



The Meerkatter

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

Palestrina – A Meerkat of Many Nations.....	1-2	Pregnancies in March.....	3
Gone Too Soon.....	2-3	Weather at the KMP.....	3
		Life History Details.....	3-7

Palestrina – A Meerkat of Many Nations

As famously stated by English poet William Cowper: "Variety is the spice of life". Our many unique backgrounds and experiences help diversify our lives, setting them apart from each other. From the Kalahari Meerkat Project's (KMP) current population of meerkats, no meerkat has exemplified this quote more than Alba's adult subordinate male Palestrina (VLM211). The oldest meerkat that we currently have, the only one whose age is currently double digits, this is the story of an exceptional meerkat.

He was born into Lazuli on the 9th of January 2014. His formative years were quietly spent, where apart from a few group splits, he largely stayed with the group. After a peaceful year and a half though, the call of adventure was finally heard, and he went on his first roving expedition in October 2015 following an inter-group interaction with Zulus. Though he returned soon after leaving, this was the precursor to him leaving for good a few months later.

On the 5th of February 2016, he officially emigrated out of Lazuli. He had a brief encounter with the group Baobab on the day of his departure, but he would not be roving for long. On the 14th that same month, he officially immigrated into Zulus alongside his littermate; adult subordinate male Tantan (VLM210). Despite there being a power vacuum for the position of dominant male at the group, the position did not get filled for many months. During that time, he grew restless once more, temporarily emigrating out of Zulus to immigrate into Quintessentials for a few days in June, as well as spending time roving and encountering Nematoads in September. It was not until October 2016 when he finally settled down and took over as dominant male of Zulus.

Palestrina spent three years as the dominant male of Zulus. His partner in crime at the group was dominant female Poma (VZUF007), who had gained dominance at the group in March 2016. Together, the two of them had approximately fifteen offspring together, with six confirmed to be his. Things changed for Palestrina though after Poma was found dead on the 18th of March 2019. Suddenly, the group dynamics of the group shifted, leaving Palestrina's future uncertain. The position of dominant female was quickly filled by current Zulus dominant female Spruddel (VZUF028). She is one of the six meerkats that has been confirmed to be his offspring leaving his position there as dominant male untenable as meerkats typically avoid inbreeding. Despite this, he

did not let go of the dominant male position easily, fending off a challenge from former Zulus adult subordinate male Sauce (VZUM026). He relinquished the position of dominant male on his own terms after he emigrated out of the group on the 16th of October 2019, almost exactly three years from when he first became dominant. This was not the end of his dominance, however.



Adult subordinate male Palestrina (VLM211) looking into the camera. Photo credit: KMP visitor Grant Davies.

He wasted no time following his departure from Zulus, immediately immigrating into Elrond's Council, following a few roving sessions at Ubuntu. There he ran into his old rival Sauce, who had immigrated into the group days earlier, setting the table for a rematch for the ages. Would Palestrina be able to beat Sauce for a second time? Would Sauce use his newfound experience and stand his ground? Unfortunately for Sauce, Palestrina was too much to overcome, and Palestrina took over the position of dominant male at his second group.

He lasted as the dominant male of Elrond's Council until January 2023. During this time, he had four different dominant females on his side, those being

former dominant females Taebae (VBBF117), Galadriel (VECF032), Calypso (VECF027) and current Elrond's Council dominant female Snoop Kat (VECF039). Following Calypso's death in April 2022, with the only possible females left to take over the position being his daughters Snoop Kat or her littermate, current Elrond's Council adult subordinate female Mojo Jojo (VECF038), this led to him constantly leaving the group over the winter months, spending time roving at Alba and Namaqua. In January 2023, at the old age of 9 years, he emigrated out of the group alongside current Alba dominant male Pucky (VECM023), and adult subordinate males Charlie (VECM031) and Ozzie (VECM033), as they all immigrated into Alba.



Adult subordinate male Palestrina (VLM211) alongside, at that time, pup Apollo (VALM010). Photo credit: Masters Student Zoe Turner.

With his past experience, it was expected amongst the volunteers that he would immediately pick up the position of dominant male that had been vacated by previous Alba dominant male Godric (VZUM053). Shockingly, it was instead Pucky that rose up as the dominant male. He held on to that position for a few months before he was usurped by Ozzie. During all that time, Palestrina was there on the side, biding his time, occasionally going roving at Zulus, the group he had been once dominant. On the 9th of September 2023, at the age of 9 years and 8 months, he officially took over the position of dominant male of Alba from Ozzie. This is the third group that he has achieved dominance in a truly remarkable achievement for any meerkat. He held the position until the 17th of February 2024, which he then lost to Pucky once more. In his tenth year of life now, it is unlikely that he will ever be able to rise to the top for a final time. But stranger things have happened, and as he has proven over the course of a long and exciting life, it is never wise to fully bet against him.

