



The Meerkatter

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

Home Sweet Home.....	1-2	Pregnancies in May.....	2
		Life History Details.....	2-5

Home Sweet Home

As observers at this project, we are privileged to witness the rich tapestry of meerkat social life—ranging from the emergence of pups and playful interactions among juveniles to the communal grooming sessions that occur when groups return to their burrows after a day of foraging. However, our position also confronts us with the harsher realities of life in the wild. These include the sombre phenomena of infanticide, and more recently, the troubling disbandment of groups that fall victim to disease.

Over the past month, we have been closely monitoring the slow decline of Renegades, the most recently established group in our study population. Several individuals within this group have shown signs of infection with tuberculosis (TB), caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium suricattae*. This event is particularly notable because it mirrors the fate of previous groups that occupied the same territory.



Nightwatch's dominant female Yorki (VGDF033). Photo credit: Julien Stanley, Life History Coordinator

In a previous article published in November 2024, we discussed the formation of Renegades (initially Gold Diggers 5) and its striking resemblance to the creation of a former group, Nightwatch. Both groups originated in the same territory and formed through a similar mechanism: evicted subordinate females from the Gold Diggers joined by roving males. Over the past 5 years, this same piece of territory has been occupied by three successive groups—Make-a-plan,

Nightwatch, and now Renegades—all of which have ultimately disbanded following the emergence of TB within their ranks.

Let us delve deeper into the sequence of events that characterized the collapse of each group.

The first notable decline for Make-a-plan took place in early 2024. On January 6th, the group's dominant female, Bridget (VQLF011), went missing. Shortly after, the group ventured into the neighbouring territory of the Gold Diggers, leading to an intergroup interaction on January 10th. Make-a-plan retreated, but the encounter resulted in the loss of three members—Vin (VMPF091), Jude (VMPP071), and Snapdragon (VMPP074). Vin later returned, but Jude and Snapdragon did not. Instead, they were seen joining up with evicted Gold Diggers females—Ricky Baker (VGDF031), Yorki (VGDF033), Maya II (VGDF039), and Mikasa (VGDF042). They formed together Gold Diggers 4. Ricky Baker and Maya II later left the sub-group and rejoined Gold Diggers.

A subsequent inter group interaction between Make-a-plan and Gold Diggers 4 further depleted Make-a-plan. Males Sticky (VMPP064), Oozy (VMPP067), Patrys (VMPP068), and Wayne (VMPP087) all joined Gold Diggers 4. Even Sushi, the former dominant male of Make-a-plan, attempted—and eventually succeeded—in integrating into Gold Diggers 4 where he then took part in the competition for dominance.

Roughly a month later, Sushi began to exhibit classic signs of tuberculosis: rapid weight loss and prominent submandibular lumps. His declining health impaired his ability to compete for dominance, and he was ultimately found predated. Sticky, too, developed symptoms and vanished soon after. The remaining males from Nightwatch also disappeared, leaving Yorki—now the dominant female—isolated. She was observed to have aborted a pregnancy and became visibly emaciated. Her last sighting was on November 14th, 2024.

Fast forward to Renegades—previously known as Gold Diggers 5—they were formed by two evicted females from Gold Diggers, having also been evicted the previous year, Ricky Baker and Maya II. The group that took over the same territory as Nightwatch. Its trajectory appears disturbingly familiar. The group's decline began when Ricky Baker developed pronounced submandibular swellings on both sides of her face, a key symptom of TB. By March 25th, 2025, she and her pup (VRGP005) were no longer present with the group. Her disappearance was likely related to TB, either

due to direct health deterioration or increased vulnerability to predation.

The newly dominant female, Maya II, soon began to show more severe signs of illness. Over four months, her body weight halved, and large submandibular abscesses appeared, one of which ruptured and failed to heal. She became increasingly lethargic and struggled to forage. Around the same time, dominant male Coquillette (VTSM014) also began showing signs of Tuberculosis.



Renegades' dominant female Maya II (VGDF039). Photo credit: Julien Stanley, Life History Coordinator.

On May 13th, 2025, Maya II and juvenile VRGF001 were found alone at a burrow, separated from the rest of the group. Maya II remained curled up for long periods and had no interest in foraging. Nearly two weeks later, on May 26th, the rest of the group's individuals were observed over 500 meters away, suggesting a split. However, an opportunistic sighting on May 27th revealed the rest of the group returning to Maya II and VRGF001's burrow, indicating continued—if fragile—cohesion.

