



The Meerkatter

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

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Ubuntu, a Group in Expansion

Visiting Ubuntu for observers at the Kalahari Meerkat Project (KMP) often means a few minutes longer sleep in the morning as the group has its favorite burrows just next to the Rus & Vrede farmhouse. Their territory, however, seems to be expanding, stretching over 2km² and bordering Trackie-Daks in the East, Lazuli in the Northwest, and Vetkoeks at their Southwest. Ubuntu, led by dominant female Agazoth (VUBF039) –easy to spot due to her dark chest-nut brown fur– and the very territorial dominant male Greebo (VHMM048) –anal marking any tree, shrub and bolthole along the way– have often gone foraging at the edge of their territory providing many memorable inter-group interactions (IGIs) with their neighbouring groups, briefly described below.



A group picture of Ubuntu on guard at a bolthole. Photo credit: Annelise van Eeden, Former Life History Coordinator

Trackie-Daks (N=13) and Ubuntu (N=19) had an IGI on the 5th of October 2023, both groups war dancing and chasing each other away. During the IGI, adult subordinate male Subigubi (VUBM050), now member of Lazuli, tried to mount Trackie-Daks' former dominant female Fly (VWF237). It was not the only occasion where observers observed an attempt by Ubuntu's males to mate with Trackie-Daks females. Indeed, at the end of January, the two groups were foraging a few hundred meters apart when Ubuntu's adult subordinate male Beans (VUBM053) and yearling subordinate males Libby (VUBM058), Ringo (VUBM059), Wobble (VUBM064) and Flibbertijibbet (VUBM066) surrounded Trackie-Daks for a few hours, we suspect with the intention to get closer to Trackie-Daks' yearling subordinate female Chinchilla (VTDF029) who was in oestrus. At the end of the morning session the observers left Trackie-Daks still surrounded by Ubuntu's males. In the afternoon Ubuntu's males were back with their

home group. The outcome of the encounter remains unknown, however it could be a sign of intergroup breeding.



Ubuntu's very distinctive meerkat Wobble, a meerkat of unusually small size for his age of one year and a half, barely reaching 500g. Photo credit: Annelise van Eeden, Former Life History Coordinator

With Lazuli (N=22), Ubuntu (N=19) only had one IGI during the last breeding season, on the 24th of February, during which the group retreated when faced with Lazuli's big group size. On the other hand, Vetkoeks (N=4) faced four times Ubuntu (N=19)'s threatening war dancing and aggressive attacks. Vetkoeks, clearly outnumbered, retreated on all occasions. Vetkoeks potentially lost two of their litters during these IGIs with Ubuntu. On the 10th of September 2023, just after Vetkoeks' dominant female Mooncake (VHMF053) gave birth, Ubuntu found Vetkoeks' babysitting burrow. While fighting with Vetkoeks, Ubuntu's individuals were seen excavating the burrow, some of them emerging from the entrance covered in blood. After that day, Mooncake stopped lactating and Vetkoeks soon changed burrows, most probably indicating that the litter has been lost before emergence during the IGI with Ubuntu. On the 14th of March 2024, an observer clearly saw Ubuntu chasing and killing all five Vetkoeks pups from their newest litter. Under the shocked gaze of the observer Ubuntu's members killed and ate the pups, cutting in half Vetkoek's number and preventing their expansion towards their territory.

Due to a healthy group size, Ubuntu is a thriving group whose future for now seems secure. We will keep tabs on them, following them in the hope of witnessing more adventures and uncover new groups dynamics within the KMP population.

Last Seen, but not really lost

It is always a sad moment when Life History coordinators need to add a new meerkat to the 'Last Seen' list – a record of individuals that have recently disappeared. According to KMP protocol, a Last Seen event is given to meerkats – males or females - that have not been sighted for a month outside the breeding season; and to males not seen for two months during the breeding season. Pups receive their Last Seen expeditiously after ten days as their disappearance most likely means that they have died or have been predated, due to their inability to survive without care from an adult, while for the majority of adult individuals their fate remains unclear. They might have been predated, or they might have successfully joined another group or created a new one with other roving individuals, outside the range of our study population. We can only speculate what fate befell the long list of meerkats which have disappeared. However, browsing through the Last Seen list there are a number of meerkat codes crossed out. These are the individuals we happened to unexpectedly see again. Here is a brief description of the return from the 'Land of the Lost' of some iconic females during these past few months.

