



# The Meerkatter

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

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## Told you so...!

Though technically the first month outside of the usual breeding season, April proved as eventful and demanding as any peak breeding period. It presented a valuable opportunity to closely monitor the outcomes of dominant strategies in the two groups—Elrond's Council and Dik-Diks—whose contrasting dominant female behaviours were outlined in last month's article. As predicted, the differing approaches have led to distinct differences in litter survival and group dynamics.

At the beginning of April, twenty-three pregnancies across several groups were still awaiting resolution. Among them, the focus remained on Elrond's Council and Dik-Diks. In both cases, we now have clear outcomes at the end of the month.

In Elrond's Council, three pregnancies were documented in March. Subordinate yearling Cadenza (VECF059) on the 18th of March and subordinate adult female Mojo Jojo (VECF038) was confirmed pregnant on the 28th of March, and. Dominant female Snoop Kat (VECF039) gave birth on the 25th of March, with visible signs of lactation and babysitting from the 26th onwards. A few days later, Mojo Jojo also gave birth, and her lactation was sustained, indicating a healthy litter. Meanwhile, Cadenza rejoined the group on the 8th of April following a suspected eviction. Upon return, she displayed significant weight loss, leading to the conclusion that she had aborted during her absence.



Dominant female Snoop Kat (VECF039) foraging. Photo credit: Julien Stanley, Life History Coordinator

Snoop Kat's approach—evicting pregnant subordinates late in gestation—appears to have had mixed results. While eviction carries energetic and social costs, the outcome for her own litter is favourable. Three females in the group are lactating, and both Mojo Jojo and Cadenza have resumed cooperative care. Cadenza, despite aborting, is lactating, providing additional support for the dominant female's offspring. Mojo Jojo, who returned to the group still pregnant, gave birth in the group, resulting in a suspected mixed cohort of pups. Four pups—VECP072 through VECP075—emerged on the 15th of April and began foraging on the 23rd of April. All remained present at month's end, suggesting good initial survival.

In contrast, Dik-Diks experienced a more turbulent and demanding end to the breeding season. Four pregnancies were recorded in March. By the 10th of March, dominant female Juliet (VGDF009) had given birth. Although lactation and babysitting were initially observed, both behaviours ceased within two days, and the litter was presumed lost before emergence by the 12th of March. Subordinate adult female Ciri (VDDF003) gave birth on the 26th March and maintained lactation and babysitting into April, suggesting her litter was surviving.

On the 1st of April, subordinate yearlings Devil (VDDF005) and Florentine (VDDF008) also gave birth. Both showed consistent signs of lactation and care, indicating successful births. The first pups—VDDP017 to VDDP020—emerged from the burrow on the 16th of April. In the following days, more pups were seen emerging, resulting in a total of twelve—a remarkably large mixed litter, and the largest recorded in the population in recent years (biggest litter size since 2002 when it was recorded at Frisky to be a mixed litter of 15 pups). Keeping account of twelve pups in high sour grass can prove challenging, however with dedication from our volunteers in topping up their distinct dye marks, we are certain in saying that all twelve pups are still present in the group by the end of the month.

This large litter places substantial pressure on the group. With more pups in the group than adult members, both food provision and pup supervision are stretched thin. From a reproductive perspective, this is a poor outcome for the dominant female, whose own litter was lost, while three subordinate females successfully reproduced. Furthermore, the group-level implications may be beneficial. If the group can raise the full litter to subadult stage, their numbers would double—significantly enhancing their ability to defend territory and support future litters. Given that Dik-Diks has experienced twelve inter-

group interactions with Lazuli over the past three years, such demographic reinforcement could prove advantageous.



Subordinate adult Jaivyn (VUBM048) babysitting the new litter at Dik-Diks. Photo credit: Claire Giraudet, Independent researcher.

At Dik-Diks, additional support came from the return of subordinate adult Shelby (VGDF022), who had likely been evicted in December 2024. She was accepted back into the group on the 21st of April. Later in the month, an unusual dietary event was observed: the group was seen consuming bird chicks, with pups actively competing alongside adults for pieces of the prey item—an uncommon but noteworthy behaviour.

The reproductive strategies of the two dominant females, Snoop Kat and Juliet, provide a clear behavioural contrast. Snoop Kat employed an aggressive dominance strategy, evicting subordinate females during late pregnancy. This decision is costly in terms of social cohesion and potential group instability but can safeguard exclusive reproductive investment. In this case, it appears to have worked to her advantage. While one evicted subordinate (Cadenza) aborted, she returned and provided allolactation. Mojo Jojo gave birth, and her offspring now coexist with those of the dominant female. Despite the additional pup load, the cohesive group now supports both litters.

