



# The Meerkatter

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

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## Make-e-Plan (4)

Ever since the disappearance of dominant male Banksia (VVHM117) mid-September, things have been tumultuous at Make-e-Plan. He was last seen with the group on the 10<sup>th</sup> of September. As he was the individual with the radio collar, his disappearance meant we also could not find the rest of the group for several days. After a few days of burrow sweeps and waiting for the group at some of their favourite sleeping burrows, we finally found them again on the 15<sup>th</sup>.

When we found the group, Banksia was no longer with them. A month and a half later, no new sightings have been noted for him and he has been moved into the group *Unknown* in the database and on the marksheet. It is possible, yet unlikely, that he left the group to go roving. Therefore, we will wait for the customary two-month period we give male meerkats during the breeding season before giving him a Last Seen as his Final Event.



Banksia (VVHM117), the dominant male at Make-e-Plan (in the middle, wearing the collar) with the rest of his group before he went missing around the 15<sup>th</sup> of September. Photo credit: meerkat volunteer Tara Naeser.

During the four days we lost track of Make-e-Plan, the dominant female Bridget (VQLF011) gave birth. Her pups never emerged and are considered lost as the group has already moved burrows several times, is no longer leaving babysitters and no one is lactating anymore.

The dominant female would be the logical choice for the new radio collar. However, as Bridget is a very skittish meerkat and near impossible to catch, we decided to put a new collar on adult subordinate

female Arabella (VMPF035) as soon as we found the group again on the 15<sup>th</sup>.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> Arabella left the group together with her littermate, adult subordinate female Vivienne (VMPF038), and sub-adult male Sidney (VMPM059). This unfortunately meant we lost track of Make-e-Plan once more and had to collar yet another individual as soon as we found them, this time yearling subordinate male Priscilla (VMPM046). He was the only male of his litter that had not left to go roving.

The trio that left Make-e-Plan encountered Namaqua on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. Namaqua saw the much smaller group; war danced at them and chased the meerkats away. The Make-e-Plan subgroup was then joined by adult male Zuko (VNQM012) and yearling males Barney (VNQM018) and Cooper (VNQM019) from Namaqua. The males chased Sidney away, who in turn joined Namaqua. The composition of this new subgroup has been stable since this day and is temporarily called *Make-e-Plan 4*. If the group turns out to be breeding successfully or is still together in two months' time, we can consider them an official group at which time they will also get a new group name.



Make-e-Plan 4 by their sleeping burrow before they went below for the night. Photo credit: meerkat volunteer Maddie Koeplin.

Shortly after the inter-group interaction Zuko mated with Arabella. Barney also made an attempt, but the observer who was with the group could not be sure whether this was successful. Since the 22<sup>nd</sup> we have



been witnessing a lot of dominance competition behaviours between Arabella and Vivienne to determine who will become the new dominant female at the group. They have been hip slamming and chinning each other a lot since the inter-group interaction with Namaqua. We have not seen either one submitting to the other yet, so dominance seems to be unsettled for now. The males have not been showing dominance competition behaviours, so it is possible that they have settled dominance already. However, we have not witnessed any direct submissions, so we cannot be sure of this and we are currently waiting for any behaviours that can shed some light on this unclear situation.

As all five members of this new group are well habituated, we could immediately start data collection at the group. We are still trying to figure out what their new territory will be. For now, they seem to have settled on our neighbouring farm Leeupan, in an area Make-e-Plan spent time in during the early winter months of this year. This territory is wedged between Make-e-Plan and Namaqua's current territories, so it will be interesting to see how the groups will react when they next encounter their former group members.

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### Rains and rovers

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We had quite a bit of rain during the last ten days of October. It started off with a light 3.4mm on the 21<sup>st</sup>, followed by 29.19mm the day after. We received another 22.4mm of rain on the 28<sup>th</sup> and finally 16.39mm on the 29<sup>th</sup>. The effect on the meerkats at the Kalahari Meerkat Project has been twofold.

Firstly, meerkats are clearly taking advantage of the more varied and nutritious foraging options that have become available to them. We have observed them eating snakes, lizards, huge scorpions and more. Most observers were truly surprised to see how quickly the animals gained weight in the days after the rains. Weight gains of about 100 grams over the course of a few days were not a rare exception for adult meerkats.