These three groups—Make-a-plan, Nightwatch, and Renegades—represent the primary sources of TB-related observations in recent years.

A compelling hypothesis is the environmental persistence of *Mycobacterium suricattae* within this territory. It is well documented that other strains of tuberculosis, e.g. *M. bovis* can survive for extended periods in the environment, particularly under favourable conditions. King *et al.* (2017) demonstrated that bacterial communities can persist at high densities in certain environments, potentially acting as a reservoir for infection even in the absence of direct host-to-host transmission.



Figure 1: Territory map of Make-a-plan (a), Nightwatch (b) and Renegades (c), illustrating their overlap.

Given the consistent presence of TB in this specific region and the relative absence of the disease in other territories, it is plausible that localized environmental conditions—such as humidity, soil composition, or organic matter availability—might support prolonged bacterial survival. However, this remains but an idea of what could be causing the Tuberculosis outbreaks in this area, as many other factors need to be accounted for to draw any conclusions.

As we continue to monitor Renegades, our priority is to document the health and social dynamics of the remaining individuals. While we remain hopeful that the group can persist, the history of this territory and the progressive symptoms seen in key individuals suggest that the future is uncertain.

Ultimately, this unfolding narrative highlights not only the impact of disease on meerkat social structures but also the intricate interplay between environment, behaviour, and pathogen persistence. Understanding these relationships will be key to managing long-term population health and informing broader conservation strategies.

Pregnancies in May 2025

Females pregnant in May	7
Females who aborted	2
Females who gave birth, litters lost	1
Females who gave birth, litter emerged	0
Females who gave birth, unknown outcome	0
Females still pregnant at the end of the month	4

May 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 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):

- 19 out of 20 individuals were present at the end of May.
- Dominant female Cleopatra (VALF008) was made officially pregnant this month.
- Enough time has passed for Pup (VALU035) to be given their Last Seen this month.
- On the 8th, yearling subordinate male Bibu (VALM014) left the group and was seen roving at Elrond's Council, he was seen waking up with the group the next day. On the 10th Bibu had left the group and was seen roving at Elrond's Council. He later returned on the 11th, where he was seen foraging with the group.
- The group had no observed encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits this month.
- All individuals appeared healthy at the end of the month.

Brussels Sprouts (FDC):

- Brussels Sprouts increased by 4 individuals with 10 members present at the end of May.
- Three pups (VBSP016, VBSP017, VBSP018) emerged for the first time on the 14th, and pup (VBSP019) emerged on the 15th. All 4 pups joined the group on their first forage this month.
- Brussels Sprouts had no encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits observed this month.
- Dominant female Arabella (VMPF035) was observed to have small lumps on her left cheek, potentially a sign of tuberculosis, which healed by the month's end. All other members of the group appeared to be in good health.

Gold Diggers (FDC):

- Gold Diggers increased by 5 individuals with 20 members present at the end of May.

- On the 17th three pups (VGDP075, VGDP076, VGDP077) emerged for the first time, and on the 20th two more pups (VGDP078, VGDP079) emerged for the first time. They then joined the group on their first forage this month.
- Adult subordinate female Serafina Pekkala (VGDF049) gave birth on the 19th, and the litter was lost.
- On the 1st Serafina Pekkala was evicted from the group after being attacked by the dominant female Goldeneye (VGDF007). Serafina Pekkala's eviction ended on the 5th, where she had returned and was acting as part of group. Yearling subordinate males Tampin (VGDM055) and Snackajack (VGDM063) left the group on the 30th, they returned later the same day.
- Gold Diggers had two daily group splits this month, both on the 6th.
- Adult subordinate male Captain Patel (VGDM048) was observed to have an open wound on the right of his muzzle this month. All other members of the group appeared to be in good health.

Jaxx (FDC):

- All 15 members were present at Jaxx at the end of the month.
- Subordinate yearling female Pulpi (VJXF189) wasn't seen going below with the group on the 7th. She was observed waking with the group on the morning of the 8th.
- Jaxx had no encounters, group-splits or intergroup interactions observed this month.
- Habituation is classed as *Advanced Progress*. Habituation of the 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 to be followed at a 5-meter distance.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health at the end of the month.

