



The Meerkatter

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

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Boubou's Night Out

On the evening of the 6th, an observer following the group Trackie-Daks reported an inter-group interaction between Trackie-Daks and Nightwatch. Both groups war danced towards each other, and a physical fight broke out involving Trackie-Daks' dominant female Boubou (VTDF028), dominant male Coquillette (VTSM014), adult subordinate male Guardy McGuardface (VTDM012), and Nightwatch's adult subordinate male littermates Sticky (VMPM064) and Oozy (VMPM067). The interaction lasted 20 minutes, and Trackie-Daks retreated to their sleeping burrow only to find that Boubou was nowhere to be seen.

Although our observers are aware that the presence of the dominant female defines the group and that she should be followed in the event of group splits. This case was not a group split as Boubou was the only one leaving the group and was wearing the radio collar. It was therefore important that the observer followed the remaining group and wait for the meerkats to go below. After a stressful evening, and once Trackie-Daks went below, our observer set out to find Boubou, hoping to get a beep with their radio-receiver. As they headed in the direction of Nightwatch territory, they spotted Boubou at a sleeping burrow grooming with Nightwatch members - she then proceeded to go below with the rest of Nightwatch.



Dominant female Boubou, at her natal group Trackie-Daks. Photo credit: Bronte Bowling, Meerkat Observer.

The following morning, an observer following Trackie-Daks reported Boubou returning to the group with Sticky and an unknown adult male, potentially Nightwatch adult subordinate male Shrimp

(VMPM070), who had left that morning as well. The males were chased away, but Boubou was accepted back and seen asserting her dominance over other subordinates in her natal group.

This event was unusual for our observers as female meerkats, especially dominant female meerkats, are not typically seen roving. Roving, attributed typically to male meerkats, usually occurs during the roving season which lasts from September to March. During this time, subordinate males conduct extra-territorial prospecting forays, for anything from a single afternoon to several months at a time, during which they approach foreign groups seeking reproductive and dispersal opportunities.¹

Competition for female breeding positions within a group is often intense, and once acquired, is not easily given up. Events on roving females, to leave the group voluntarily for one night and return to the group again, have not been reported previously. Subordinate females typically fight for dominance within their own group or get evicted and form their own group with other roving males, as was the case with the formation of Hogwarts. Regarding dominant females, they are not known to leave their group in search of breeding opportunities, but instead exert aggression towards other subordinate females to retain their breeding rights.¹

This was recently observed at Side Quest on the 7th when adult subordinate female Motoko Kusanagi (VSIF013) was evicted from the group by dominant female Pumba (VZUF048). Motoko Kusanagi was seen being away chased from a bolt-hole by Pumba, after dominant male Legolas (VECM009) mate-guarded the eldest subordinate. Pumba, reportedly in oestrus at the time of the event, drove her further away from the group as Legolas was seen following Motoko Kusanagi from the bolt-hole. Motoko Kusanagi was seen back with the group in the afternoon of the 9th, and Pumba has now been reported as pregnant. We suspect this was not the first time Motoko Kusanagi was evicted. In January this year, Motoko Kusanagi seemed not be part of Side Quest as observers reported her being chased away by the group, or altogether absent from the group, only to see her rejoining the group going below, using a separate entrance.

Boubou being a young dominant female, having only gained dominance from March this year she currently does not have a breeding mate as her presumed father Coquillette is currently the dominant male. In

contrast, Pumba, an older female who has been dominant since May 2021, has a breeding mate Legolas and has been seen fighting to defend her breeding rights. With all this in mind, this could likely explain Boubou's night out at Nightwatch.

Crownless

Competition for dominance positions is always interesting for the Kalahari Meerkat Project's (KMP) observers. The path to dominance within a group can sometimes be dramatic (a challenger and a winner) and sometimes peaceful (such as the passing away of a previous dominant with no challenger).

Regardless of the backstory, it is always anticipated as we eagerly look out for indications of submissions from eligible group members to determine the new dominants. Currently, however, it seems we are either missing information on submissive behaviour or there is no rush to claim the crown for males in groups such as Nightwatch, Elrond's Council and Jaxx - as the male dominance position remains vacant.

Male dominance at Nightwatch remains unconfirmed. There have been numerous dominance competitions throughout the month of June since the suspected dominant; adult male Sushi (VTSM006) passed away. The main initiators were adult subordinate males Sticky (VMPM064), Oozy (VMPM067) and Shrimp (VMPM070). The number of dominance competitions throughout this month have reduced, but no clear victor has yet emerged. We will continue following the group and report when dominance will have settled.