Secondly, the rains have made it clear to our meerkat population that summer – and the accompanying breeding season – has officially begun. Even though this past winter has shown us that breeding can happen year-round, it primarily takes place from September to March. One of the first behaviours to signal this start is that males leave their home groups to go roving.

Subordinate males tend to go roving in the hopes of finding extra-group mating opportunities. According to a paper from 2007, males typically remain subordinates in their home groups well into adulthood. As they are closely related to the females in their group, they usually do not breed with resident females. Males sometimes disperse in coalitions with other males they are related to. Even if they manage to disperse and start a new group with unrelated females, only one of them will become the new

dominant male and monopolize reproductive opportunities within the group.

It is therefore thought that males possibly also go on roving forays to find reproductive opportunities with females from other groups without having to actually disperse. The same research paper shows that subordinate males frequently go on forays outside of their normal territories for 1-150 days at a time. Females do not tend to leave their territories unless they are dispersing from their home group permanently. This same paper found that when subordinate males find a potential mate, they are often refused by the female and do not mate in close proximity to the rest of her group. It does however happen that those females temporarily leave their home groups with these prospecting males for up to 24 hours and mate out of sight. This phenomenon is not uncommon. It is believed that extra-group paternity, meaning that pups were sired by a male from outside the group, can be as high as 20-25% in meerkats.



Slop (VLM253), an adult subordinate male from Lazuli, spotted by while roving. Photo credit: meerkat volunteer Maddie Koeplin

We currently have quite a few rovers in the population. An unknown rover approached Elrond's Council several times in October. Adult subordinate male Rincewind (VJXM131) from Jaxx left the group twice. Adult subordinate male Captain Barbosa (VLM265) from Lazuli was seen by himself near Gold Diggers. Adult subordinate male Slop (VLM253) from the same group went roving three times in October and has not yet returned from his latest foray. He was once joined by adult subordinate male Shandy (VHMM023), who returned the next day. Make-e-Plan's adult subordinate males Thorn (VMPM027), Maverick (VMPM034), Kanyonyi (VMPM036) and Doby (VMPM037) left the group together, presumably to go roving, and have not yet returned.

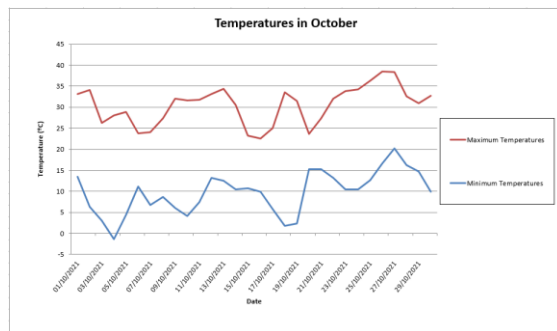


One of our habituation groups, Trackie-Daks, also had a few rovers last month. Yearling subordinate male Jumper (VTSM017) left the group and returned two days later. Yearling subordinate male Sushi (VTSM006) also has not yet returned from his latest roving expedition. Lastly, usual suspect adult subordinate male Jay-A-Rod (VWM216) from Zulus left his home group and was spotted roving at Lazuli. Surely this is only the start, and more males will probably follow suit soon. We take DNA samples of all our meerkats, and it will be very interesting to see whether some of these males actually managed to find successful mating opportunities while they went on their roving forays.

### Pregnancies in October 2021

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

### Weather at the KMP



Temperatures are still increasing in the Kalahari. The average maximum was 30.5 °C and the average minimum 9.6 °C. The 13<sup>th</sup> was the hottest day, with temperatures rising to 38.6 °C. The coldest morning was on the 4<sup>th</sup> when temperatures dropped to -1.4 °C. We had a total of 71.8 mm of rain in October.

### October 2021 Life History Details

#### Elrond's Council:

- All 23 members were present at the end of the month.
- Adult subordinate female Pippin (VECF003) gave birth on the 21<sup>st</sup> or 22<sup>nd</sup>. We do not yet know how many pups she had.
- One pup (VECP037) of the previous litter by the dominant female Galadriel (VECF032) disappeared from the group on the 12<sup>th</sup> and was given its Last Seen.