Lazuli (FDC):

- Lazuli increased by 5 individuals with 14 members present by the end of May.
- Five pups, Reblochon (VLP322), Scrumpy (VLP323), Thrutch (VLP324), Avon (VLP325), and Tam-O'-Shanter (VLP326) emerged for the first time on the 16th and have since been foraging with the group.
- 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 at the end of the month.

Side Quest (FDC):

- All 15 members were present at the end of the month.
- Dominant female Pumba (VZUF048) was made officially pregnant this month.
- Side Quest had no observed encounters, inter-group interactions or group-splits this month.
- Dominant female Pumba (VZUF048) was observed limping at the beginning of the month, but appeared to have recovered by the month's

end. All individuals appeared in good health by the end of May.

Trackie-Daks (FDC):

- Trackie-Daks increased by 1 individual with 21 members present at the end of the month.
- Yearling subordinate female Unova (VTDF037) was made officially pregnant this month. The litter was later aborted.
- Yearling subordinate female Refilwe (VTDF041) woke up with the group on the 5th. Both Unova and sub-adult female Mulan (VTDF046) were not with the group on arrival on the 22nd. Both Unova and Mulan woke up with the group on the 26th.
- Trackie-Daks had no observed encounters, inter-group interactions or group-splits this month.
- The habituation level is currently in *Advanced Progress*. Dominant male Guido (VWM275) drank water and ate egg multiple times this month. This month Guido was weighed for the first time since January. He was comfortable with 2m follows for 15 minutes.
- Subordinate yearling male Raisibe (VTDM043) showed signs of swelling on their muzzle this month. All other members of the group appeared to be in good health by the end of the month.

Ubuntu (FDC):

- All 22 individuals were present at the end of May.
- On the 7th subordinate yearling males Vamoose (VUBM072) and Hightail (VUBM073) left the group and were seen foraging close to Gold Diggers. They returned the same evening and went below with the group.
- On the 6th an intergroup interaction was observed between Ubuntu and Vetkoeks. Ubuntu saw, war-danced towards, and chased Vetkoeks, who retreated.
- There was one daily group-split observed at Ubuntu this month.
- The group had no observed encounters this month.
- All individuals at the group appeared to be in good health.

Vetkoeks (LHM):

- 8 out of 11 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- On the 9th, dominant male Mion (VZUM057) did not wake up with the group. He is yet to return by the end of the month
- *Male dominance* is now unsettled in the group.
- On the 10th pup Pona (VVKP030) was left behind by the group. Sub-adult male Ody (VVKM021) did not wake up with the group on the 19th. Both Pona and Ody are yet to return by the end of the month.
- On the 6th an intergroup interaction was observed between Vetkoeks and Ubuntu. Ubuntu saw, war-danced towards, and chased Vetkoeks, who retreated.
- The group had no encounters or group splits observed this month.

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

Zulus (FDC):

- All 8 of Zulu's individuals were present at the end of May.
- On the morning of the 25th, sub-adult female Bonnie (VZUF077) left the group. She was observed foraging with the group later that afternoon.
- Zulus had no observed group splits, encounters, or intergroup interactions in the month of May.
- All individuals in Zulus appeared to be healthy at the end of the month.

Life History Monitoring Groups:

Dik-Diks (LHM):

- 20 out of 24 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- This month dominant female Juliet (VGDF009) had her litter reported as aborted. She was later made officially pregnant again.
- On the 6th subordinate yearling female Florentine (VDDF008) did not wake up with the group. Florentine returned on the 8th and foraged with the group. Florentine left the group again on the 13th, returning on the 20th. On the 6th, Pup (VDDP021) did not wake up with the group. On the 9th, pup (VDDP023) did not wake up with the group. On the 28th, juvenile females Regina (VDDF019) and Nichi (VDDF026) left the group. They did not return by the month's end. On the 30th, juvenile female Eowyn (VDDF022) left the group. She did not return by the month's end.
- Enough time has passed for pup (VDDP021) and pup (VDDP023) to be given their Last Seen.
- On the 8th subordinate adult female Tuna Fish II (VGDF026) immigrated back into the group.
- There was one group split of uncertain duration observed at Dik-Diks in May.
- There were no recorded encounters or intergroup interactions observed this month.
- Habituation of the group remains in *Advanced progress* at the end of the month. Juliet drank water, however, she has not been weighed this month.
- Juliet, dominant male Rufaro (VUBM046), and subordinate adult male Jaivyn (VUBM048) all showed lumps on their cheeks, potentially a sign of tuberculosis. These symptoms had all disappeared by the end of May. Pup (VDDP022) had an injured left eye. All other members of the group appeared to be in good health at the end of the month.

