



# The Meerkatter

*The Friends of the Kalahari Meerkat Project Report - www.kalahari-meerkats.com - July 2021*

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## **A tumultuous winter at Namaqua**

As already mentioned in the last Meerkatter, tuberculosis was on the rise again at Namaqua. In recent weeks, two individuals have succumbed to their symptoms. Yearling subordinate female Chandler (VNQF017) disappeared from the group between the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of June and is assumed dead. Dominant female Skirmish (VNQF009) was found dead a few days later.



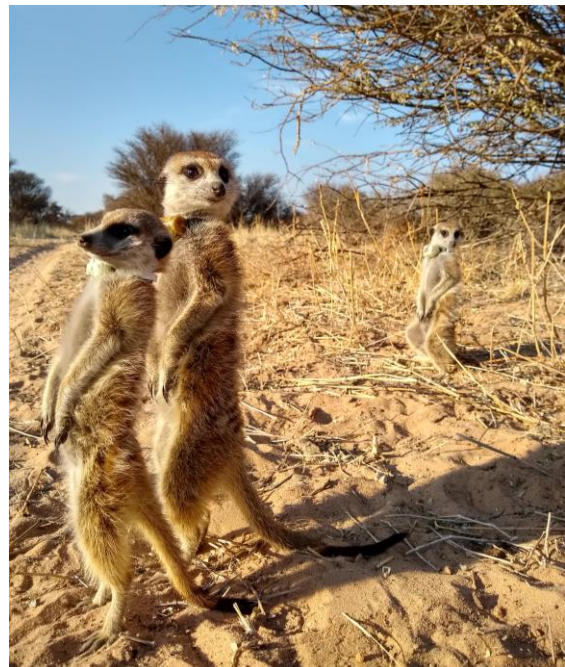
Former dominant female Skirmish (VNQF009) pregnant with her last litter. Photo credit: Former Life History Coordinator Shaz Alderton.

Observers first reported weight loss and submandibular lumps on both sides on Chandler mid-April. Mid-June observers also noticed more laboured breathing. She was last seen with the group on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and was not seen during the next session on the 25<sup>th</sup>. As she looked very weak at the time of her disappearance, we assume she died. She received a Last Seen on the 9<sup>th</sup> of July.

In September last year, when TB was also raging through the group, observers saw that Skirmish had difficulties breathing and suspected she had been infected with the disease. Her health, however, did not deteriorate any further and she pulled through. By the end of April of this year, people reported that she was looking skinny. She had also developed a lump on her left wrist. By mid-May observers could also feel a submandibular lump and a few weeks later her wrist lump burst. Over the course of one week in June, another lump formed on her right wrist, she became more fatigued by the day and showed signs of dyspnea. She was still seen during the morning

session on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July but was found dead in the road a few hours later. Our vet was able to perform an autopsy on her and confirmed it was TB that led to her death. A large tumor on her lung had ruptured and her lungs showed multiple lesions, caused by the disease.

Last winter, the disease also claimed several lives at Namaqua, including that of the former dominant female Heatherleigh (VLQF018). The two females that died recently are both her offspring. When we first noticed signs of TB in April, we feared that it might wipe out the entire group. Research has shown that TB is transmitted during grooming and aggressive social behaviours. Especially groomers - instead of the meerkats being groomed - and meerkats on the receiving end of aggression are more vulnerable to infection. Defying this logic of transmission through social contact, the rest of the group is currently not showing any symptoms.



Umfana (VZUM034), the new dominant male in the middle, with two of his new group members. Photo credit: Life History Coordinator Bieke Maex.



After the death of Skirmish, the position of dominant female became available again at Namaqua. Yearling subordinate littermates Manzaï (VNQF013) and Mononoke Hime (VNQF014) competed over the course of a week and by the 8<sup>th</sup> they had settled the matter. After dozens of hip slams, nose to nose rubs and actual fighting, Mononoke Hime – along with the other adult females – submitted to Manzaï and she officially became the new dominant female.

Since the predation of the former dominant male Sauce (VZUM026) by a Martial Eagle on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April, male dominance at Namaqua had remained unsettled. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of June adult subordinate male Umfana (VZUM034) left Elrond's Council and immigrated into Namaqua. He was immediately accepted as part of the group. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of July all other Namaqua males left the group to go on a roving expedition, making Umfana the only remaining and de facto dominant male. This was not Umfana's first relocation - the original Zulus meerkat had already left his home group for Elrond's Council in October 2019 with his brother Langa (VZUM033) and father, Palestrina (VLM211), who has been the dominant male of Elrond's Council ever since. Yearling subordinate males Zuko (VNQM012), Barney (VNQM018) and Cooper (VNQM019) have since returned and not challenged Umfana's new status as dominant.

