



# The Meerkatter

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

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## What a carry-on!

As June draws to a close and the coldest months arrive, breeding activity typically begins to cease, and one might expect group dynamics to stabilise. However, this is not the case for the group of Whiskers. Following their 'Turbulent Year' in 2024 – as reported on in February – dramatic events continue to unfold, and the theatrics continue.

Soon after Archangel (VWF259) had successfully gained the position as dominant female from Gnoll (VWF262) in January 2024, adult male Raclette (VTDM017) also rose to dominance. It seemed as if dominance at Whiskers had been settled. However, this respite was short-lived. On the morning of the 25<sup>th</sup> of May, it was observed that Archangel was absent upon the group's emergence from the sleeping burrow – once again leaving female dominance unclaimed. As the only eligible female remaining in the group, dominance fell back to Gnoll. Gnoll's second reign was short-lived however, as just four days later, on the 29<sup>th</sup> of May, three natal Whiskers females immigrated back into the group. Kylie (VWF265), Bruce (VWF266), and Sheila (VWF267) who all had left Whiskers in the days following Archangel's rise to dominance back in January, had returned. Despite maintaining a similar weight to the three imposing females, Gnoll did not attempt to assert any authority of her own, leaving the group that same evening.



An example of dominance assertion from Whiskers' dominant female Luna (left) towards yearling subordinate female Pandi (right). Photo credit: Zoe Turner (2021).

The absence of Archangel and Gnoll provided an opportunity at Whiskers, leaving Kylie, Bruce, and Sheila to contest one another in a rivalry among sisters for social hierarchy. Dominant females boast many privileges and advantages over their subordinate counterparts, some of which are especially prevalent during breeding. Such

reproductive advantages include priority access to viable mates and breeding control over subordinate group members, directly benefitting the sexual fitness of the dominant female (Clutton Brock et al, 2001). Furthermore, females have been shown to outcompete their subordinate group members for food and successfully steal food from subordinates more commonly (Flower, 2007). This facilitates more rapid physical growth in both the dominant female and her offspring, thereby indirectly enhancing their fitness and optimising their reproductive success. The ability for a dominant breeding pair to monopolise a breeding system gives those individuals a significant competitive edge over other group members – making dominance worth fighting for. Nevertheless, it comes with a cost.



Subordinate female (right) submitting to Gattaca's dominant female Flint (left) Photo credit: Shaylee Alderton (2020).

The status of dominance can sometimes be acquired without conflict. For example, if there is only one eligible successor following the death or departure of the dominant individual. However, if multiple individuals are vying for the same position, even close relatives often engage in fierce, and occasionally fatal, competition. Such competition often incurs substantial costs for the individuals involved, including reduced breeding success and increased rates of reproductive senescence (Sharp & Clutton-Brock, 2011). Ultimately, high competition among females can result in shorter and less productive fertile lifespans. Henceforth, the females at Whiskers face a difficult trade-off between the benefits of dominance and the costs associated with achieving it, which may never even materialise. So far, the three sisters have shown subdued competition for dominance, with Bruce, Kylie, and Sheila frequently chinning and hip-slaming one another as well as anal-marking surrounding vegetation. Despite this, no substantial submissions have been observed between the sisters, hence dominance at Whiskers is yet to be confirmed.

This year in the Kalahari, unlike in previous years, breeding appears to be sustained later into winter, with 8 pregnancies observed in the month of June. For context, there has only been an accumulative total of 4 pregnancies in the month of June since 2020. In 2024 and 2023 we observed no pregnancies at all in June. The extended breeding season is possibly a result of the period of heavy rainfall which we experienced here in the months of March and April. These periods of heavy rainfall can lead to the emergence of sour grass and an abundance of food, thereby facilitating behaviors which demand high energy, such as breeding.

Whilst these conditions have alleviated some of the pressures of the dry winter, the relief is somewhat offset. Naturally, pressures such as predation, disease, and harsh environmental conditions can lead to the death of a dominant meerkat - regardless of the time of year. However, as breeding has continued into later months this year, intra-group competition has remained especially prevalent. The example of Whiskers is not alone in this regard. The eviction of subordinate adult female Mojo JoJo (VECF038) from Elrond's Council, and the ongoing hostility toward evicted yearling female Florentine (VDDF008) at Dik-Diks demonstrate that this heightened competition is not an isolated incident unique only to Whiskers, but rather a recurring theme across many groups this year. As the weather becomes harsher and food grows increasingly scarce, we would expect breeding behaviours to cease and the pressures that come with them, such as heightened intra-group competition to alleviate once again. Individuals are forced to alter their behaviours in accordance with these changes in a bid to optimise their fitness and survivability.

To conclude the month with one final twist, on June 28<sup>th</sup>, a senior observer confirmed that Bruce in Whiskers was indeed pregnant. It will be interesting to observe how Bruce's pregnancy affects competition from hereon, particularly given the late stage of the season. Will the weight gain associated with pregnancy enable Bruce to prevail over her sisters and restore order within the group, or will the birth of a new litter prove the catalyst for increased competition?

## References

- Clutton-Brock et al., (2001). Cooperation, control, and Concession in Meerkat Groups.
- Flower, T. (2007). Competition for food in meerkats (*Suricata suricatta*), MSc dissertation.
- Sharp & Clutton-Brock. (2011). Competition, breeding success and ageing rates in female meerkats.