Elrond's Council (FDC):

- All 18 individuals were present at the of May.
- Elrond's Council had three encounters this month. On the 8th, Alba's yearling subordinate male Bibu (VALM014) approached the group. The group saw Bibu and war-danced, – Bibu retreated. On the 10th, Bibu approached the group, he was chased and he retreated. On the 8th an unknown adult approached the group. The group saw the individual and war-danced

towards them, and the unknown individual then retreated.

- The group had one daily group split this month.
- Habituation is classed as *Advanced Progress*. The males were comfortable enough that we were 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) ~~was~~ is going well, Jonsnow was comfortable with observers standing at a 2-meter distance. Both males were interested in egg and Jatu was comfortable with observers standing at a 3 meters distance. The males were comfortable with group follows but foraged at a distance from observers.
- Subordinate adult male Jatu (VECM071) had an open wound on his chest, which has healed this month. All other members of the group appear to be in good health.

Renegades (LHM)

- 2 out of 8 members were present at the end of the month.
- On the 25th, dominant male Coquillet (VTSM014), subordinate adult male Gary (VTDM033), subordinate yearling male Johto (VTDM039), juvenile female (VRGF002), and juvenile males (VRGM003, VRGM004) were observed to have left the group.
- Coquillet, Gary, Johto, juvenile female (VRGF002), and juvenile males (VRGM003, VRGM004) are yet to return by the end of the month.
- Renegades had no observed group-splits, encounters, or inter-group interactions this month.
- Habituation is classed as *Advanced Progress*. The group was visited fifteen times this month. Dominant male Coquillet (VTSM014) was drinking water but is yet to be interested in egg.
- Dominant female Maya II (VGDF039) was observed to have lumps on her left cheek, likely a sign of tuberculosis. She also was observed to have a wound to the left of her mouth. Observers found Coquillet to be very thin and lethargic – he has experienced weight loss this month. All other members of the group appeared to be in good health at the end of the month.

Habituation Groups:

Hogwarts (HAB):

- All 11 members of the group were present at the end of the month.
- Hogwarts had no observed group-splits, encounters, or inter-group interactions this month.
- Habituation is classed as *In Progress*. Habituation of sub-adult male Buckbeak (VHWM002) was going well, he was drinking water, was comfortable around the scale and he got weighed three times this month. Dominant

male Caraxes (VHWM004) drank water. Habituation at the babysitting burrow has been successful this month as the group left to forage later due to the litter. Both individuals were comfortable with less than two meters sitting and movement.

- Subordinate yearling male Nkosana (VHWM001) had a small open wound on the left side of their abdomen. All other individuals appeared healthy at the end of the month.

Whiskers (HAB):

- 9 out of 10 individuals were present at the end of May.
- On the 25th, dominant female Archangel (VWF259) did not wake up with the group. On the 25th subordinate adult female Gnoll (VWF262) did not wake up with the group.
- *Female dominance* is now unsettled in the group.
- Enough time has passed for pup (VWU284) to be given its Last Seen this month.
- On the 29th three adult females Kylie (VWF265), Bruce (VWF266), and Sheila (VWF267) immigrated into the group, and began competing for dominance.
- Bruce rejoined the group with no signs of the pregnancy that was observed before her leaving the group.
- Whiskers had no observed group splits, encounters, or intergroup interactions in the month of May.
- The group's habituation was classed as *In Progress*. Adult subordinate male Agent K (VWM276) drank water, was eating egg and was comfortable with a 2-3m sitting distance and a 5m standing and moving distance. We will continue visiting the group and increasing Agent K's comfort distance as well as potentially recording his weight.
- Dominant male Raclette (VTDM017) has been observed with lumps on his left cheek, a possible sign of tuberculosis. All other members of the group appeared to be in good health.

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