male Chillli (VBSM005) was given his Last Seen this month.
- On the 11th Brussels Sprouts had 12 encounters with unknown adult meerkats. Brussels Sprouts wardanced and chased away the unknown meerkats every time.
- There were no group splits nor inter-group interactions this month.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health.

Elrond's Council (FDC):

- All 13 members of the group were present at the end of February.
- *Male dominance* remained *unconfirmed* at Elrond's Council.
- From dominant female Snoop Kat's (VECF039) recent litter, 4 pups have emerged.
- Adult subordinate males Kuzco (VECM040), Shisharka (VECM041) and yearling subordinate male Karadoc (VECM049) have been given their Last Seen this month.
- Elrond's Council had 7 encounters with an unknown meerkat on the 4th, 20th, 21st, 23rd and 24th and one encounter with an unknown adult male on the 7th.

- There were no group splits or inter-group interactions this month.
- Adult subordinate female Mojo Jojo (VECF038) has a serious injury on the top of her head, she is slowly showing signs of recovery. Juvenile male Fiufiu (VECM053) had a deep cut under his left forearm, but has now recovered. All other individuals at Elrond's Council appeared to be in good health.

Gold Diggers (FDC):

- All 10 members of the group were present at the end of February.
- Dominant female Goldeneye (VGDF007) gave birth on the 16th of this month.
- Yearling subordinate female Dizle (VGDF040) and pup John Cena (VGDF060) were given their Last Seen this month.
- Yearling subordinate female Panash (VGDF052) left the group on the 10th of February and returned on the 28th. She then left again on the 29th.
- Gold Diggers had an encounter with an unknown adult meerkat on the 8th and with Lazuli's adult subordinate male Girdle (VLM287) on the 23rd, who was chased away by yearling subordinate male Captain Patel (VGDM048).
- There were no inter-group interactions nor group splits this month.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health.

Jaxx (FDC):

- All 20 individuals were present at Jaxx at the end of February.
- Dominant female Jub Jub (VJXF160) gained dominance at Jaxx on the 17th, as she received direct submissions from more than half of the eligible females in the group.
- Adult subordinate female Baloo (VJXF080) was made officially pregnant at the start of the month. Around three weeks later, on the 16th she gave birth to 4 pups. Yearling subordinate females Qhawekazi (VJXF180) and Miss Tick (VJXF173) were also made officially pregnant. Qhawekazi aborted on the 9th as too little time had passed since the start of the pregnancy to be able to give birth.
- Juvenile female Togepi (VJXF185) and adult subordinate male Fred (VJXM146) were given their Last Seen this month.
- Enough time has passed for yearling subordinate male Kamvelihle (VJXM174) to be officially emigrated out of the group.
- There were no encounters, inter-group interactions nor group splits this month.
- All individuals appeared to be in good health.

Lazuli (FDC):

- 26 out of 27 individuals were present at the end of January.

- Yearling subordinate female Coffee (VLF297) returned to the group on the 4th. Adult subordinate female Tuna Fish IV (VLF283) who was away at the end of last month, returned this month on the 5th together with yearling subordinate female Muhammara (VLF304). Tuna Fish IV was pregnant when she had departed the group.
- Tuna Fish IV gave birth between the 21st of January and the 6th of February. 8 pups emerged on the 18th, both dominant female Dumpling (VLF272) and Tuna Fish IV are the potential mothers of these pups.
- Yearling subordinate female Mist (VLF294) and adult subordinate female Ma Di Tau (VLF278), who left the group at the end of January, were given their Last Seen this month.
- Adult subordinate male Subigubi (VUBM050) left on the 4th and returned on the 14th. On the 8th, adult subordinate male Girdle (VLM287) and yearling subordinate male Meeko (VLM300) left the group after an inter-group interaction with an unknown group and returned on the same day. Girdle left the group again on the 27th and returned on the same day. On the 10th, yearling subordinate male Kush (VLM298) was not seen with the group anymore and was observed joining the group in the same morning. On the 13th, juvenile male Dzikamai (VLM309) left the group, he remains absent from the group as of the end of the month.
- Subigubi appeared to the group twice on the 8th and on the 10th. On both occasions he was ignored by the group.
- Lazuli had an encounter with an unknown individual on the 3rd, as well as an encounter with two unknown adults on the 8th who were repeatedly chased away. On the 15th, Lazuli had an encounter with an unknown male who retreated after being attacked by the group.
- Lazuli had two inter-group interactions on the 8th and on the 14th with an unknown group of 8 individuals, potentially Dik-Diks, who were on both occasions chased away. On the 24th, Lazuli had an inter-group interaction with Ubuntu. Lazuli wardanced, chased and attacked Ubuntu who then retreated.
- Lazuli had three daily group splits recorded on the 10th, 18th and 19th.
- All individuals seemed to be in good health.