Conversely, Juliet adopted a more passive approach. She did not evict any pregnant subordinates during their gestation periods. As a result, her own litter was lost, and three subordinate females successfully gave birth to a large, shared cohort. Juliet herself even contributed to allolactation. While this outcome is clearly disadvantageous for her individual direct fitness in the short term, it enhances her indirect fitness and may also strengthen long-term group viability. Should the group raise all twelve pups to independence, it would gain significant strength in defending territory, competing with neighbouring groups, and raising future litters. The presence of many helpers may ultimately benefit Juliet, especially if she can maintain her dominance and reproduce in the future.

These differing strategies showcase how flexible and context-dependent dominance behaviour can be. While aggressive monopolisation may preserve individual fitness in the short term, tolerance and cooperation may offer long-term group level advantages, which enhance each group members individual fitness.

The outcomes observed this month highlight the complex trade-offs involved in reproductive management and social hierarchy. The clear divergence in results offers an illuminating case study. We will continue to closely monitor the development of the extraordinary twelve-pup litter in Dik-Diks, with the aim of assessing how such an unusually large cohort fares through to the subadult stage.

## Pregnancies in April 2025

Females pregnant in April	15
Females who aborted	2
Females who gave birth, litters lost	0
Females who gave birth, litter emerged	2
Females who gave birth, unknown outcome	10
Females still pregnant at the end of the month	1

## April 2025 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 life history (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 20 individuals were present at the end of April.
- The five pups VALF032, VALP033, VALP034, VALP035 and VALP036 emerged for the first time this month and joined the group to forage for the first time.
- Alba had no observed encounters or inter-group interactions this month.
- Alba had one daily group split this month on the 13<sup>th</sup>.
- All individuals appeared healthy at the end of the month.

#### **Brussels Sprouts (FDC):**

- All 6 members were present at the end of April.
- Dominant female Arabella (VMPF035) gave birth this month. With clear signs of lactation and babysitting, the litter is thought to be alive but is yet to emerge by the end of the month.
- 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):**

- All 17 individuals were present at the of the April.
- Subordinate adult female Mojo Jojo (VECF038) gave birth on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April. Subordinate yearling female Cadenza (VECF059) was found to have rejoined the group on the 8<sup>th</sup>. Upon return, Cadenza was observed to have aborted of her litter.
- Four pups VECP072, VECP073, VECP074 and VECP075 emerged from the burrow on the 15<sup>th</sup>, and were observed foraging with the group for the first time on the 23<sup>rd</sup>.
- On the 29<sup>th</sup>, VECP072 was left behind by the group, but was found to have returned in the group by the end of the same day.
- Elrond's Council had three encounter this month. On the 5<sup>th</sup>, two unknown adults approached the group, the group saw, war danced and chased the individuals, who then retreated. On the 8<sup>th</sup>, an unknown adult approached the group, the group saw the individual, proceeded to perform mark frenzies leading the unknown adult to retreat.
- Elrond's Council had no inter-group interactions observed this month.
- The group had two daily group split on the 4<sup>th</sup>, and on the 8<sup>th</sup>.
- Habituation is classed as *Advanced Progress*. The males are comfortable enough that we are collecting behavioural data on the group, whilst remaining aware that the priority is the

habituation of the two males. Habituation of dominant male Jonsnow (VECM071) and sub-adult male Jatu (VECM070) is going well, Jonsnow is comfortable with observers standing at a 2-meter distance. Both males are interested in egg and Jatu is comfortable with observers standing at a 3-meter distance. The males are comfortable with group follows but will forage at a distance from observers.

Sub-adult male Bazooka (VECM065) is limping due to a swollen front right paw, this has been confirmed to be a radial fracture, which has healed by the end of the month, but left a permanent callus. Jonsnow had an open wound on his chest, which is no longer visible at the end of the month. All other members of the group appeared to be in good health.