Despite all these recent changes, Namaqua remain a big favourite amongst observers. They are a very mellow group, easy to weigh and like to sun right next to us after morning weights are finished. We all breathed a sigh of relief when we could not see anyone else's health deteriorate and are hoping Namaqua will once more make it through a wave of TB.

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### From wildie to friendly

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One of the favourite tasks of our observers at the KMP is working on the habituation of meerkats. Besides our three current habituation groups Gold Diggers, Trackie-Daks and Phoenix, we also have some individuals within otherwise well habituated groups that require some extra work. Time for an update on how everyone is doing!

At Lazuli, the two main targets are the dominant male Odin (VLM266) and adult subordinate male Captain Barbosa (VLM265). Both have improved massively over the course of the past few months, to the extent that Odin is no longer considered a habituation meerkat. He has become quite eager around the scales and has become increasingly more comfortable with being followed while foraging. Captain Barbosa evolved from being occasionally weighable, to an egg and water lover who comes into the scales most sessions. He waits until everyone else has jumped in and things have quieted down but is happy to come close to us and the scales after that. It is however quite the challenge to dye him. As long as we do not make too much noise or move too quickly, he is fine with us following him in the field at about 2m.



Lazuli's dominant male Odin (VLM266) is no longer considered a habituation meerkat. Photo credit: meerkat volunteer Tara Naeser.

The ladies that require work at Elrond's Council are dominant female Galadriel (VECF032) and adult subordinate female Pippin (VECF003). Galadriel has gone from a skittish meerkat to one that is all over the scales during morning weights and loves egg and water. She will occasionally bark at observers who are following her and the distance at which she tolerates us depends on the day. She has recently given birth and does have a history of becoming more nervous around people and very protective of her pups. It remains to be seen how her new litter will affect her behaviour. Pippin needs a bit more convincing, but we have also been able to weigh her consistently. Her two weeklong evictions from the group in July do not seem to have impacted her habituation.



Elrond's Council's dominant female Galadriel (VECF032) looking highly pregnant. Photo credit: Life History Coordinator Bieke Maex.

At Side Quest, two pups were born on the 2<sup>nd</sup>. They first emerged on the 21<sup>st</sup> and our habituation efforts have been rewarded. The little meerkats are very comfortable around us, and both already eat egg and drink water. The rest of the group has also become more at ease with our presence, and we now consider the group's habituation *Complete*.

Phoenix is of course nowhere near that level but is gradually improving. Some meerkats are fine with us sitting at 3m away, others prefer a distance of around 10m. We are trying to get them used to us moving and walking around near their sleeping burrow. After dozens of unsuccessful efforts, we finally managed to capture the only identifiable member of the group, yearling subordinate female Pinky (VPHF001). Her



radio collar had become a bit tight, and we replaced it with a larger one.

At Gold Diggers, observers are focusing on following the group for 3 hours after they leave their sleeping burrow in the morning. Most group members do not mind our presence and have even been weighed at lunch. Approaches in the afternoon are more stressful for them and Gold Diggers often split up into smaller groups when they see us. Some are happy to stay around the observers, others stealthily slink away in the high grass and make their way to the sleeping burrow. All individuals have dye marks, even though three individuals often have faint marks as they are quite skittish and very challenging to dye. These are the dominant female Cleo (VGDF013), yearling subordinate female Meghan (VGDF018) and sub-adult subordinate female Shelby (VGDF022). The mixed litter that was born at the end of February has lost two meerkats, but is still eight strong, making Gold Diggers one of our largest groups with 23 members.