Side Quest (FDC):

- 17 out of 18 meerkats were present at the end of this month.
- Yearling subordinate female Croissant (VSIF023) was given her Last Seen this month.
- Yearling subordinate male Mackie (VSIM020) left the group on the 8th and is yet to return to the group as of the end of the month.
- Side Quest had an encounter with two unknown individuals on the 23rd.
- Side Quest had no inter-group interactions nor group splits this month.
- All individuals appeared in good health.

Trackie-Daks (FDC):

- All 10 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- *Female Dominance* at the group remains *unsettled*.
- Yearling subordinate female Boubou (VTDF028) was made officially pregnant on the 15th.
- Enough time has passed for sub-adult subordinate females Clemintine (VTDF034) and Sinenhlanhla (VTDF035) to be given their Last Seen.
- Both Clemintine and Sinenhlanhla did not wake up with the group on the 3rd. Adult subordinate male Guardy McGuardface (VTDM012) left the group on the 6th and returned the day after. Boubou also left the group to return on the same day on the 21st. Dominant male Coquillet (VTSM014) left the group on the 19th and returned on the 23rd. He left again on the 28th together with Guardy McGuardface. Both males remain absent by the end of the month.
- On the 5th, Trackie-Daks had an encounter with an unknown adult who was chased away.
- The habituation level is currently *Advanced Progress*. Coquillet is the habituation individual at the group. He is interested in water and was occasionally weighed this month. More work is needed during follows. He is still not comfortable with more than 1 person at the group.
- All individuals appeared to be healthy.

Ubuntu (FDC):

- All 16 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Dominant female Agazoth (VUBF039) was officially made pregnant on the 16th.
- Previously absent adult subordinate male Beans (VUBM053) returned on the 1st of this month. He left again the day after and returned on the 3rd.
- Previously evicted adult subordinate female Evikutty (VUBF051) had encounters with the group on the 5th, 11th, 12th and 24th. On all occasions she was not accepted back into the group.
- On the 24th Ubuntu had an inter-group interaction with Lazuli. Ubuntu retreated after being wardanced, chased and attacked by Lazuli.
- On the 24th, after the inter-group interaction, Ubuntu had a daily group split.
- The group appear to be in good health at the end of the month.

Zulus (FDC):

- All 7 individuals were present at the end of January.
- Dominant female Spruddel (VZUF028) has been made officially pregnant this month.
- Enough time has passed for adult subordinate females Helga (VZUF052), Rowena (VZUF054) and Spoekies (VZUF062) to be officially given their Last Seen, as well as adult subordinate

males Willow (VZUM063), Tazara (VZUM064) and Fritzi Rosti (VZUM074).

- Yearling subordinate male Rain (VZUM067) left the group on the 14th and returned on the 17th.
- The group encountered previously evicted adult subordinate female Salazar (VZUF051) on the 14th. Dominant male Baymax (VDGM028) together with juvenile male Soo (VZUM073) chased her away. Zulus also had 7 encounters an unknown adult, twice on the 14th, once on the 21st, and three times on the 28th.
- Zulus had no inter-group interactions or group splits this month.
- All individuals in Zulus appeared to be healthy.

Life History Monitoring Groups:

Dik-Diks (LHM):

- All 13 members of the group were present at the end of this month.
- Previously evicted adult subordinate female Shelby (VGDF022) has been accepted back into the group on the 2nd. Previously absent adult subordinate female Tuna Fish II (VGDF026) returned to the group on the 7th.
- At her return, Shelby appeared slim and lactating, indicating she gave birth between the 25th of January and the 2nd of February. 4 pups emerged as part of the litter. However, pups VDDP009 (Miles Hundredlives) and VDDP010 (The Lord Ruler) died on the 23rd after being attacked by a cape cobra at the babysitting burrow.
- Adult subordinate male Kwame (VUBM047) was given his Last Seen this month.
- The group had no encounters, group splits or inter-group interactions this month.
- Habituation at this group is considered *Advanced Progress*. All three habituation individuals, Shelby, Juliet, and yearling subordinate male Jaskier (VDDM001) can now be followed at a distance of 1m. All three are jumpy to big arm movements and Jaskier still remains a bit skittish and growly when approaching. We will continue to do follow habituation with Jaskier, Juliet and Shelby. Pups VDDP011 and VDDP012 are very comfortable with hands and interested into egg. All individuals approach the scale, are weighable and eager for water or egg.
- All individuals appeared to be healthy.

Make-e-Plan (HAB):

- The majority of Make-e-Plan's individuals, namely adult subordinate male Sushi (VTSM006), yearling subordinate males Shen (VMPP069), Shrimp (VMPP070), Waxillium (VMPP083) and Wayne (VMPP087), and juvenile females Maggie (VMPP093) and Graciekin (VMPP094) have been immigrated into Gold Diggers 4 on the 13th. Only two individuals remained, dominant female Vin (VMPP091) and juvenile female Adonalsium

(VMPP092), however, they have not been seen since.

