



The Meerkatter

The Friends of the Kalahari Meerkat Project Report – www.kalahari-meerkats.com – March 2025

Last Chance!.....	1-2	Pregnancies in March.....	2
		Life History Details.....	2-6

Last Chance!

March is typically the first month of respite, marking the end of the breeding season and the easing of all the chaos that usually accompanies it. However, this year has defied expectations — with 22 pregnancies recorded this month, it still very much feels like the peak of breeding activity.

Here in the Kalahari, we have finally had significantly more rainfall than so far this summer, leading to the sudden emergence of sour grass across much of the reserve. With this influx of water has come an explosion of life, especially among the invertebrates. This has greatly benefitted the meerkats. While they have had to endure cold, wet mornings — with our observers often left waiting at burrows for meerkats who seemed entirely unconvinced about foraging — the longer-term gains have been substantial. Food is now abundant, temperatures are mild, and there is still time left in the breeding season, presenting a perfect time window for another litter.

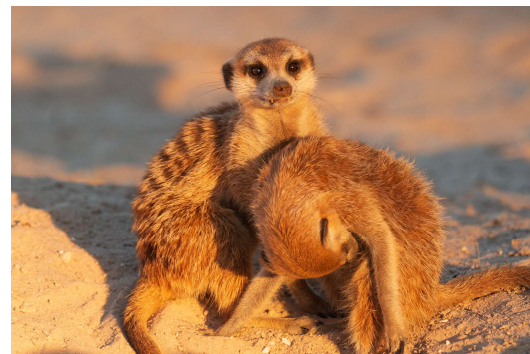
To be exact, the 22 pregnancies noted this March surpass the previous eight-year average for the month, which stays slightly above 13, with about the number of monitored groups staying the same.. We can only speculate about the reason for this surge, but one likely factor is the abundance of resources. With more food available, meerkats are better equipped to engage in energetically expensive behaviours like pregnancy, evictions, roving, and pup-rearing. Some groups saw up to four confirmed pregnancies, with each group managing the situation differently. Let us look at the contrasting examples of Elrond's Council and Dik-Diks.

At Elrond's Council, the dominant female Snoop Kat (VECF039) was first observed to be pregnant on February 20th. She was the first of three pregnant females in the group. Adult subordinate female Mojo Jojo (VECF038) was noted as pregnant on March 5th, followed by yearling subordinate female Cadenza (VECF059) on March 6th. Mojo Jojo left the group on March 8th, likely evicted, and was chased off again upon attempting to return. Then, closer to Snoop Kat's due date, Cadenza also left — also likely evicted on March 21st and similarly chased away upon reapproaching. Snoop Kat gave birth on March 25th, and three days later, Mojo Jojo was observed foraging with the group and allo-caring for her sister's litter again. This kind of behavior is typical of dominant females during the breeding season — evicting subordinate females reduces threats to her litter, especially from those most likely to commit infanticide¹. It also lessens the chance of subordinates returning pregnant, as evicted females

show higher rates of abortion². Mojo Jojo, however, was confirmed to still be pregnant upon her return by our observers. By the end of the month, Cadenza had not yet been accepted back into the group, leaving her pregnancy outcome uncertain.

The reappearance of subordinate evictions so late in the season might be attributed to the sudden availability of resources, enabling meerkats to extend typical breeding-season strategies.

In contrast, at Dik-Diks, where four pregnancies were recorded during March, dominant female Juliet (VGDF009) handled the situation very differently. None of the three pregnant females: adult subordinate female Ciri (VDDF003) and yearling subordinate female littermates Devil (VDDF005), and Florentine (VDDF008), were evicted or left the group. This tolerance came at a cost though as Juliet gave birth on March 10th, but by the 12th, both signs of lactation and babysitting ceased. It is likely that one of the subordinate females consumed her pups, possibly to redirect resources toward her own litter. Ciri, later gave birth on March 26th, and signs of lactation and babysitting suggest her litter survived at least through the end of the month.