The last dominant male at Elrond's Council was current Alba adult subordinate male Palestrina (VLM211) who held the dominant position from October 2019 to January 2023. Palestrina regrettably had to leave the group as his presumed daughter, dominant female Snoop Kat (VECF039), took over the dominant role at Elrond's Council. In most cases in which a dominant female died, leaving an unmated dominant male and one or more mature subordinate females who were his daughters, the dominant male soon left the group³. If Snoop Kat is indeed his daughter, this would explain Palestrina relinquishing his dominance position and immigrating into Alba.

Since then, Snoop Kat has delivered three litters and the group has had multiple encounters with unknown adult males. In particular, and throughout the majority of this month, two unknown adult males have been seen approaching the group, raising alertness from observers of wild individuals potentially joining the group. This might not be out of question as Snoop Kat does not currently have a mate, and on the 17th was seen approaching and sniffing one of the unknown adult males. This further developed on the 20th and the 25th, when on both mornings an unknown adult male emerged from the sleeping burrow with the rest of the group and foraged at a distance with the group. Although Elrond's Council's

individuals are well-habituated, the immigration of wild males into the group has the potential of turning them into a habituation group.

The male dominance situation at Jaxx has similarly been renounced since former dominant male Leonard (VLM221), dominant from April 2018, was last seen in March 2023, reportedly leaving the group multiple times beforehand before not being seen again. Dominant female Jub Jub (VJXF160) currently holds dominance from February this year after her mother, adult subordinate female Baloo (VJXF080), stepped down after an 8-year reign. Additionally, adult subordinate male Sneaky (VJXM170) has been displaying dominance behaviour by excessively anal-marking boltholes. On the 6th, Sneaky initiated a dominance competition with Jub Jub which resulted in no clear winner. Given that Sneaky and Jub Jub are siblings, it was surprising to see this display of dominance behaviour from Sneaky.



Jaxx's adult subordinate male Sneaky on the 14th of July 2024. Photo credit: Sofya Melnikova, Life History Coordinator.

It is important to point out that there is a distinction between natal and immigrant dominants. Natal dominant males seldom mate within their group, as they are usually sons of the dominant female and siblings of subordinate females². For this reason, the benefits of gaining natal dominance are not clearly obvious. However, a study conducted in 2021 saw that "after dispersing from their natal group, they have a higher chance of acquiring dominant status in another breeding group, suggesting that acquiring dominance in their natal group has deferred direct fitness benefits for male meerkats"².

Jaxx does not have immigrant subordinate males, and natal males rarely take dominance if an immigrant subordinate male is already present in the group. This might be down to energy expenditure required to maintain bodyweight when competing for

dominance positions as there is no evidence females favour immigrant males over natal males.⁴ Seeing as there are no other contestants for the male dominance position at present and no immigrant subordinate males, Sneaky's behaviour remains to be observed.

We will be keeping an eye on these currently "crownless groups" as we eagerly await for the male dominant position to be secured.

References

¹ Hodge et al, 2008. Determinants of reproductive success in dominant female meerkats.

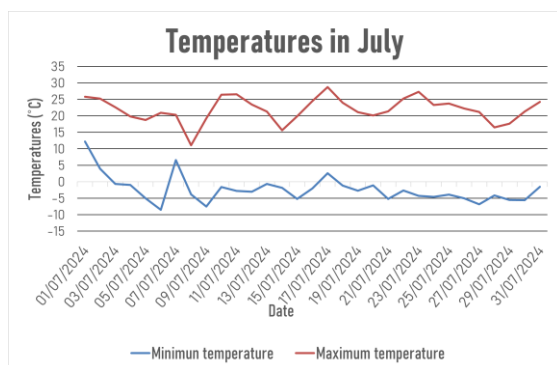
³ Griffin et al, 2003. A genetic analysis of breeding success in the cooperative meerkat (*Suricata suricatta*).

⁴ Spence-Jones et al, 2021. Deferred benefits of dominance for natal males in a cooperative breeder, the Kalahari meerkat.

Pregnancies in July 2024

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|--|----------|
| Females pregnant in July | 2 |
| Females who aborted | 1 |
| 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 | 1 |

Weather at the KMP



This month the temperature stayed at an average of 10°C. The average minimum temperature was -2.4°C and the average maximum temperature was 21.9°C. The hottest day was on the 17th of July, at 28.7°C. The coldest day was on the 6th with -8.5°C. Over the entire month it rained only on the 1st with a total of 0.8mm of rain.

July 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):

- 11 out of 12 members of the group were present at the end of the month.
- Adult subordinate male Ozzie (VECM033) left at the end of June and is yet to return.
- Dominant female Cleopatra (VALF008) was made officially pregnant on the 2nd but was found to have aborted the litter on the 12th.
- 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 month.
- *Male dominance* remained *unconfirmed* at Elrond's Council.
- Elrond's Council had a total of 4 encounters throughout July. The group encountered four unknown individuals on the 17th. At first, dominant female Snoop Kat (VECF039) approached two individuals and sniffed one of them. The group chased away the individuals who retreated and returned twice. The group repeatedly war danced and chased without physical contact two unknown individuals who repeatedly returned.
- The group did not have any group splits or inter-group interactions this month.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health.