Gone Too Soon

Meerkat deaths are not an unnatural event in the Kalahari. While we may not always see them, every month in the Meerkatter we have to report on the meerkats that have been given their Last Seen. Of course, the Last Seen system does not necessarily mean that a meerkat has been predated, but rather a period of time has passed since the individual was last seen by an observer and is removed from our population. There are, however, a few death events witnessed by volunteers over the past couple of months, which is a rare occurrence. Sadly, these events all included seeing pups leave this 'beautiful world'. While death is a part of the natural world, these events are nevertheless difficult experiences for observers. Here are some bittersweet stories from the Kalahari Desert.

On the 23rd of February, the clouds had been threatening all day as an observer went to Dik-Diks for an evening weights session. The group was babysitting at the time so instead of looking for the group, he decided to visit the babysitting burrow. Surely enough, there he found two babysitters, adult subordinate male Jaivyn (VUBM048) and sub-adult subordinate female Devil (VDDF005) along with the four pups from adult subordinate female Shelby's (VGDF022) litter. The pups were just out of the entrance of the sleeping burrow and were curiously investigating the observer. As the observer was interacting with the pups, the most frightening of events occurred. A Cape cobra, concealed within the entrance of the sleeping burrow, lashed out, grabbing pup Lord Ruler (VDDP010) and dragging it below. The babysitters and the rest of the pups immediately went below down the same hole Lord Ruler was taken. Five minutes later, Jaivyn and Devil came back up along with the rest of the pups. Pup Miles Hundredlives (VDDP009) was noticeably bleeding from the head. The babysitters and pups tried to intimidate the cobra into leaving but it would not budge. The babysitters, sensing the danger to the rest of the pups, took the pups away from the burrow. 60m away from the burrow, it was then that the effects of the cobra's venom started showing an effect on Miles. It was tired and lethargic and could not move, despite the frantic calls from the babysitters. The babysitters took the remaining pups away for their safety, leaving Miles alone. The rain that had been threatening all day finally started pouring down as the observer stayed behind and remained with Miles during its last moments. The babysitters took the remaining pups back to the sleeping burrow minutes later, where the rest of the group had returned and were mobbing the Cape Cobra away before settling down for the night, now two group members smaller.



Pup Mules Hundredlives (VDDP009) on the day it first emerged. Photo credit: Zurich Manager Maahir Jusabani

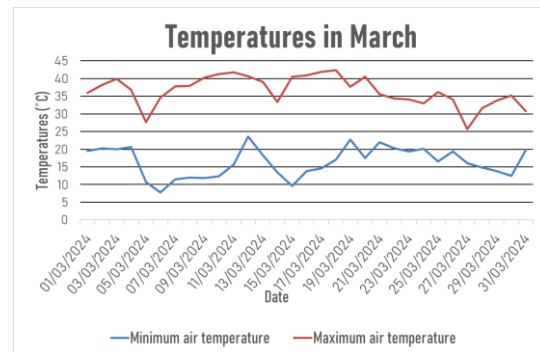
On the 14th of March, an observer was spending the morning with Ubuntu. Not far from them, another observer had made a brief visit to Vetkoeks to habituate the new pups. The pups, who had not been seen much due to Vetkoeks' status as a Life History Monitoring group, required extra habituation to get them interested in egg and water. The observer left Vetkoeks, unaware of the danger the group would soon find themselves in. Soon after her departure, the Ubuntu observer radioed in that Ubuntu had spotted a group. It was quickly realized that the group Ubuntu spotted was indeed Vetkoeks. Ubuntu chased down Vetkoeks, who bid a hasty retreat due to being vastly outnumbered by Ubuntu. Unfortunately for the pups, they were too small and young to keep up with the adults, and quickly fell behind. Ubuntu caught up with the pups and, in order to eliminate rival meerkats, proceeded to kill the pups. All five pups from dominant female Mooncake's (VHMF053) litter, pups Dustbiter (VVKF015), Doornail (VVKF016), Bucketkicker (VVKP017), Coopfler (VVKM018) and Meetmaker (VVKP019) were lost to Ubuntu that morning. This is possibly the second time that Ubuntu have killed a Vetkoeks litter, as we cannot confirm the first, though the group were seen close to Vetkoeks' babysitting burrow before their September 2023 litter was considered lost. What this means for Vetkoeks' future, and whether they will finally find a territory safe from Ubuntu, remains to be seen.