Devil and Scramble grooming at their sleeping burrow. Photo credit: Julien Stanley, Life History Coordinator

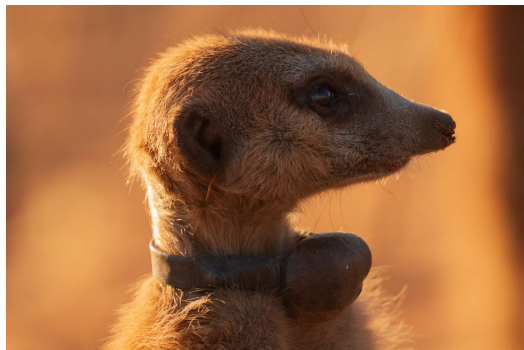
Juliet's leniency is less typical of dominant behaviour during the breeding season. As noted by Zoe Turner in the March 2020 issue of The Meerkatter, subordinate litters tend to have better success toward the end of the breeding season. One reason is that dominant females may refrain from evictions to conserve energy for the difficult winter ahead. Furthermore, maintaining group size becomes more beneficial than risking energy loss over evictions — even if it means conceding a litter to a subordinate female in the group.

The noticeable increase in breeding activity among females this year, when compared to previous seasons, is not accompanied by a similar rise in other

reproductive behaviours — most notably, roving. When looking at some of the typically more active roving males in our population — such as Lazuli's yearling subordinate male Tinashe (VLM310), Brussel Sprouts' adult subordinate male Gurke (VHMM036), and Ubuntu's adult subordinate male Beans (VUBM053), to name a few most have stopped or decreased their roving activity.

This contrast is particularly intriguing, we could suggest that the environmental conditions which appear to have stimulated increased litter production among females have not had a corresponding effect on male reproductive strategies. Several factors could contribute to this discrepancy. One explanation we can think of is the high and dense growth of sour grass across the reserve, following the recent rains. While this vegetation has brought significant ecological benefits — including increased prey abundance — it may simultaneously reduce visibility and mobility for individuals moving through the terrain. For roving males, who rely heavily on stealth, speed, and vigilance to navigate unfamiliar territory and avoid predators or rival groups, such ground cover may represent a significant risk.

Following this same thought trail, the cost-benefit ratio of roving may have shifted under current conditions, making the behaviour less advantageous despite the apparent increase in female fertility. This would suggest that while ecological abundance may enhance certain aspects of reproductive success, it can also introduce new limitations or challenges, leading to divergent behavioural responses between the sexes.



Juliet, at the burrow after a day of foraging. Photo credit: Julien Stanley, Life History Coordinator.

The contrasting strategies of Snoop Kat and Juliet, but more broadly between male and female meerkats, reflects the flexible social dynamics of meerkat groups as the breeding season draws to a close. While we can only speculate on the drive behind these behaviours, but the fact being that we have witnessed 22 more pregnancies this month is a sign that our population of meerkats is doing well towards the end of summer as we head into the harder months, an encouraging sight after a couple of dryer and food scarcer years. How successful the breeding attempts will be and the pups emerge and survive, we will be able to report over the next months. The cold, and currently humid conditions, will certainly pose challenges for maintaining body

temperatures by the small pups and has previously described as a major cause of pup mortality².

References:

¹ Young et al, 2006. The causes of physiological suppression among female meerkats: A role for subordinate restraint due to the threat of infanticide?

² Young et al, 2006. Stress and the suppression of subordinate reproduction in cooperatively breeding meerkats.

Pregnancies in March 2024

Females pregnant in March	22
Females who aborted	0
Females who gave birth, litters lost	3
Females who gave birth, litter emerged	1
Females who gave birth, unknown outcome	6
Females still pregnant at the end of the month	12

March 2024 Life History Details

Due to the large number of groups, we are covering, we have made some changes to the way we are collecting data at the KMP. There are four different levels of data collection, that we will briefly introduce here.

Full data collection group (FDC)

We collect LH data at the group and regularly visit the group for full adlib and weights sessions.

Life History monitoring group (LHM)

Observers tend to visit these groups for shorter amounts of time. We collect LH data and increase our visits when new pups need to be habituated. We do not collect adlib data at these groups but collect morning and evening weights a few times per week.

Habituation group (HAB)

Habituating meerkats to our presence is the main goal at these groups. As the group's habituation progresses, we start collecting LH and weights data as well. In a later stage, we try to follow the group after morning weights, introduce lunch weights and start approaching the group in the afternoon.