Gold Diggers (FDC):

- All 14 members of the group were present at the end of the month.
- Gold Diggers had one inter-group interaction with Lazuli on the 6th. Both groups war danced towards each other and fought with Gold Diggers retreating.
- Gold Diggers had no encounters or group splits this month.
- The group's habituation is considered *Complete* as adult subordinate female Ricky Baker (VGDF031) can be now followed at ease. She is interested in water and can be successfully weighed consistently.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health.

Jaxx (FDC):

- All 14 members of the group were present at the end of the month.
- *Male dominance* remained *unconfirmed* at Jaxx.
- Adult subordinate male Sneaky (VJXM170) was seen leaving the group on the 6th and was seen returning to the group later on the same day.
- There were no group splits, encounters or inter-group interactions observed this month.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health.

Lazuli (FDC):

- All 22 members of the group were present at the end of the month.
- Lazuli had an inter-group interaction with Gold Diggers on the 6th. Both groups war danced towards each other, fought and Gold Diggers retreated.
- Lazuli had three daily group splits recorded on the 1st, 2nd, and 20th.
- Lazuli had no encounters this month.
- All individuals seemed to be in good health.

Side Quest (FDC):

- 15 out of 16 members of the group were present at the end of this month.
- Dominant female Pumba (VZUF048) was made officially pregnant on the 11th.
- Adult subordinate female Motoko Kusanagi (VSIF013) was evicted on the 7th by Pumba, she was seen back with the group on the 9th and acted part of the group. Sub-adult subordinate female Granita (VSIF031) did not wake up with the group on the 15th, she is yet to return. Yearling subordinate male Toph (VSIM024) was seen leaving the group on the 25th and returned later the same day. Adult subordinate male Deltron Zero (VSIM015) was seen chasing one unknown male on the 27th, he was seen back with the group on the 29th.
- Side Quest had 13 encounters with unknown adult males, 18 encounters with unknown adults, and one encounter with an unknown individual this month. On the 1st, the group war danced and chased three unknown individuals who retreated. On the 3rd, two unknown adult males and one unknown individual were seen foraging by the group, they ran away as the observer approached, but joined the group going below. On the 4th and the 5th one unknown individual was seen emerging from the sleeping burrow with the group but did not join the group to forage. On the 26th, the group war danced and chased five unknown adults' who retreated. Two unknown adult males approached the group, the group war danced and chased them away multiple times. On the 27th, the group war danced and chased two unknown adult males and five unknown adults who approached and retreated multiple times.
- Side Quest had no inter-group interactions or group splits this month.
- All members of the group seemed to be in good health.

Trackie-Daks (FDC):

- All 12 members were present at the end of the month.
- Dominant female Boubou (VTDF028) emigrated out of the group on the 6th but immigrated back into the group on the 7th.
- Trackie-Daks had six encounters this month. On the 7th, the group encountered adult subordinate male Sticky (VMPM064) and an unknown adult. Both approached the group together with Boubou who was returning to the group. The two males were chased away. On the 10th, the group war danced and chased away an unknown male who returned twice. Shortly afterwards, the group chased and fought an unknown male who repeatedly stayed at a 30m distance from the group. On the 11th, the group war danced towards an unknown adult who repeatedly retreated to a 40m distance.

- Trackie-Daks had one inter-group interaction with Nightwatch on the 6th. The group fought and chased Nightwatch and then retreated back to the sleeping burrow.
- The habituation level is currently *Advanced Progress*. The habituation individual, dominant male Coquillet (VTSM014), remains jumpy when followed closer than 2m.
- Yearling subordinate female Chinchilla's (VTDF029) and sub-adult subordinate male Johto's (VTDM039) injuries from last month have healed. The members of the group appeared to be in good health.

Ubuntu (FDC):

- All 19 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Ubuntu had no encounters, group splits or inter-group interactions this month.
- All members of the group appeared in good health at the end of the month.

Zulus (FDC):

- All 6 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- On the 8th, adult subordinate male Rain (VZUM067) left the group before the group left to forage; he was back with the group later the same day.
- Zulus had no encounters; inter-group interactions or group splits this month.
- All members of the group appeared in good health at the end of the month.