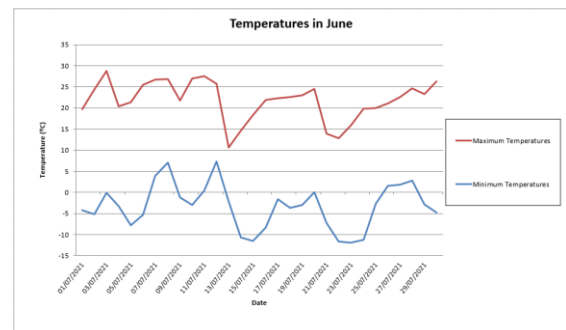
Last, but not least, the meerkats at Trackie-Daks are also improving well. Most adults like either egg or water and can be weighed consistently. We are having mixed success with their latest litter. Juvenile males Frida (VTDM005) and George (VTDM008) are always very excited to see us and happily jump into the scales. Their littermates Savakes (VTDF006) and Ketje (VTDM007) are currently our focus of attention. The former loves egg, the latter occasionally drinks a sip of water, but we have not been able to coax them into the scales yet. The dominant male Coquette (VTSM014) has good and bad days. He sometimes suns right next to us and comes over for water, on other days he prefers to sit with the other three skittish meerkats of the group. Yearling male Sketchy Bongo (VTSM019) and two wild unmarked adult females are not weighable but are gradually becoming more comfortable with our presence. On some days they are happy to sun at a mere 3m away and feel confident enough to leave the sleeping burrow with an observer sitting in the middle of the group.

It is very motivational for volunteers to see the meerkats become more comfortable around us and to see how much our habituation efforts are paying off. The end goal, as always, is to add more groups to our data collection pool and out of our three habituation groups, Gold Diggers will most likely be the first ones to reach that stage.

## Pregnancies in July 2021

Females pregnant in July	4
Females who aborted	0
Females who gave birth, litters lost	0
Females who gave birth, litter emerged	1
Females who gave birth, unknown outcome	3
Females still pregnant at the end of the month	0

## Weather at the KMP



July was the coldest month of the year yet, with an average maximum of 21.9 °C and average minimum of -3.3 °C. Temperatures dipped below -10 °C for five nights. The coldest day was on the 13<sup>th</sup>, with a maximum of only 10.6 °C. We had 0.6 mm of rain on the 9<sup>th</sup>.

## July 2021 Life History Details

### Elrond's Council:

- All 19 individuals were present at the end of the month. Dominant female Galadriel (VECF032) gave birth on the 25<sup>th</sup> but we have not seen any pups yet.
- Adult subordinate male Langa (VZUM033) left the group twice. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> he was seen foraging with Namaqua and returned to Elrond's Council that same afternoon. On the 14<sup>th</sup> he left for about 45 minutes.
- Yearling subordinate female Orc (VECF012) was accepted back at the beginning of the month after her eviction. She left the group one more time on the 19<sup>th</sup>, unsuccessfully tried to re-join on the 20<sup>th</sup> and was accepted back on the 27<sup>th</sup>. Adult subordinate female Pippin (VECF003) left the group from the 14<sup>th</sup> until the 21<sup>st</sup> and again from the 22<sup>nd</sup> until the 27<sup>th</sup>.
- The group had two individual encounters with adult subordinate male Jay-A-Rod (VWM216) and one with yearling subordinate male Zuma (VZUM059) – both from Zulus - on the 21<sup>st</sup>.
- Elrond's Council had two group encounters with Zulus, on the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup>.
- No group splits were observed in July.
- Habituation is still considered *Incomplete*. Both Galadriel and Pippin are being weighed on a



regular basis but are still not too comfortable with close follows while they are foraging. The rest of the individuals are fully habituated.

- All individuals appear to be in good health.

#### **Gold Diggers:**

- The number of individuals at Gold Diggers has decreased to 21 at the end of the month since juvenile male Momo (VGDM027) has been given his Last Seen. He has been missing from the group since the 16<sup>th</sup> of June. Yearling subordinate males Jack (VGDM010) and James Sawyer (VGDM011) both left the group during the last week of the month and have been spotted roving together on the 29<sup>th</sup>.
- There were no individual encounters, inter-group-interactions or group splits observed this month.
- Gold Diggers' habituation level is in *Advanced Progress* as the group members are all marked, most individuals are weighable, and observers have been working hard to let Gold Diggers adjust to being followed for 3 hours in the mornings.
- All individuals seem to be healthy.