Sub-group (SUB)

The amount of data we can collect at these groups depends mainly on whether a radio-collared individual is present. If that is the case, we try to collect LH, weights and adlib data, as it is very interesting to witness group dynamics within these newly formed groups. However, we do not always have a radio collar at these groups. In these cases,

we focus on collecting LH data during opportunistic sightings.

Full Data Collection Groups:

Alba (FDC):

- All 15 individuals were present at the end of March.
- Dominant female Cleopatra (VALF008) gave birth on the 23rd. The pups were not seen by the end of the month.
- Pup Orlov (VALM026) was given his Last Seen this month.
- On the 10th, yearling subordinate male Bibu (VALM014) did not wake up with the group in the morning but was seen returning to Alba in the evening of the 10th.
- Alba had no observed encounters or inter-group interactions this month.
- Alba had one daily group split this month on the 13th.
- All individuals appeared healthy at the end of the month.

Brussels Sprouts (FDC):

- All 6 members were present at the end of the month.
- Dominant female Arabella (VMPF035) was made officially pregnant this month.
- On the 4th, Dropke was not with the Brussel Sprouts.
- Pup Dropke (VBSF015) was given her Last Seen this month.
- On the 13th, adult subordinate male Gurke (VHMM036) left the group in the morning and returned the same morning. On the 21st, Gurke left the group in the morning and rejoined the group in the evening.
- Brussels Sprouts had no encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits observed this month.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health.

Elrond's Council (FDC):

- 12 out of 13 individuals were present at the end of March.
- *Male dominance* was confirmed this month at Elrond's council, as dominant male Jonsnow (VECM070) received submissions from more than half of all other eligible males of the group.
- Dominant female Snoop Kat (VECF039) gave birth on the 26th of this month. The pups have not yet been seen but with confirmed lactation and babysitting the litter is thought to be alive. Adult subordinate female Mojo JoJo (VECF038) and yearling subordinate female Cadenza (VECF059) were made officially pregnant this month.
- Adult male Ivory (VECM051), yearling males Croqueta (VECM052), Hoid (VECM055), Nightblood (VECM056), Arpeggio (VECM057) and Mozart (VECM058) were given their Last Seen this month.
- On the 7th, adult subordinate female Mojo JoJo (VECF038) did not wake up with the group, she returned to the group on the 28th. On the 18th,

Jonsnow did not wake up with the group, he was seen having rejoined the group on the 21st. On the 11th, the undyed adult wild male at the group was not found to be with Elrond's Council.

- Cadenza and the wild male are yet to return by the end of the month.
- Elrond's Council had one encounter this month. On the 21st, an unknown adult male approached the group, the group saw, war danced and chased the individual, who then retreated.
- The group had no inter-group interactions observed this month.
- The group had one daily group split on the 29th.
- Habituation is classed as *Advanced Progress*. The males are comfortable enough that we have resumed collecting behavioural data on the group, whilst still being very aware that the priority is the habituation of the two males. Habituation of Jonsnow and adult subordinate male Jatu (VECM071) is going well, Jonsnow is comfortable with observers standing at a 2-meter distance. Both males are interested in egg and are comfortable with observers standing at a 3m distance. The males are comfortable with group follows but will forage at a distance from observers.
- Sub-adult subordinate male Bazooka (VECM065) is limping due to a swollen front right paw. Jonsnow has an open wound on his chest, which is still visible at the end of the month. All other members of the group appeared to be in good health.

Gold Diggers (FDC):

- All 15 members were present by the of the month.
- Yearling subordinate female Manchego (VGDF054) and adult subordinate female Peanut (VGDF047) gave birth on the 24-27th and 29-30th respectively. On both litters, no signs of lactation and babysitting were observed though and pups are considered to be lost. Dominant female Goldeneye (VGDF007) has been made officially pregnant this month.
- On the 21st, adult subordinate male Captain Patel (VGDM048) was not with the group in the afternoon, but was found to have rejoined the group later that afternoon. On the 27th, adult subordinate female Serafina Pekkala (VGDF049) did not wake up with the group.
- The group had 3 encounters this month. On the 1st, Lazuli's yearling subordinate male Pot Belly (VLM317) was seen approaching Gold Diggers, the group saw him and Manchego chased him away, Pot Belly retreated. On the 1st, Lazuli's yearling subordinate male Tinashe (VLM310) was seen approaching the group, the group alarmed and Tinashe retreated. On the 21st, Zulus' yearling subordinate female Sooty (VZUF071) was seen approaching the group, the group saw her and war danced, Sooty retreated.
- The group had two inter-group interactions this month. On the 21st, Gold Diggers and Zulus had an interaction, both groups saw each other, and both started war dancing, but Gold Diggers chased Zulus, and Zulus retreated. On the 22nd,

Gold diggers had an interaction with an unknown group. Gold Diggers war danced and chased the unknown group, probably Zulus, but this could not be confirmed, as the unknown group started retreating.