#### **Gold Diggers (FDC):**

- All 17 members were present by the of April.
- Dominant female Goldeneye (VGDF007) gave birth between the 25<sup>th</sup> and the 28<sup>th</sup>. With clear signs of lation and babysitting, the litter is thought to be alive but is yet to emerge by the end of the month.
- Subordinate female Serafina Pekkala (VGDF049) was immigrated into the group on the 29<sup>th</sup>, as she woke up with the group. She was made officially pregnant this month.
- On the 8<sup>th</sup>, subordinate adult female Peanut (VGDF047) was evicted by Goldeneye, who chased her away from the group. On the 15<sup>th</sup>, subordinate yearling female Manchego (VGDF054) did not wake up with the group. On the 29<sup>th</sup>, both Peanut and Manchego woke up with the group.
- Gold diggers had 3 encounters this month. On the 8<sup>th</sup>, Lazuli's subordinate yearling male Pot Belly (VLM317) approached the group, the group saw him and subordinate adult male Captain Patel (VGDM048) chased Pot Belly, who retreated. Later that day, Pot Belly approached the group again, the group saw him and went vigilant, leading him to retreat. On the 11<sup>th</sup>, Pot belly approached the group, the group saw him and chased him. Pot belly retreated.
- Gold diggers had no observed inter group interactions or group splits this month.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health.

#### **Jaxx (FDC):**

- All 15 members were present at Jaxx at the end of April.
- *Male dominance* is currently *unconfirmed*. We will be reporting on *male dominance* at Jaxx in the coming months.
- Five pups VJXP201, VJXP202, VJXP203, VJXP204 and VJXP205 emerged for the first time this month, between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup>. They joined to forage with the group for the first time between the 14<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup>.
- Subordinate adult female Brave (VJXF178) was made officially pregnant this month. However,



she was observed to have aborted the pregnancy on the 23<sup>rd</sup>.

- On the 1<sup>st</sup>, subordinate adult male Kush (VLM298) did not wake up with the group.
- Previous dominant male Sneaky (VJXM170), Kush and subordinate yearling female Minou (VJXF191) have been given their Last Seen this month.
- Jaxx had three daily group splits on the 9<sup>th</sup>, the 10<sup>th</sup> and on the 13<sup>th</sup>.
- Jaxx had no observed encounters or inter-group interactions this month.
- Habituation is classed as *In Progress*. Habituation of dominant male Mr.Worldwide (VJXM200) is going well, he 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 April.
- Dominant female Masiwa (VLF308) gave birth between the 23<sup>rd</sup> and the 26<sup>th</sup>. With clear signs of lactation and babysitting, the litter is thought to be alive but is yet to emerge by the end of the month.
- Subordinate adult male Subigubi (VUBM050) was given his Last Seen this month.
- On the 8<sup>th</sup>, subordinate yearling male Pot Belly (VLM317) did not wake up with the group. On the 15<sup>th</sup>, he woke up with the group again. On the 21<sup>st</sup>, dominant male Rogelio de la Vega (VGDM015) and subordinate yearling male Tinashe (VLM310) were seen away from the group, roving at Dik-Diks. They both returned later that same day to the group. On the 24<sup>th</sup>, Rogelio de la Vega and subordinate yearling male Tumtum (VLM315) were seen leaving the group, they were seen returning later that same morning.
- Lazuli 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):**

- All 15 members were present at the end of the April.
- Four pups VSIP045, VSIP046, VSIP047 and VSIP048 emerged on the 12<sup>th</sup> and foraged for the group for the first time on the 20<sup>th</sup>.
- Enough time has passed for subordinate yearling female Otje (VSIF028) and sub-adult female Pudding (VSIF038) both to be emigrated out of the group.
- Side Quest had no observed encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits.
- All individuals appeared in good health by the end of April.

#### **Trackie-Daks (FDC):**

- All 16 individuals were present at the end of April.

- Dominant female Boubou (VTDF028) gave birth between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> of this month. With clear signs of lactation and babysitting, the litter is thought to be alive but is yet to emerge by the end of the month.
- On the 2<sup>nd</sup>, subordinate yearling female Unova (VTDF037) was absent from the group. On the 10<sup>th</sup>, subordinate adult female Chinchilla (VTDF029) and subordinate sub-adult female Refilwe (VTDF041) did not wake up with the group. On the 23<sup>rd</sup>, Unova and Chinchilla were found back foraging with the group.
- Refilwe is yet to return to the group by the end of the month.
- Trackie-Daks had no encounters, inter group interaction or 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.
- All individuals at the group appeared to be in good health.