These are a few of the stories from the past couple of months to emanate from the KMP. While being a meerkat observer is a unique experience, truly unlike anything in the world, there are events that are not the easiest to witness, these being but a few of them. Thank you for reading.

Pregnancies in March 2024

Females pregnant in March	13
Females who aborted	4
Females who gave birth, litters lost	6
Females who gave birth, litter emerged	0
Females who gave birth, unknown outcome	1
Females still pregnant at the end of the month	2

Weather at the KMP



Temperatures have started to slightly cool this month. The average minimum temperature was 16.4°C and the average maximum temperature was 36.5°C. The hottest day was on the 18th of March, at 42.4°C. The coldest day was on the 6th with a temperature of 7.8°C. It rained on 3 days this month with a total of 16.4mm of rain this month.

March 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 March.
- Dominant male Pucky (VECM023) gained dominance on the 4th, by which he had received submissions from half the eligible males within the group. This is his second term as dominant male of Alba, after a period of dominance from February to June last year.
- Dominant female Cleopatra (VALF008) was confirmed as officially pregnant this month.
- Yearling subordinate males Tiramisu (VALM007) and Pantalaimon (VALM012) were both given their Last Seen this month.
- Alba had one daily group split on the 13th.
- There were no encounters or inter-group interactions observed 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.
- Dominant female Arabella (VMPF035) was described as officially pregnant on the 3rd but was found to have aborted the litter on the 15th.
- Adult subordinate male Gurke (VHMM036) left the group on the 14th to go roving at Zulus before returning the next day. He also left on the 16th and 20th and returned on the same day both times.
- There were no encounters, group splits or 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 March.
- *Male dominance* remained *unconfirmed* at Elrond's Council.
- There were no encounters, group splits or inter-group interactions this month.
- Adult subordinate female Mojo Jojo (VECF038) still retains a serious injury at the top of her head following a snake bite in January. It has not proven detrimental to her foraging though and she is healing well. The rest of the group is healthy.

Gold Diggers (FDC):

- All 13 members of the group were present at the end of March.
- 6 pups emerged as part of dominant female Goldeneye's (VGDF007) litter.
- Yearling subordinate female Panash (VGDF052) was given her Last Seen this month.
- Pup Cephandrius (VGDP061) left the group on the 17th and has been given its Last Seen. Pup Stick (VGDF062) was found to be struggling when an observer arrived at the group for an afternoon session on the 23rd and died shortly after. We suspect the pup was anaemic which is what caused its death.
- On the 13th, Kookiness and Foofofo alongside pups Snackajack (VJXM063), Broson (VJXM064), Gown (VGDF065) and Shambles (VGDP066) were all left behind by the group alongside yearling subordinate female Serafina Pekkala (VGDF049) on their first foraging session. They were found back with the group in the afternoon.
- There were no encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits this month.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health.

Jaxx (FDC):

- 16 out of 18 individuals were present at Jaxx at the end of March.
- Former dominant male Leonard (VLM221) lost his dominance on the 17th after he did not wake up with the group on that day and is yet to return. He had been leaving the group occasionally before this day.
- Yearling subordinate female Miss Tick (VJXF173) gave birth on the 12th but is considered to have lost the litter based on nobody babysitting them and the group moving burrows a few days later. Dominant female Jub Jub (VJXF160) aborted a litter on the 16th after emerging in the morning with large quantities of blood. She had been described as potentially pregnant the past few days.
- Yearling subordinate male Kamvelihle (VJXM174) was given his Last Seen this month. Pup Jaxxy (VJXP192) was not seen with the group from the 3rd and pup Pop Tart (VJXP193) went missing on the 17th. Both individuals have been given their Last Seen.
- Adult subordinate female Baloo (VJXF080) left the group on the 12th before returning on the same day. She also left the group briefly alongside adult subordinate female Old Greg (VJXF167), yearling subordinate females Qhawekazi (VJXF180) and Ntombizonke (VJXF181), as well as pups Pino (VJXF188), Pulpi (VJXP189), Dexter (VJXP190) and Sahara (VJXF195) on the 22nd before returning that same morning. This whole leave event was caused by the group leaving them behind as they sped on ahead to forage. Miss Tick left the group on the 27th but woke up with them on the

28th. Old Greg did not wake up with the group on the 28th.

- Old Greg, alongside Leonard, are yet to return to the group by the end of the month.
- There were no encounters, inter-group interactions nor group splits this month.
- All individuals appeared to be in good health.