- There were no group splits observed this month.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health.

Jaxx (FDC):

- 11 out of 12 members were present at Jaxx at the end of the month.
- *Male dominance* is currently *unconfirmed*. We will be reporting on *male dominance* at Jaxx in the coming months.
- Dominant female Jub Jub (VJXF160) gave birth on the 18th, the litter is yet to emerge, but there is clear lactation and babysitting, indicating the litter to be alive.
- Enough time has passed for former adult dominant male Sneaky (VJXM170) to be emigrated out of the group.
- On the 2nd, adult subordinate female Brave (VJXF178) did not act as part of group, but on the morning of the 5th, she woke up with the group. On the 6th, yearling subordinate female Minou (VJXF191) did not wake up with the group. On the 6th, Brave got evicted, she was attacked and chased off by Jub Jub, on the 20th, she woke up with the group, marking the end of her eviction.
- Minou is yet to return by the end of the month.
- There were no encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits observed this month.
- Habituation is classed as *Advanced Progress*. Behavioural data collection has resumed on the 10th this month. Habituation of the unknown adult male is going well, the unknown adult male has not yet shown interest in egg or water but is comfortable with observers sitting at 1 meter distance at the sleeping burrow and follows at a 5-meter distance.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health by the end of the month.

Lazuli (FDC):

- All 9 individuals were present at the end of March.
- Dominant female Masiwa (VLF308) became officially pregnant this month.
- Enough time has passed for adult subordinate male Subigubi (VUBM050) to be emigrated out of the group.
- On the 1st, yearling subordinate males Pot Belly (VLM317) and Tinashe (VLM310) were not with the group, both were seen roving at Gold Diggers. On the morning of the 2nd, Tinashe was seen waking up with the group. Later the same day Pot Belly was seen joining and going below with the group. On the morning of the 7th, dominant male Rogelio De La Vega (VGDM015) was seen leaving the group. He was back with the group in the afternoon of the 8th. On the 9th, Rogelio De La Vega was not with the group, he woke up with the group in the morning of the 10th. On the 17th, Pot Belly and yearling

subordinate male Petit Bidon (VLM318) were not found with the group, both of them returned later that afternoon. On the 27th, Rogelio De La Vega and Tinashe were not found with the group, they returned later that afternoon.

- The group had no observed encounters, inter group interactions or group splits this month.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health by the end of the month.

Side Quest (FDC):

- 11 of 13 members were present at the end of the month.
- Dominant female Pumba (VZUF048) gave birth on the 25th, lactation and babysitting have been observed, the litter is thought to be alive.
- On the 12th, Boo was not found with the group.
- Pup Boo (VSIM044) has been given his Last Seen this month.
- On the 7th, yearling subordinate female Otje (VSIF028) and sub-adult subordinate female Pudding (VSIF038) were both found away from the group. On the 24th, yearling subordinate male Jip (VSIM027) was not found at the group, he was found back with the group in the afternoon of the 25th.
- Both Otje and Pudding are yet to return by the end of the month.
- Side Quest had no observed encounters or inter-group interactions.
- The group had one daily group split on the 25th.
- All individuals appeared in good health by the end of March.