Vetkoeks (LHM):

- All 5 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Dominant female Mooncake (VHMF053) gave birth between the 14th and 15th of February.
- Yearling subordinate male Spartan (VVKM003) has been given his Last Seen this month.
- Vetkoeks had no recorded encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits this month.
- All individuals appeared healthy at the end of the month.

Habituation Groups:

Cape Crusaders (HAB):

- There were 10 individuals consistently seen at this group.
- Dominant female Sky (VSIF003) was assumed predated between the 9th and 12th as her body remains were found on the 12th.
- As the only eligible female left in the group, dominant female Rosetta gained dominance on the 13th. *Male dominance* at this group remains *unknown*.
- From Sky's last litter, 3 pups were seen on the 12th. Only one pup Hedgehog (VCCP010) has emerged and foraged with the group. The other two pups Badger (VCCP011) and Fox (VCCP012) have not been seen since then anymore.
- Cape Crusaders had no encounters, inter-group interactions, nor group splits observed this month.
- Cape Crusaders have not been found since the 23rd. Observers have been sent to sweep their territory, but the group's location still remains unknown.
- The habituation of this group is classed as *In Progress*. Observers can sit at 1m distance to the unknown adult males, who still remain difficult to approach and do not show any interest to neither egg nor water. Juvenile male Tallie (VCCM009) is confident around observers and increasingly interested into egg. Sub-adult subordinate female Rosetta (VCCF004) is now very eager for egg and water. Both individuals can be weighted. Once the group are found again, we will continue movement and distance habituation at the sleeping burrow as well as egg frenzies to encourage interest in egg and the scale.
- The individuals of this group appeared to be healthy.

Phoenix (HAB):

- Phoenix was not seen by observers this month. We continued to burrow sweep their known

territory through the month, however they were not found.

Whiskers (HAB) :

- All 11 meerkats were present at Whiskers.
- *Female and male dominance remains unsettled* at Whiskers.
- Yearling subordinate females Archangel (VWF259), Gnoll (VWF262) and Bruce (VWF266) were all made officially pregnant at the start of the month.
- Archangel and adult subordinate female Candy Land (VWF256) both gave birth on the 18th and on the 25th respectively. Both litters are considered lost before emergence, as no babysitting nor consistent lactation signs have been observed.
- Whiskers had no encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits observed this month.
- The group's habituation is classed as *In Progress*. The habituation of the 3 wild males varies. One male is approachable, observers can sit up to 1m distance away. Another male is comfortable with observers sitting at a 2m distance but immediately runs into a bolthole at unexpected movements. The third male remains skittish but has started to leave the entrance of the burrow even when at close proximity to the observer.
- All members of the group appeared in good health, as well as one of the wild males who had received a wound on their head in the previous month.

Sub-groups:

Gold Diggers 4

- 10 of 13 individuals were present at the end of February.
- Dominant female Yorki (VGDF033) gained dominance status, as she is the only eligible female in the group. *Male dominance* at this group remain *unknown*.
- Former Make-e-Plan yearling subordinate males Shen (VMPPM069), Shrimp (VMPPM070), Waxillium (VMPPM083) and Wayne (VMPPM087), and juvenile females Maggie (VMPPF093) and Graciekin (VMPPF094) have immigrated into Gold Diggers 4 on the 13th while former Make-e-Plan dominant male Sushi (VTSM006) was immigrated on the 16th, as they have all been observed acting as part of the group.
- Enough time has passed for adult subordinate male Patrys (VMPPM068) and yearling subordinate males Jude (VMPPM071) and Snapdragon (VMPPM074) to be officially emigrated out of the group.
- On the 13th during an inter-group interaction with Make-e-Plan yearling subordinate female Maya II (VGDF039) and adult subordinate male Oozy (VMPPM067) were separated from the group. Later that morning, Maya II was seen together with Sushi, while Oozy returned to the group.

The same day, in the evening, adult subordinate female Ricky Baker (VGDF031) and yearling subordinate female Mikasa (VGDF042) left the group.

- Shen left the group on the 16th and was seen foraging with the group back on the 19th.
- Gold Diggers 4 had an inter-group interaction with Make-e-Plan on the 13th. The two groups wardanced towards each other. Gold Diggers 4 individuals attacked and dispersed former Make-e-Plan's juveniles females Adonalsium (VMPPF092), Maggie and Graciekin, while Sushi was chased away by Oozy.
- The group had two inter-group encounters with Alba on the 26th and on the 27th. On both occasions Alba wardanced and chased Gold Diggers 4 away.
- Since the one individual at this group that required habitation, Jude, has emigrated out, the group's habituation is classed as *Complete*.
- All individuals in the group appeared to be healthy.

Abandoned groups:

Hakuna Matata (HAB):

- After holding hope for over a year we decided to officially abandon Hakuna Matata this month, since they have been last seen end of 2022.

The following authors contributed to this report:

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