- Adult subordinate male Langa (VZUM033) left the group on the morning of the 5<sup>th</sup>. He was seen roving at Side Quest and returned to his home group a few hours later.
- The group had 3 encounters with an unknown adult meerkat. One on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, next on the 25<sup>th</sup> and finally on the 30<sup>th</sup>.
- Elrond's Council had 5 daily group splits and one of uncertain duration in October.
- No inter-group-interactions were observed this month.
- 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:

- All 23 meerkats were present at Gold Diggers at the end of the month.
- Yearling subordinate female Shelby (VGDF022) left the group on the 27<sup>th</sup> and was found with Gold Diggers again on the 29<sup>th</sup>.
- The group had 2 encounters with adult subordinate male Captain Barbosa (VLM265) from Lazuli on the 23<sup>rd</sup>.
- There were no inter-group-interactions observed this month.
- Gold Diggers had 1 daily group split on the 20<sup>th</sup>.
- Gold Diggers' habituation level is in *Advanced Progress* as the group members are all marked, most individuals are weighable and quite comfortable with follows during the morning. The group is not always comfortable with being approached and followed during the afternoon, so that is where our current focus lies.
- All individuals seem to be healthy.

#### Hakuna Matata:

- There were 14 out of 16 individuals present at the end of October.
- The 2 pups (VHMP055 and VHMP056) that were born at the end of August were not seen again since their disappearance at the end of September and received their Last Seen.
- Former group member adult female Munchkin (VHMF019) was found dead on the main road on the 25<sup>th</sup>.
- Adult subordinate male Sacrebleu! (VHMM034) was moved into the group Unknown as he has not been sighted since the end of September. As it is the breeding season and he might be roving, he will still get another month before being given his Last Seen.
- Adult subordinate male Gurke (VHMM036) left the group on the 28<sup>th</sup>.
- Before that he had already left the group 3 times during the course of October and returned each time a few days later. Yearling subordinate male Ogg (VHMM047) left the group on the 25<sup>th</sup> and returned the same day. Adult subordinate male Luther (VLM245) left the group 3 times for a few days and was seen roving at Ubuntu during each one of these periods.





- No individual encounters were observed in October.
- Hakuna Matata had an inter-group interaction with Ubuntu on the 17<sup>th</sup>.
- There was 1 daily group split on the 13<sup>th</sup>.
- All individuals appear healthy.

#### Jaxx:

- There were 20 out of 25 members present at the end of the month.
- Adult subordinate females Elea (VJXF129) and Salamander (VJXF135) and yearling subordinate female Amanda Leigh Rose James (VJXF143) all left the group on the 29<sup>th</sup>.
- Adult subordinate male Rincewind (VJXM131) and yearling subordinate female Enya (VJXF141) have not yet returned from a group split of uncertain duration that started on the 28<sup>th</sup>.
- Besides the group split, adult subordinate male Rincewind (VJXM131) left the group for a few hours on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and from the 23<sup>rd</sup> until the 24<sup>th</sup>.
- Jaxx had 2 daily group splits, one of uncertain duration and 2 overnight splits.
- There were no individual encounters or inter-group-interactions observed in October.
- All individuals seem to be in good health.

#### Lazuli:

- 11 out of 15 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- The dominant female Sigma (VLF230) had 3 pups in total. One (VLP280) was found dead and the other 2 (VLP279 and VLP281) both went missing from the group around the 9<sup>th</sup> and have both been given their Last Seen.
- Sub-adult male Chŭya (VLM276) left the group on the 9<sup>th</sup> and has not been seen since. Adult subordinate female Lennon (VLF246) left the group on the 26<sup>th</sup>. Her littermate, adult subordinate female Haopia (VLF244), was observed being evicted on the 25<sup>th</sup>. Adult subordinate male Slop (VLM253) left the group 4 times in October and only returned 3 times. These 4 meerkats were missing from the group at the end of the month.
- Adult subordinate male Captain Barbosa (VLM265) left the group on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and returned to the group later that day. During his absence he was seen roving at the neighbouring group Gold Diggers. Adult subordinate male Shandy (VHMM023) left the group on the 25<sup>th</sup> and returned the next day.
- Lazuli had several encounters with roving Ubuntu males on the 25<sup>th</sup>. Dominant male Mr. Worldwide (VUBM031), yearling subordinate males Stanislas (VUBM029), Rowdy (VUBM032), Stitch (VUBM033) and Thulani (VUBM036) all approached Lazuli multiple times that morning and were chased off each time. They also had an encounter with adult subordinate male Jay-A-Rod (VWM216) from Zulus on the 30<sup>th</sup>.
- 2 daily group splits were observed in October.
- No inter-group interactions took place.