Life History Monitoring Groups:

Dik-Diks (LHM):

- All 10 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Adult subordinate female Tuna Fish II (VGDF026) left the group during the day on the 18th, she was seen back with the group later the same day.
- The group had no encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits this month.
- Habituation at this group is considered *Advanced Progress*. Both habituation individuals, dominant female Juliet (VGDF009) and adult subordinate female Shelby (VGDF022), are comfortable during follows at 1-2m. Both Shelby and Juliet are interested in water, and both have been weighed successfully this month.
- All members of the group appeared in good health at the end of the month.

Nightwatch (LHM)

- All 8 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- *Male dominance* at this group remains *unconfirmed*.
- Trackie-Daks dominant female Boubou (VTDF028) immigrated into the group on the 6th and emigrated out of the group on the 7th. Adult

subordinate males Sticky (VMPM064) and Sticky (VMPM070) left the group on the 7th with Boubou. Shrimp returned shortly after. Sticky appeared later the same day, the group war danced and chased him away twice. Sticky remained close to the group; he was seen going below in the same sleeping using a different entrance after the group went below. The next morning, he woke up again with the group.

- The group had one inter-group interaction with Trackie-Daks on the 6th. The group fought and was chased by Trackie-Daks.
- No encounters or group splits were observed this month.
- At the beginning of the month Sticky was reported with a submandibular lump on his right cheek, a sign of tuberculosis that was previously seen on adult subordinate male Sushi (VTSM006). The submandibular lump has disappeared, but his health is being monitored. All other members of the group appeared in good health at the end of the month.

Vetkoeks (LHM):

- All 4 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Yearling subordinate male Blackjack (VVKM002) was not with the group in the afternoon of the 10th but woke up with the group on the 11th.
- Vetkoeks had no observed 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 two 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.

Hogwarts (HAB):

- All 4 individuals and an unknown male were present at the end of the month.
- The group had no encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits this month.
- Hogwarts were visited 15 times this month. The group's habituation is classed as *In Progress*. Both adult females Salazar (VZUF051) and Helga (VZUF052) are comfortable with observers sitting next to them, are interested in both egg and water and are easy to weigh.
- Juvenile males Nkosana (VHWM001) and Buckbeak (VHM002) are both curious about egg and water. Nkosana is good with hands and movement and easy to weigh. Buckbeak remains jumpy with movement but was seen approaching the scale multiple times this month.
- The habituation of the unknown adult male is more difficult. The individual is comfortable with observers sitting at a 3m distance. He has not

shown any interest in egg or water and does not approach the scale.

- All members of the group appeared in good health at the end of the month.

Mandalore (HAB):

- The group was visited 6 times this month, 4 times the group was on heights.
- Together with Floki, five unknown meerkats were observed. But the exact group composition remains unknown.
- Floki is comfortable at 5-10 metres stand and came to 1-2 metres with egg frenzy. The unknown female ate some egg but kept a distance of 5 metres. All individuals still appear very skittish. The group is comfortable to sun and leave the sleeping burrow at a nearest distance of 30m. We will continue visiting the group to get them used to observers sitting and moving at a closer distance.

Phoenix (HAB):

- The group was visited 6 times this month. A group of four adults and three juveniles have been using a sleeping burrow formerly used by Phoenix.
- Habituation is *In Progress*. Observers can sit and move slowly at 80m distance, the majority of the group stay up at 35m distance when crawled but go below when observers stand up. None of the individuals have been seen sniffing egg when egg frenzying.
- The group is comfortable leaving the sleeping burrow to forage at 80m sitting distance. We will continue visiting the group to attempt moving closer to the group and increasing their comfort distance.

Whiskers (HAB):

- 9 out of 10 members of the group were present at the end of the month.
- *Female and male dominance remains unsettled* at Whiskers. Competition for female dominance between yearling subordinate females Gnull (VWF262) and Medusa (VWF263) continued at start of the month. Subordinate female Kylie has been seen displaying dominance behaviour as well. Not enough submissions have been observed so far.
- Yearling subordinate female Medusa (VWF263) did not wake up with the group on the 4th and is yet to return. Adult subordinate male Guido (VWM275) and one unknown adult male did not wake up with the group on the 10th, both returned to the group the same day.
- The group had one encounter on the 7th with three unknown individuals. The group war danced and chased without physical contact the individuals who retreated.
- The group had no inter-group interactions or group splits this month.
- The group's habituation is classed as *In Progress*. It was possible to consistently mark another adult wild male who is now entered in the database as adult subordinate male Guido (VWM275). Both Guido and adult subordinate male Gojo Satoru (VWM274) are fine with

waking up and sunning next to observers. Both can be groomed and drink water. Gojo Satoru approaches the scale, weighing however is still not possible. The third adult wild male is still difficult to approach, it is not possible to get closer than 3m. We will focus our habituation effort on getting Gojo Satoru and Guido interested in the egg, as well as the scale and reducing the distance for the adult wild male.

- All individuals appeared in good health at the end of the month.

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