Lazuli (FDC):

- All 25 individuals were present at the end of March.
- Yearling subordinate female Mist (VLF294) was accidentally identified as yearling subordinate female Muhammara (VLF304) when she returned last month, though the misidentification was rectified midway this month.
- Pup Journey (VLM314) was given his Last Seen this month after not waking up with the group on the 15th.
- Yearling subordinate female Pita (VLF303) and sub-adult subordinate female Masiwa (VLF308) were not seen with the group on the 1st but woke up with them on the 2nd. Adult subordinate female Tuna Fish IV (VLF283) as well as Masiwa and sub-adult subordinate female Nontokozi (VLF307) all left on the 15th before returning the same day.
- Subigubi appeared to the group twice on the 8th and on the 10th. On both occasions he was ignored by the group.
- Lazuli had 5 daily group splits recorded on the 10th, 11th, 15th, 16th and 19th, as well as a group split of uncertain duration that lasted from the 22nd to the 25th.
- There were no encounters or inter-group interactions recorded this month.
- All individuals seemed to be in good health.

Side Quest (FDC):

- 15 out of 17 meerkats were present at the end of this month.
- Dominant female Pumba (VZUF048) was described officially pregnant at the start of the month and was found to have given birth on the 29th. With lactations present and babysitting evident, she has most likely successfully given birth.
- Yearling subordinate male Mackie (VSIM020) has been emigrated out of the group due to a month having passed in the breeding season.
- Juvenile male Pluk (VSIM030) left the group on the 7th. Prior to this, he had sustained an injury to his left hindleg and was struggling to keep up with the group. Sub-adult subordinate male Basil (VSIM026) disappeared following a group split on the 10th. Pup Brioché (VSIM032) did not wake up with the group on the 26th but was found with them later that afternoon. Both Basil and Pluk are yet to return to the group at the end of the month.
- Side Quest had an overnight group split from the 10th to 11th.

- Side Quest had no encounters or inter-group interactions this month.
- All individuals appeared in good health.

Trackie-Daks (FDC):

- All 9 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Female dominance at the group was settled on the 24th when dominant female Boubou (VTDF028) received a direct submission from subordinate female Chinchilla (VTDF029), who was the only other eligible female at the group.
- Boubou gave birth on the 18th but that litter is considered to have been lost before emergence, as no babysitting or lactation was observed.
- Former Trackie-Daks adult subordinate male Moon Moon (VTSM022) was given his Last Seen this month after being seen two months ago close to Vetkoeks.
- Juvenile female Paldea (VTDF038) was found dead by the side of the main road on the 23rd. While it was difficult to detect signs of a road accident, that is our best guess of her death.
- The habituation level is currently *Advanced Progress*. Dominant male Coquille (VTSM014) has improved. He can be followed at a distance of 1m during follows, and is occasionally weighed at the burrow.
- All individuals appeared to be healthy.

Ubuntu (FDC):

- All 16 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Dominant female Agazoth (VUBF039) gave birth on the 12th, but with no lactations and babysitting, the litter is considered to have been lost before emergence. Yearling subordinate female Bruindtjie (VUBF063) was declared officially pregnant on the 17th.
- Adult subordinate female Evikutty (VUBF051) was given her Last Seen this month.
- Former Ubuntu adult subordinate female Masekind (VUBF037) made a reappearance at the group after having not been seen since October last year. She had two encounters with Ubuntu on the 21st.
- Ubuntu had two inter-group interactions with Vetkoeks this month, on the 2nd and 14th respectively. In the latter interaction, Ubuntu caught and killed Vetkoeks' pups while the adults escaped.
- Ubuntu had no group splits this month.
- The group appeared to be in good health at the end of the month.

Zulus (FDC):

- All 7 individuals were present at the end of March.
- Dominant female Spruddel (VZUF028) gave birth on the 3rd, but after a period of lactation and babysitting, the litter was considered lost before emergence on the 11th as the group stopped babysitting with the group moving burrows shortly after.
- Adult subordinate female Salazar (VZUF051) was given her Last Seen this month as was adult subordinate male Robin (VZUM066).
- Zulus had an encounter with an unknown adult meerkat on the 9th. They also had 4 encounters with Brussels Sprouts adult subordinate male Gurke (VHMM036) on the 14th and 15th where he was chased away consistently.
- 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):

- 11 out of 12 members of the group were present at the end of this month.
- Pup Lucius (VDDM012) did not wake up with the group on the 8th and has since been given his Last Seen. Juvenile male Dzikamai (VLM309), who was missing at the end of last month, has also been given his Last Seen.
- Juvenile male Benedict (VDDM006) also did not wake up with the group on the 8th alongside Lucius and is yet to return to the group by the end of the month.
- The group had no encounters, group splits or inter-group interactions this month.
- Habituation at this group is considered *Advanced Progress*. The habituation individuals at the group remain dominant female Juliet (VGDF009), adult subordinate female Shelby (VGDF022) and yearling subordinate male Jaskier (VDDM001). All three are relatively comfortable during follows at 1m. Jaskier is the easiest to weigh of the 3 meerkats, eager for egg and water, while the older females will come into the scale occasionally.
- Yearling subordinate female Ciri (VDDF003) formed a lump under her jaw this month. While at first this was suspected to be tuberculosis, it has since been decided that it was formed due to abscess that has since ruptured. The rest of the group is healthy.