#### **Ubuntu (FDC):**

- All 18 individuals were present at the end of the April.
- Dominant female Agazoth (VUBF039) gave birth between the 27<sup>th</sup> and the 28<sup>th</sup>. With clear signs of lactation and babysitting, the litter is thought to be alive but is yet to emerge by the end of the month.
- On the 7<sup>th</sup>, subordinate adult male Beans (VUBM053) and sub-adult male Wors (VUBM075) did not wake up with the group, they returned to the group later that day. On the 10<sup>th</sup>, Beans was absent from the group, and returned later that day, being observed waking up with the group on the 11<sup>th</sup>.
- Ubuntu had no observed encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits this month.
- All individuals at the group appeared to be in good health.
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#### **Zulus (FDC):**

- All 8 individuals were present at the end of April.
- Yearling subordinate female Sooty (VZUF071) gave birth on the 3<sup>rd</sup>. with clear signs of lactation and babysitting. VZUM080 emerged on the 21<sup>st</sup>, and foraged with the group for the first time that same day.
- On the 23<sup>rd</sup>, sub-adult female Bonnie left the group but was seen returning later that afternoon.
- Zulus had no encounters, inter group interaction or group splits observed this month.
- All individuals in Zulus appeared to be healthy by the end of the month.

### **Life History Monitoring Groups:**

#### **Dik-Diks (LHM):**

- All 24 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- Twelve pups, VDDP017, VDDP018, VDDP019, VDDP020, VDDP021, VDDP022, VDDP023, VDDP024, VDDP025, VDDP026, VDDP027 and VDDP028 emerged between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 23<sup>rd</sup>, and they joined the group to forage for the first time on the 25<sup>th</sup>.
- On the 19<sup>th</sup>, subordinate adult female Ciri (VDDF003), subordinate yearling Devil (VDDF005) and subordinate yearling female Florentine (VDDF008) left the group to go forage whilst the group was babysitting. They returned later that same day. On the 21<sup>st</sup>, subordinate adult female Shelby (VGDF022) was observed to have immigrated into the group.
- Dik-Diks had 6 encounters this month. On the 17<sup>th</sup>, an unknown adult approached the group, the group saw the individual, went vigilant and the unknown individual retreated. On the 18<sup>th</sup>, an unknown individual was seen running out of an entrance of the babysitting burrow after the group went below, the group did not chase. On the 21<sup>st</sup>, Lazuli's subordinate yearling male Tinashe (VLM310) approached the group, the group ignored, dominant male Rufaro (VUBM046) chased him off and the group followed, Tinashe retreated. On the 21<sup>st</sup>, Dominant male Rogelio de la Vega (VGDM015) approached the group, the group saw him, war danced and chased, he retreated. On the 28<sup>th</sup>, an unknown adult female approached, the group alarmed 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.
- Subordinate adult male Jaivyn (VUBM048) had a submandibular lump on the left side of his jaw, it has disappeared by the end of the month. Rufaro has submandibular lumps on both sides of his jaw, and they are still present by the end of the month. Dominant female Juliet (VGDF009) had a submandibular lump on the right side of her jaw. All other members of the group appeared to be in good health.

#### **Renegades (LHM)**

- All 8 members were present at the end of April.
- Previous Dominant female Ricky-Baker (VGDF031) and pup VRGP005 were given their Last Seen this month.
- *Adult female Maya II (VGDF039) has now gained dominance as there are no other eligible females in the group.*
- Maya II gave birth between the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup>. With no clear signs of lactation and no babysitting, the litter is not thought to be alive by the end of the month, but will monitor it further.
- Renegades had no encounters, inter-group interactions observed this month.
- Renegades had one observed daily group split on the 7<sup>th</sup>.

- 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.
- Adult female Maya II (VGDF039) has got a submandibular lump on her left cheek, which has burst and left a scab by the end of the month. All other members of the group appear in good health.

#### **Vetkoeks (LHM):**

- All 7 individuals were present at the end of April.
- Dominant female Mooncake (VHMF053) gave birth between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup>, had clear signs of lactation, the litter is thought to be alive, but is yet to emerge by the end of the month.
- Subordinate adult male Blackjack (VVKM002) was found dead on a main road of the 13<sup>th</sup>, hit by a car.
- Vetkoeks had no encounters, 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 April.
- Habituation is classed as *In Progress*. Habituation of sub-adult male Buckbeak (VHWM002) is going well, he is drinking water, is comfortable around the scale and he got weighed once this month on the 25<sup>th</sup>. 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) :**

- All 10 individuals were present at the end of April.
- Dominant female Archangel (VWF259) gave birth on the 7<sup>th</sup>. With clear signs of lactation and babysitting, the litter is thought to be alive, VWP284 emerged on the 25<sup>th</sup>, and is yet to join the group to forage.
- Juvenile female Sibusiwe (VWF277) was given her Last Seen this 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 submandibular lump on the left side of his jaw, it is still present by the end of the month. All other members of the group appeared to be in good health.

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