#### **Hakuna Matata:**

- 16 out of 17 individuals were present at the end of April. Sub-adult subordinate female Mae (VHMF052) returned on the 4<sup>th</sup> but left the group again on the 7<sup>th</sup> and has not been seen since.
- Adult subordinate male Gurke (VHMM036) also returned on the 4<sup>th</sup>, left the group two more times, and was accepted back each time. Sub-adult subordinate female Lord Havelock (VHMF049) left the group on the 8<sup>th</sup> and returned on the 9<sup>th</sup>.
- Hakuna Matata had two encounters with former group member female Munchkin (VHMF019) but she was chased away.
- Adult female Sencha (VHMF030) is the new dominant female at Hakuna Matata.
- There were no inter-group-interactions or group splits observed this month.
- All individuals appear healthy.

#### **Jaxx:**

- There were 18 out of 21 individuals present at the end of the month. The dominant female Baloo (VJXF080) gave birth on the 25<sup>th</sup> but we do not yet know how many pups she had. Adult subordinate female Eléa (VJXF129) and yearling subordinate female Salamander (VJXF135) have not returned since their eviction at the end of June but might still do so now that Baloo has given birth. Sub-adult subordinate male The Doctor (VJXM154) has been missing from the group since the 5<sup>th</sup>.
- Adult subordinate male Rincewind (VJXM131) and yearling subordinate males Nibs (VJXM137) and Tootles (VJXM139) were seen roving at Runaways on the 12<sup>th</sup>.
- Tootles and sub-adult subordinate females Footprints (VJXF148) and Gray (VJXF150) left the group during a group split on the 27<sup>th</sup> and did not come back with the rest when it ended. They did wake up with the group the next morning.

- Yearling subordinate female Enya (VJXF141) was accepted back from her eviction on the 2<sup>nd</sup> but was then evicted again from the 12<sup>th</sup> until the 26<sup>th</sup>.
- One daily group split occurred on the 27<sup>th</sup>.
- There were no encounters or inter-group-interactions seen in July.
- All individuals seem to be in good health.

#### **Lazuli:**

- All 15 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Adult subordinate male Shandy (VHMM023), adult subordinate female Lennon (VLF246), yearling subordinate male Moteck (VLM261) and juvenile male Chüya (VLM276) left the group during an inter-group interaction with Ubuntu on the 14<sup>th</sup> and had all returned to the group by the 18<sup>th</sup>.
- The group had an encounter with adult subordinate male Jay-A-Rod (VWM216) from Zulus on the 4<sup>th</sup>.
- There was a daily group split on the 31<sup>st</sup>.
- Lazuli's habituation level is *Incomplete* as the habituation of Captain Barbosa (VLM265) is ongoing. He is being weighed consistently but is still uncomfortable with observers approaching within 1-5m while he is foraging. The habituation of dominant male Odin (VLM266) has improved so much, that he is now considered a fully habituated meerkat.
- All individuals at Lazuli seem to be in good health.

#### **Make-e-Plan:**

- All 22 individuals were present at the end of July.
- Yearling subordinate male Doby (VMPM037) left the group on the 16<sup>th</sup> and returned later that day.
- Make-e-plan had an encounter with yearling subordinate male Zuko (VNQF012) from Namaqua on the 17<sup>th</sup>.
- The group had two inter-group interactions with Namaqua on the 17<sup>th</sup>.
- A group split was observed on the same day.
- All individuals appear to be in good health.

#### **Namaqua:**

- Namaqua consisted of 11 meerkats at the end of July. The dominant female Skirmish (VNQF009) was found dead on the 1<sup>st</sup>. Yearling subordinate female Chandler (VNQF017) was given her Last Seen on the 9<sup>th</sup>. She disappeared from the group on the 25<sup>th</sup> of June and was suffering from serious TB symptoms. It is likely she has died from those.
- Yearling subordinate females Manzaï (VNQF013) and Mononoke Hime (VNQF014) competed for dominance at the group until the 8<sup>th</sup>. That day, Manzaï officially became the new dominant female of Namaqua. Elrond's Council's adult male Umfana (VZUM034), who immigrated into Namaqua in June, has become the new dominant male.
- Yearling subordinate male Zuko (VNQM012) left the group twice. Yearling subordinate males Barney (VNQM018) and Cooper (VMQM019)



left the group four times and successfully returned each time.

- Namaqua had an encounter with adult subordinate male Langa (VZUM033) from Elrond's Council on the 2<sup>nd</sup>.
- There were two inter-group interactions with Make-e-plan on the 17<sup>th</sup>.
- There were no group splits observed in July.
- The remaining meerkats at Namaqua are currently not showing any signs of TB.