Nightwatch (LHM)

- Nightwatch was officially confirmed to be an official full group on the 13th after having stayed together for 2 months after they were first found foraging together. Due to the high number of adlib groups in our study, they will be considered henceforth as a Life History Monitoring group.
- 10 out of 11 individuals were present at the end of March.

- *Male dominance* at this group remains *unknown*.
- Due to low volunteer numbers, Nightwatch were visited sporadically this month. Because of this, dominant female Yorki (VGDF033) was considered officially pregnant on the 15th after being visited by enough senior volunteers despite not achieving the required amount of pregnancy confirmations.
- Yorki was found on the 20th to have aborted her litter.
- On the 9th, former Make-e-Plan juvenile female Adonalsium (VMPF092) was found to have immigrated into the group. She was last seen on the 13th of February with Make-e-Plan before it disintegrated and did not immigrate into Nightwatch with the rest of the group. We are unsure if she had been surviving on her own all this time or, more likely, that she had been staying with former Make-e-Plan dominant female Vin (VMPF091).
- Adonalsium has not been seen since the 21st and is considered to have left from then. She is yet to return by the end of the month.
- Yearling subordinate males Patrys (VMPM068), Jude (VMPM071) and Snapdragon (VMPM074), who all left the group 2 months ago, have been given their Last Seen, as have adult subordinate females Ricky Baker (VGDF031), Maya II (VGDF039) and Mikasa (VGDF042), who left the group last month.
- No encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits were observed this month.
- Adult subordinate male Sushi (VTSM006) has developed a submandibular lump. We suspect that he has acquired tuberculosis.

Vetkoeks (LHM):

- All 5 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- 5 pups emerged as part of dominant female Mooncake's (VHMF053) litter on the 4th.
- Vetkoeks had 2 inter-group interactions with Ubuntu this month, on 2nd and 14th. During the interaction on the 14th, pups Dustbiter (VVKF015), Doornail (VVKF016), Bucketkicker (VVKP017), Coopflie (VVKM018) and Meetmaker (VVKP019), who had just started foraging with the group were left behind by the adults. Ubuntu subsequently killed all 5 pups.
- Vetkoeks had no recorded encounters or group splits this month.
- All individuals appeared healthy at the end of the month.

Habituation Groups:

Cape Crusaders (HAB):

- Dominant female Rosetta (VCCP004) is outfitted with a radio collar but observers have been unable to find the group this month. The group was searched for 5 times over the course of the month.

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. They were searched for a total of 3 times this month.

Whiskers (HAB) :

- 11 out of 12 meerkats were present at Whiskers.
- *Female and male dominance remains unsettled* at Whiskers.
- Yearling subordinate females Gnoll (VWF262) and Bruce (VWF266), who were both pregnant as of the end of last month, both gave birth on the 1st and 3rd respectively. Both litters are considered to be lost with the group moving shortly after birth.
- Yearling subordinate female Medusa (VWF263) was confirmed as pregnant this month but aborted the litter a few days later.
- Yearling subordinate female Mya (VWF268) has not been seen at the group since the 19th and is considered to have left the group. She is absent as of the end of the month.
- 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 is the main focus. One male is the friendliest, with familiar observers able to comfortably sit at a distance of 1m away while another is a bit more reserved at a distance of 2-3m, though when fazed by sudden movements that can turn into 5m. The final male is still the most concerned in the presence of observers and is rarely comfortable at distances closer than 10m. None of the males are interested in egg despite the rest of the individuals in the group happily eating next to them.
- All members of the group appeared in good health.

Disintegrated groups:

Make-e-Plan (HAB):

- Former Make-e-Plan juvenile female Adonalsium (VMPF092) emigrated out of the group on the 9th to immigrate into Nightwatch. This left dominant female Vin (VMPF091) as the final member of the group. Vin was given her Last Seen on the 13th, officially ending the status of Make-e-Plan as a group in the population.

The following authors contributed to this report:

Maahir Jusabani, Zurich Manager