- Lazuli's habituation level is *Incomplete* as the habituation of adult subordinate male Captain Barbosa (VLM265) is ongoing. He is being weighed consistently but is still uncomfortable with observers coming too close while he is foraging.
- All individuals at Lazuli seem to be in good health.

#### Make-e-Plan:

- The number of Make-e-Plan members dropped to 18. 4 out of those 18 are currently missing from the group.
- The dominant male Banksia (VVHM117) went missing around the 15<sup>th</sup> of September. He was moved into the group Unknown as he has not been sighted since his disappearance. Even though it is unlikely that the dominant male went roving, we will still wait for 2 months before giving him a Last Seen. New male dominance remains unsettled at the group.
- Adult subordinate males Thorn (VMPM027), Maverick (VMPM034), Kanyonyi (VMPM036) and Doby (VMPM037) all left the group on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, presumably to go roving.
- On the 20<sup>th</sup>, adult subordinate females Arabella (VMPF035) and Vivienne (VMPF038) and sub-adult male Sidney (VMPM059) left the group together. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> the 3 of them had an inter-group interaction with Namaqua. Adult male Zuko (VNQM012) and yearling males Barney (VNQM018) and Cooper (VNQM019) from Namaqua left with the Make-e-Plan females and formed a new group, for now known as Make-e-Plan 4. During the IGI, Sidney left his Make-e-Plan group members and immigrated into Namaqua.
- Yearling subordinate male Priscilla (VMPM046) left the group on the 16<sup>th</sup> and returned to the group the next day.
- The group had an encounter with an unknown meerkat on the 23<sup>rd</sup>.
- Make-e-Plan had 4 group splits in October; 1 daily and 3 of uncertain duration.
- All individuals appear to be in good health.

#### Make-e-Plan 4:

- This new subgroup was formed after an inter-group interaction between adult subordinate females Arabella (VMPF035) and Vivienne (VMPF038) and sub-adult male Sidney (VMPM059) from Make-e-Plan and the group Namaqua on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. 3 males from Namaqua; adult male Zuko (VNQM012) and yearling males Barney (VNQM018) and Cooper (VNQM019), joined the subgroup and chased away Sidney, who then immigrated into Namaqua.
- Both female and male dominance are unsettled in the group. Mainly Arabella and Vivienne are regularly observed to be competing for dominance.
- The day of the IGI, Zuko successfully mated with Arabella. Barney also tried to mate with her, but the observer could not be sure whether that was successful.



- All individuals at Make-e-Plan 4 seem to be in good health.

#### **Namaqua:**

- Namaqua went from 11 to 9 meerkats in October.
- As mentioned above, adult male Zuko (VNQM012) and yearling males Barney (VNQM018) and Cooper (VNQM019) left the group on the 22<sup>nd</sup> after an IGI with the Make-e-Plan subgroup containing adult subordinate females Arabella (VMPF035) and Vivienne (VMPF038) and sub-adult male Sidney (VMPM059). The Namaqua males chased away Sidney from Make-e-Plan 4, who then immigrated into Namaqua.
- Yearling subadult female Megara (VMPF020) and Sidney did not wake up with the group on the 25<sup>th</sup>, but both returned the next day.
- There were no individual encounters or group splits observed in October.
- Yearling subordinate female Hiccup (VNQF016) still has tuberculosis symptoms. She now has a submandibular lump on each side. The one on the left is approximately 2\*3cm and the one on the right 2.5\*4cm. She has also developed a cough and is starting to become emaciated. So far, no other Namaqua meerkats are showing 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 15 unmarked individuals. Last month we still had 20 unmarked individuals. It is possible that some meerkats left the group to go roving or were evicted, but as we cannot identify them and do not always see all of them, we cannot be sure who or exactly how many are missing.
- The 3 pups we saw in September have not been seen since.
- No encounters or interactions were witnessed this month.
- The group's habituation status is still *In Progress*. On most days observers are tolerated at 2-5m.
- All individuals at Phoenix appear to be healthy.