Gold Digger's adult subordinate female Ricky Baker (VGDF031) was observed being evicted on the 7th of January 2024. On the same day Gold Diggers' adult subordinate females, Maya II (VGDF039) and Mikasa (VGDF042), emigrated out of Gold Diggers when they were not seen with the group anymore. All three females were briefly part of Nightwatch from mid-January to mid-February 2024, then disappeared mid-February 2024, following an inter-group interaction with Make-e-Plan. Mikasa was sighted again on the 17th of February at Alba, but was chased away, her fate unknown. On the 2nd of April, Maya II together with Ricky Baker, was seen again at Gold Diggers. On several occasions they tried to gain acceptance back into their natal group. On the 12th of April, they joined Mikasa, seen again after nearly two months. Their natal group initially did not welcome them back, on the contrary they repeatedly chased them away. Only on the 1st of May were all three females seen acting as part of the group, allowing us to officially immigrate them back into Gold Diggers.

On the 23rd of May, while looking for Cape Crusaders, an observer spotted a group of five meerkats. Approaching the group, it soon became clear that it was not Cape Crusaders, our semi-habituated group not seen since February 2024. Two females eagerly ate egg and a quick check with a transponder reader confirmed that they were former Zulus adult subordinate females Salazar (VZUF051) and Helga (VZUF052), evicted in December 2023. These two females have now twice been given their Last Seen and thus it is their second time that this has been rescinded. The first was in October 2022: after they disappeared, they were seen trying to immigrate back into their natal group in November, finally succeeding in early December. Evicted one year later in December 2023, they were seen sporadically in January and February 2024 before

disappearing. It was therefore a very pleasant surprise to find them again with at least one unknown adult male and two unknown juveniles, although these were much less confident around people. In the last few weeks several observers have tried to re-find the group but, so far, the search has been unsuccessful. The exact group composition remains unclear, but the presence of juveniles was a clear sign of breeding and longevity, which allowed us to immediately create a new group, named Hogwarts.

It always is an unexpected and pleasant surprise to encounter meerkats already considered lost. It shows that meerkats seem to often move away from their natal group outside our study population, but then return back again to their group, potentially when they have not been successful to establish their own new group. It also gives hope for the many other meerkats who have disappeared and whose fate remains unknown.

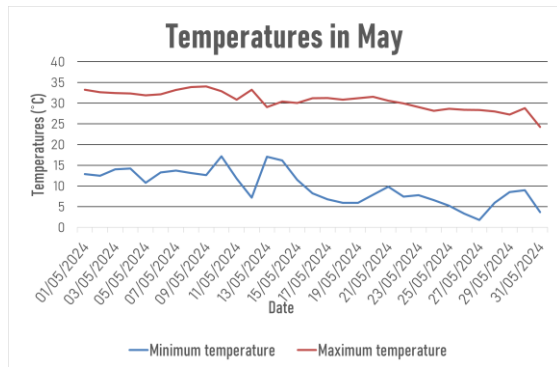


Adult subordinate female Salazar (VZUF051) on guard. Photo credit: Annelise van Eeden, Former Life History Coordinator

Pregnancies in May 2024

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

Weather at the KMP



The temperature has slowly decreased from mid-twenties to mid-10 this month. The average minimum temperature was 9.7°C and the average maximum temperature was 30.6°C. The hottest day was on the 9th of May, at 34°C. The coldest day was on the 27th with 1.8°C. Over the entire month it rained only on the 13th with a total of 0.2mm of rain.