#### **Phoenix**

- The only identifiable individual, the radio collared yearling female Pinky (VPHF001), was present at the end of the month along with 18 unmarked individuals.
- On the 12<sup>th</sup> we managed to capture her and replace her radio collar.
- No group composition changes, major life history events, encounters or interactions were witnessed this month.
- The group's habituation status is still *In Progress*. On most days observers are tolerated at 5-10m.
- All individuals at Phoenix appear to be healthy.

#### **Runaways:**

- There were 9 out of 12 individuals present at the end of the month. The adult dominant female Bigwig (VMPF022) gave birth on the 30<sup>th</sup>. We have not yet seen any pups. Adult subordinate females Cirilla (VMPF026) and Hope (VMPF029) have not yet returned after their eviction at the end of June, but they might still come back now that Bigwig has given birth. Adult subordinate female Scylla (VMPF025) was evicted on the 31<sup>st</sup>.
- Adult subordinate male Grigio (VJX126) left the group four times and juvenile male Roger (VRWM005) left the group once.
- Runaways had seven encounters with roving yearling subordinate male Nibs (VJXM137) and eight with subordinate males Rincwind (VJX131) and Tootles (VJXM139) from Jaxx on the 12<sup>th</sup>.
- There were no inter-group-interactions or group splits at Runaways this month.
- All individuals appear to be in good health.

#### **Side Quest:**

- The number of group members at Side Quest increased to 9 this month. On the 1<sup>st</sup> the dominant female gave birth to 2 pups.
- The first one (VSIP005) emerged on the 21<sup>st</sup> and the second one (VSIP006) on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. Both changed burrows for the first time on the 28<sup>th</sup> and foraged with the group for the first time on the 29<sup>th</sup>.
- Side Quest had no encounters, inter-group-interactions or group splits this month.
- Side Quest's habituation level is now *Complete* as observers manage to weigh all individuals consistently and are able to follow them closely while they are foraging.
- All individuals seem to be healthy.

#### **Trackie-Daks:**

- There were 14 out of 15 marked individuals present at the end of the month. The two unmarked wild yearling females were also present. Juvenile subordinate female KB1 (VTDF009) has not been seen with the group since the 11<sup>th</sup>.
- There were no individual encounters, inter-group-interactions, or group splits observed this month.
- Trackie-Daks' habituation level is *In Progress* as there are still two wild unmarked females in the group and yearling male Sketchy Bongo (VTSM019) cannot be seen every session.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

#### **Ubuntu:**

- All 17 individuals were present at Ubuntu at the end of July.
- The status of dominant male is still unknown.
- The group had an inter-group-interaction with Lazuli on the 14<sup>th</sup>. Yearling subordinate males Stanislas (VUBM029), Mr. Worldwide (VUBM031), Rowdy (VUBM032) and juvenile female Welma (VUBF043) all left the group during the chaos that ensued. They had all returned to the group by the next morning.
- During the inter-group-interaction Ubuntu had encounters with adult subordinate male Shandy (VHMM023), yearling subordinate male Moteck (VLM261), adult subordinate female Lennon (VLF246) and juvenile male Chüya (VLM276) from Lazuli. They also had encounters with an unknown meerkat and were approached by their own members Stanislas, Mr. Worldwide and Rowdy.
- They had an encounter with adult subordinate male Slop (VLM253) from Lazuli on the 21<sup>st</sup>.
- There were no group splits at Ubuntu this month.
- All individuals appear to be in good health.

#### **Whiskers:**

- All 19 individuals were present at the end of July.
- Yearling subordinate male Lupin (VWM234) left the group on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, tried to re-join five times that same day and was not accepted back. He was found foraging with the group again by the next afternoon.
- Whiskers had an encounter with adult female Munchkin (VHMF019) and adult male Shaggy (VUNKM002) on the 3<sup>rd</sup>.
- There were no inter-group-interactions or group splits in July.
- All individuals at Whiskers seem to be healthy.

#### **Zulus:**

- All 13 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Adult subordinate male Jay-A-Rod (VWM216) left the group twice and was once joined by yearling subordinate male Zuma (VZUM059). Observers at Elrond's Council witnessed the encounters these roving males had with the group.



- Zulus had one inter-group-interaction with Elrond's Council on the 5<sup>th</sup> and another one on the 21<sup>st</sup>.
- There were no individual encounters or group splits observed this month.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

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**The following authors contributed to this report:**

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