#### **Runaways:**

- There were 10 out of 12 members present at the end of the month.
- Adult subordinate females Cirilla (VMPF026) and Hope (VMF029) left the group on the 29<sup>th</sup>.
- Runaways had no encounters, inter-group-interactions or group splits this month.
- All individuals appear to be in good health.

#### **Side Quest:**

- There were 8 of 11 meerkats present at the end of October.
- 3 pups (VSIP007, VSIP008, VSIP009) first emerged on the 18<sup>th</sup>. They had their first move on the 11<sup>th</sup> and foraged with the group for the first time on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. They went missing from the

group between the morning and afternoon sessions on the 24<sup>th</sup>. They will be given 10 days before receiving a Last Seen.

- Side Quest had no encounters, inter-group-interactions or group splits this month.
- All individuals seem to be healthy.

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

- 11 out of 16 individuals were present at the end of October.
- Dominant female BB (VTDF010) has not been seen since the 26<sup>th</sup>. Adult subordinate female Scarface (VTDF011) was evicted on the 19<sup>th</sup>. Sub-adult female Savakes (VTDF006) has been missing since the 5<sup>th</sup> and littermate Ketje (VTDM007) since the 15<sup>th</sup>. Yearling subordinate male Sushi (VTSM006) left the group on the 26<sup>th</sup>.
- Yearling subordinate female Fergalicious (VTSF020) approached the group both on the 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> and was chased away. She was however accepted back into the group on the 31<sup>st</sup> after being evicted at the start of September.
- Yearling subordinate male Jumper (VTSM017) left the group on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and was seen roving at Ubuntu. He had returned to the group by the 5<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 the adult females BB (VTDF010) and Scarface (VTDF011), yearling male Sketchy Bongo (VTSM019) and dominant male Coquette (VTSM014) still need a lot of habituation work.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

#### **Ubuntu:**

- There were 13 out of 17 individuals present at the end of the month.
- Yearling subordinate males Stanislas (VUBM029), Rowdy (VUBM032), Stitch (VUBM033) and Thulani (VUBM036) did not get up with the group on the 25<sup>th</sup> and had not returned by the end of the month.
- They were joined by the dominant male Mr. Worldwide (VUBM031) and were all seen roving together at Lazuli on the 25<sup>th</sup>. Later that day, Mr. Worldwide returned to Ubuntu by himself.
- They had an encounter with yearling subordinate male Jumper (VTSM017) on the 3<sup>rd</sup>.
- The group had an interaction with adult subordinate male Luther (VLM245) from Hakuna Matata on the 20<sup>th</sup>, 2 more on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and another one on the 26<sup>th</sup>. They encountered his group member, adult subordinate male Gurke (VHMM036), on the 16<sup>th</sup>.
- 1<sup>st</sup> but had returned by the next morning session.
- The group had 1 encounter with yearling subordinate male Jumper (VTSM017) from Trackie-Daks on the 16<sup>th</sup>.
- Ubuntu had 1 inter-group-interactions with Hakuna Matata in October.
- No group splits were observed this month.
- All individuals appear to be in good health.



**Whiskers:**

- All 18 individuals present at the end of the month.
- Yearling subordinate male Ragnar (VWM239) has not been seen since the end of August and was given a Last Seen.
- There were no individual encounters, inter-group-interactions or group splits observed this month.
- All individuals at Whiskers seem to be healthy.

**Zulus:**

- There were 12 out of 13 individuals present at the end of the month.
- No more pups were seen since the end of September and the one that was seen is assumed to have been predated.
- Adult subordinate male Jay-A-Rod (VWM216) was absent at the end of the month. He did not get up with the group on the 30<sup>th</sup> and was seen roving at Lazuli.
- No individual encounters, group splits or inter-group interactions were observed this month.
- All individuals appear to be healthy.

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

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