Trackie-Daks (FDC):

- All 13 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Pups Hoen (VTDP049), Sinnoh (VTDP050), Alola (VTDP051) and Galar (VTDP052) all foraged with the group for the first time this month.
- Trackie-Daks have had 3 encounters this month. On the 24th, Ubuntu's adult subordinate male Beans (VUBM053) approached the sleeping burrow, sub-adult male Tsodiyo (VTDM042) saw Beans and ignored him, Beans then approached then retreated. He approached the sleeping burrow again, Tsodiyo ignored him again, and Beans then went into the sleeping burrow, then came back up and retreated. The same morning Beans approached the group for a third time, the group saw him, and chased him, Beans retreated.
- Trackie-Daks had one inter-group interaction this month, on the 2nd, they war danced and chased an unknown group, this unknown group then retreated.
- Trackie-Daks had no group splits observed this month.
- The habituation level is currently in *Advanced Progress*. Dominant male Guido (VWM275) drinks water and ate egg multiple times this month. He has not been weighed this month but will partially come into the scale for water. He is comfortable with 2m follows for 15 minutes.

- Juvenile male Peely (VTDM048) has developed a lump on the lower part of his left cheek, it has disappeared by the end of the month. All other members of the group appeared to be in good health.

Ubuntu (FDC):

- All 18 individuals were present at the end of March.
- Dominant female Agazoth (VUBF039) was made officially pregnant this month.
- Six pups Pawpaw (VUBP080), Moppie (VUBP081), Fifi (VUBP082), Stella (VUBP083), Baba (VUBP084) and Koka (VUBP085) have joined the group on their first forage.
- On the 1st, adult subordinate male Beans (VUBM053) was seen away from the group, on the 2nd he woke up with the group. On the 4th, Beans did not wake up with the group, he returned later that evening. On the 8th, Beans was seen away from the group, and woke up with the group on the 9th. On the 13th, Beans did not wake up with the group, he was found to have returned on the morning of the 15th. On the 17th, Beans did not wake up with the group, he woke up with the group in the morning of the 18th. On the 21st, Beans was not part of the group, he was found back in the group on the 26th. On the 29th, Beans did not wake up with the group, he was back in the group on the morning of the 30th, waking up with the group.
- Ubuntu had 2 encounters this month with unknown individuals. On the 13th, two unknown individuals approached the group, the group saw them, war danced, one of the unknown individuals retreated, the group chased the other individual who also retreated. Later that morning, an unknown individual approached the group, the group saw him, war danced and chased him, the unknown individual retreated.
- The group had no observed inter-group interactions or group splits this month.
- All individuals at the group appeared to be in good health.

Zulus (FDC):

- 7 individuals were present at the end of March.
- Dominant female Spruddel (VZUF028) was found predated on the 10th, her radio collar was found to be up a tree, and the skull and lower jaw of a meerkat were found at the bottom of the tree. She was officially pregnant at the time of her death.
- On the 10th, Leona immigrated back into the group.
- *Female Dominance* at Zulus has changed this month. Previously absent yearling subordinate female Leona (VZUF070) gained dominance, as she was seen receiving submissions from all eligible females of the group.
- Yearling subordinate female Sooty (VZUF071) was made officially pregnant this month.
- Sooty was not with the group following an inter group interaction with Gold Diggers. She woke up with the group on the 22nd.

- Zulus had 5 observed encounters this month. On the 3rd, Leona approached the group, the group saw her, war danced and chased, Leona retreated. On the 4th, Leona approached the group, yearling subordinate male Sweep (VZUM072) alarmed at her, the group went vigilant, and Leona retreated. On the 8th, Leona approached the group, the group war danced, and Leona retreated. The same day an unknown adult approached the group, the group saw the individual, war danced and chased, the unknown adult retreated. On the 23rd, an unknown adult approached the group three times, all three times the group saw it, war danced and chased it, the unknown adult retreated all three times.
- Zulus had one observed inter group interaction this month. On the 21st, Zulus saw Gold Diggers, both groups war danced, Gold Diggers chased Zulus, and Zulus retreated.
- Zulus had no observed group splits in the month of March.
- All individuals in Zulus appeared to be healthy by the end of the month.

Life History Monitoring Groups:

Dik-Diks (LHM):

- 11 out of 12 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Dominant female Juliet (VGDF009) gave birth on the 10th, babysitting stopped and lactation ended on the 12th, the litter is considered lost. Adult subordinate female Ciri (VDDF003) gave birth on the 26th, with clear lactation and babysitting, the litter is thought to be alive. Both yearling subordinate females Devil (VDDF005) and Florentine (VDDF008) were made officially pregnant this month.
- On the 27th, juvenile male Siyah (VDDM014) did not wake up with the group.
- Dik-Diks had 2 encounters this month. On the 11th, former Dik-Diks adult subordinate female Shelby (VGDF022) approached the group, the group saw her and went vigilant, Shelby retreated. On the 12th, Shelby came out of the same sleeping burrow as the group, dominant male Rufaro (VUBM046) saw her and she retreated.
- Siyah is yet to return by the end of the month.
- Dik-Diks had no inter-group interactions or group split observed this month.
- Habituation of the group remains in *Advanced progress* at the end of the month. Dominant female Juliet (VGDF009) drinks water and has been weighed once this month.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health at the end of the month.