May 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):

- 13 out of 14 individuals were present at the end of May.
- Enough time has passed for adult subordinate male Charlie (VECM031) to be given his Last Seen.
- Juvenile subordinate female Daenerys (VALF017) left on the 3rd and is yet to return.
- There were no group splits, 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.
- 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 May.
- *Male dominance* remained *unconfirmed* at Elrond's Council.
- Elrond's Council had two encounters on the 20th, one on the 22nd, and five on the 23rd with a total of 13 unknown meerkats this month. On all occasions the group war danced towards the unknown meerkats who always retreated.
- There were no group splits or inter-group interactions this month.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health.

Gold Diggers (FDC):

- 14 out of 15 individuals were present at the end of May.
- Sub-adult subordinate male Rosy Posy (VGDM053) left on the 15th and is yet to return.
- Adult subordinate females Ricky Baker (VGDF031), Maya II (VGDF039) and Mikasa (VGDF042) immigrated into Gold Diggers on the 1st of this month, as they have been observed acting as part of the group.
- Gold Diggers had no encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits this month.
- The group's habituation is considered in *Advanced Progress* as Ricky Baker has been acting skittish once she immigrated back into the group. By the end of the month her habituation improved, she can be now followed at 1m distance, but she still does not show any interest in egg or water.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health.

Jaxx (FDC):

- 14 out of 15 individuals were present at Jaxx at the end of May.
- *Male dominance* remained *unconfirmed* at Jaxx.
- Female pup Sahara (VJXF195) is yet to return and enough time has passed to give her Last Seen. Previous dominant male Leonard (VLM221) was also given his Last Seen this month.
- Adult subordinate male Howard Moon (VJXM165) was left behind by the group on the 15th as he appeared lethargic and was struggling to keep up with the group. He is yet to return by the end of the month.
- There were no encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits this month.
- Howard Moon appeared lethargic before disappearing. Adult subordinate female Baloo showed signs of limping and fatigue. All other individuals appeared to be in good health.

Lazuli (FDC):

- All 22 members of the group were present at the end of May.
- Enough time has passed for missing sub-adult subordinate male Tapiwa (VLM306) to be given his Last Seen.
- Adult subordinate male Vegeta (VGDM038) left on the 3rd and returned early in the morning on the 4th
- Lazuli had an inter-group interaction with Dik Diks on the 21st. Both groups war danced towards each other before Dik Diks retreated.
- Lazuli had no encounters or group splits recorded this month.
- 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 Toupie (VSIF019), who had sustained a serious injury to her belly and right inner thigh, has been given her Last Seen this month. Sub-adult subordinate male Basil (VSIM026) was also given his Last Seen.
- Juvenile male Brioche (VSIM032) left on the 10th. He woke up again with the group the following day. On the 29th yearling subordinate male Great A'Tuin (VSIM021) was not found with the group, he is yet to return at the end of the month.
- Side Quest had two inter-group interactions this month. On the 16th in the afternoon, Side Quest war danced and attacked an unknown group of five adult meerkats and one pup at a sleeping burrow. Both groups went below the same sleeping burrow. The following morning on the 17th Side quest excessively marked the burrow and attacked the unknown group who stayed below until Side Quest left to forage.
- Side Quest had no encounters or group splits this month.
- All members of the group seemed to be in good health.

Trackie-Daks (FDC):

- All 13 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- From yearling subordinate female Chinchilla's (VTDF029) litter, four pups emerged and started foraging with the group.
- There were no encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits this month.
- The habituation level is currently *Advanced Progress*. The habituation individual continues to be dominant male Coquilette (VTSM014), who remains jumpy when followed closer than 2m. All four pups have shown interested into egg, but still need some work with hands.
- All individuals appeared to be healthy.

Ubuntu (FDC):

- All 19 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Former Ubuntu adult subordinate female Masekind (VUBF037) has been given her Last Seen this month.
- Male pups Pap (VUBM074) and Wors (VUBM075) were left at a bolthole on the 4th. They were found foraging with the group the following day.
- Ubuntu had an encounter with Vetkoeks' adult subordinate male Zuma (VZUM059) on the 22nd, who was chased away by the group.
- Ubuntu had no group splits or inter-group interactions this month.
- Yearling subordinate female Bruindtjie (VUBF063) sustained an injury, a large open cut, on her inner lower thigh. All other members of the group appeared to be in good health at the end of the month.

Zulus (FDC):

- All 6 individuals were present at the end of May.
- On the 22nd adult subordinate male Rain (VZUM067) was found alone at a sleeping burrow a few hundred meters away from the group. He returned to the group on the same day a few hours later.
- Zulus had no encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits this month.
- Yearling subordinate female Leona (VZUF070) recovered from the snake bite she sustained in April. The wound on her left neck and on her head have completely healed. All individuals appeared in good health at the end of May.

Life History Monitoring Groups:

Dik-Diks (LHM):

- 10 out of 11 individuals were present at the end of this month.
- On the 30th yearling subordinate male Jaskier (VDDM001) was not found with the group. He is yet to return by the end of the month.
- Dik Diks had an inter-group interaction with Lazuli on the 21st. Both groups war danced towards each other and Dik Diks retreated.
- The group had no encounters or group splits this month.
- Habituation at this group is considered *Advanced Progress*. All three habituation individuals; dominant female Juliet (VGDF009), adult subordinate female Shelby (VGDF022) and Jaskier are comfortable during follows at 1-2m. Jaskier shows interest for egg and is the easiest to weigh of the 3 meerkats, The other two females remain skittish around the scale.
- Before disappearing Jaskier was limping, we suspect he sustained an injury on his right elbow. All other members of the group appeared healthy.

Nightwatch (LHM)

- All 9 individuals were present at the end of May.
- *Male dominance* at this group remains *unknown*.
- Adult subordinate male Shen (VMPM069) was given his Last Seen this month
- No encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits were observed this month.
- Adult subordinate male Sushi (VTSM006) still shows two submandibular lumps, that we suspect to be tuberculosis signs. An additional lump on his left foreleg has been reported.

Vetkoeks (LHM):

- All 4 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Yearling subordinate male Brego (VVKM004) has been given his Last Seen this month.
- Adult subordinate male Zuma (VZUM059) left the group on the 22nd, as he was encountered at Ubuntu. He was observed back with the group on the 25th.
- 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):

- Cape Crusaders was searched for 3 times over the course of the month, but no meerkat has been found and no signs of activity at previously known sleeping burrows have been observed.

Phoenix (HAB):

- Phoenix was searched for once over the course of the month. Some signs of activity have been seen at a previously used burrow, but no meerkat was observed.

Whiskers (HAB):

- All 9 individuals were present at Whiskers.
- *Female and male dominance* remains *unsettled* at Whiskers. Yearling subordinate females Gnoll (VWF262) and Medusa (VWF263) have been repeatedly observed showing dominance behaviours around the sleeping burrow and competing between each other through continuous chinning and hip-slamming, however no submission has been observed so far.
- 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 adult subordinate male Gojo Satoru (VWM274) and of the 2 wild males is the main focus. The habituation of Gojo Satoru, after being marked on several occasion, has been going backwards. He immediately goes below when trying to sit closer than 3-4m and only leaves the burrow when sitting at 30m distance. One wild male has shown signs of improvement, he comfortably wakes up and suns at 1m distance and it is possible to slowly walk at 4-5m distance around him without scaring him away. The last wild individual remains very skittish, he only comes out of the sleeping burrow at least 15m distance. None of the males are interested in egg despite the rest of the individuals in the group happily eating next to them.
- Both Gnoll and Medusa show various small wounds to their snout, cheeks, necks and ears but they all appear to be slowly healing. All other members of the group appeared in good health.

Hogwarts (HAB):

- On the 23rd, while searching for Cape Crusaders, previously Last Seen former Zulus adult subordinate females Salazar (VZUF051) and Helga (VZUF052) have been found together with one adult male, one juvenile male and one juvenile female at a sleeping burrow. Unfortunately, it was not possible to capture any of the two females to collar them, as the group stayed below.
- Since then, burrows in the territory have been swept six times over the month in the hope of finding the group again. Signs of activity around two burrows have been observed but the group has not been found again yet.

The following authors contributed to this report:

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