Renegades (LHM)

- 8 out of 10 members were present at the end of the month.
- Adult subordinate female Maya II (VGDF039) was made officially pregnant this month.
- Dominant female Ricky-Baker (VGDF031) and pup VRGP005 were not part of the group on the 25th.

- Both Ricky-baker and VRGP005 are yet to return to the group by the end of the month.
- Renegades had no encounters, inter-group interactions observed this month.
- Renegades had one observed daily group split on the 7th.
- Habituation is classed as *Advanced Progress*. The group was visited ten times this month. Dominant male Coquille (VTSM014) drinks water and is comfortable with a 2-meter sitting distance. He did not enter the scale this month and remains weary of observers standing at a 2m distance, he was not seen eating egg this month. Ricky Baker eats egg approaches the scale, and is comfortable with a 2-meter standing distance for observers.
- Maya II has got a submandibular lump on her left cheek, which is still present by the end of the month. When Ricky Baker was last seen, she had a swollen left side of the neck, and a wound midtail, all still present last time she was seen. All other members of the group appeared to be in good health.

Vetkoeks (LHM):

- All 8 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Dominant female Mooncake (VHMF053) was made officially pregnant this month.
- Juvenile female Brownie (VVKF020) has been given her last seen this month.
- On the 5th, adult subordinate male Zuma (VZUM059) was not with the group in the afternoon, he rejoined the group when they returned to the burrow that same evening. On the 11th, adult subordinate male Blackjack (VVKM002) was not part of the group in the afternoon, but later that evening rejoined the group.
- Vetkoeks had one encounter this month. On the 1st, Ubuntu's adult subordinate male Beans (VUBM053) approached the group, the group saw him, war danced, and Beans retreated.
- The group had no inter group interactions or group splits observed this month.
- All individuals appeared healthy at the end of the month.

Habituation Groups:

Hogwarts (HAB):

- All 12 members of the group were present at the end of the month.
- Dominant female Salazar (VZUF051) gave birth this month. Five pups, VHWP009, VHWP010, VHWP011, VHWP012, VHWP013 have emerged this month.
- Habituation is classed as *In Progress*. Habituation of sub-adult subordinate male Buckbeak (VHWM002) is going well, he is drinking water, is comfortable around the scale and he got weighed once this month on the 25th. Dominant male Caraxes (VHWM004) drinks water and got weighed twice this month. Habituation at the babysitting burrow has been

successful this month as the group left to forage later due to the litter. Both individuals are comfortable with less than two meters sitting and movement.

- All individuals appeared healthy at the end of the month.

Whiskers (HAB) :

- 9 out of 10 individuals were present at the end of February.
- Dominant female Archangel (VWF259) was made officially pregnant this month.
- Female pups Amarula (VWF280) and Anita (VWF282), adult subordinate male Gojo Satoru (VWM274) and juvenile female Bubblegum (VWF278) were given their Last Seen this month.
- On the 9th, juvenile female Sibusiwe (VWF277) did not wake up with the group.
- Sibusiwe is yet to return by the end of the month.
- Whiskers had no encounters, inter-group interactions, or group splits observed this month.
- The group's habituation is classed as *In Progress*. Adult subordinate male Agent K (VWM276) drank water, is eating egg and is comfortable with a 2-3m sitting distance and a 5m standing and moving distance. We have started introducing follows, to eventually habituate Agent K to observers collecting Adlib data. We will continue visiting the group and increasing Agent K's comfort distance as well as potentially getting his weight.
- Dominant male Raclette (VTDM017) had a wound on the left side of his neck, it has since scabbed over, and it has fully healed by the end of the month. All other members of the group appeared to be in good health.

The following authors contributed to this report:

Julien Stanley, Life History Coordinator