## Pregnancies in June 2025

<b>Females pregnant in June</b>	<b>8</b>
Females who aborted	1
Females who gave birth, litters lost	0
Females who gave birth, litter emerged	3
Females who gave birth, unknown outcome	2
Females still pregnant at the end of the month	2

## June 2025 Life History Details

Due to the large number of groups that 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 19 individuals were present at the end of June.
- Dominant female Cleopatra (VALF008) gave birth this month. There were clear signs of lactation and babysitting and the litter was thought to be alive – the pups were yet to emerge by the end of this month.

- On the 14<sup>th</sup>, subordinate yearling male Bibu (VALM014) left Alba and was seen roving at Elrond's Council. He returned to Alba on the 16<sup>th</sup>.
- Alba had one daily group split this month on the 27<sup>th</sup>.
- The group had no observed encounters or inter-group interactions this month.
- All individuals appeared healthy at the end of the month.

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

- All 10 members were present at the end of the month.
- On the 29<sup>th</sup>, subordinate adult male Gurke (VHMM036) left the group and was seen roving at Zulus, he returned later that day.
- Subordinate sub-adult male Toadstool (VBSM013) left the group on the 28<sup>th</sup>, returning the following day.
- Brussels Sprouts had no encounters, intergroup interactions or group-splits observed this month.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health.

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

- Gold Diggers decreased by 1 individual with 19 members present by the end of the month.
- Subordinate adult female Serafina Pekkala (VGDF049) left the group on the 28<sup>th</sup>. Serafina Pekkala had not returned by the month's end.
- The group had no encounters, inter-group interactions, or group-splits observed this month.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health.

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

- Jaxx increased by 2 individuals with 17 members being present at the end of June.
- Dominant female Jub Jub (VJXF160) gave birth on the 9<sup>th</sup>, there were clear signs of lactation and babysitting and the litter was thought to be alive.
- Two pups VJXP206 and VJXP207 emerged for the first time on the 24<sup>th</sup>, and as of the month's end, were yet to forage with the group.
- On the 4<sup>th</sup>, subordinate adult female Brave (VJXF178) left the group – she was observed back with the group on the 9<sup>th</sup>.
- There were no group-splits, encounters or inter-group interactions observed this month.
- Habituation was classed as *In Progress*. Habituation of dominant male Mr.Worldwide (VJXM200) was going well, he had not yet shown interest in egg or water but was comfortable with observers sitting at 1 meter distance at the sleeping burrow and follows at a 5-meters distance.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health by the end of the month.

#### **Lazuli (FDC):**

- Lazuli decreased by 1 individual with 13 members present at the end of June.

- Dominant female Masiwa (VLF308) was observed to be in oestrus between the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup>.
- On the 8<sup>th</sup>, pup Tam-O'-Shanter (VLU326) was no longer with the group. Enough time has passed for Tam-O' Shanter to be given his Last Seen this month.
- On the 19<sup>th</sup>, dominant male Rogelio De La Vega (VGDM015) left the group, he returned the same afternoon.
- Lazuli had no observed encounters, inter-group interactions or group-splits this month.
- Yearling male Petit Bidon (VLM318) had a wound to his left muzzle. All other 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 month.
- Dominant female Pumba (VZUF048) gave birth on the 16<sup>th</sup> of this month. There were clear signs of lactation and babysitting, and the litter was thought to be alive, they were yet to emerge by the month's end.
- Side Quest had no observed encounters, inter-group interactions or group-splits in June.
- All individuals appeared in good health at the end of June.

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

- Trackie-Daks decreased by 2 individuals with 19 members present at the end of the month.
- Dominant female Boubou (VTDF028) was found dead on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. Her skull and radio collar were found near the entrance of a bolthole. The cause of her death is unknown.
- *Female Dominance* was now *unknown* at Trackie-Daks at the end of the month.
- On the 29<sup>th</sup>, yearling female Unova (VTDF037) was evicted from the group. She was yet to return to the group by the end of the month.
- Trackie-Daks had no encounters, inter-group interactions or group-splits observed this month.
- The habituation level was currently in *Advanced Progress*. Dominant male Guido (VWM275) drank water and ate egg multiple times this month. He had not been weighed this month but partially came into the scale for water. He was comfortable with 2m follows for 15 minutes.
- Yearling female Refilwe (VTDF041) had an open wound on her left cheek. Sub-adult male Peely (VTDM048) had a swollen right cheek, and his right eye had been observed half-closed at times this month. Unova had a puncture wound on the left underside of her neck. All other individuals at the group appeared to be in good health.

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

- Ubuntu decreased by 4 individuals with 18 members present at the end of the June.
- On the 6<sup>th</sup> subordinate yearling male Vamoose (VUBM072) and subordinate yearling male Wors (VUBM075) were not with the group on arrival. They both returned to the group the following day. On the 8<sup>th</sup> subordinate adult male Beans



(VUBM053), Vamoose, and subordinate yearling male Hightail (VUBM073) all left the group after running in another direction. All three males returned on the 12<sup>th</sup>, waking up and foraging with the group. On the 24<sup>th</sup> Beans, Vamoose, Hightail, subordinate yearling Chakalaka (VUBM076), and juvenile male Fifi (VUBM082) were not observed to be foraging with the group upon arrival. Fifi woke up and foraged with the group again on the 26<sup>th</sup>, but the other four males were yet to return to the group at the end of the month.

- The group had no encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits this month.
- It was observed that Wors has an open lump by his left eye and a swollen left muzzle. All other individuals at the group appeared to be in good health.

#### **Vetkoeks (FDC):**

- All 8 individuals were present at the end of the month.
- On the 21<sup>st</sup>, sub-adult male Seabiscuit (VVKM022) left the group, he returned later that day.
- Enough time has passed for Dominant male Mion (VZUM057) and sub-adult male Ody (VVKM021) to be given their Last Seen this month.
- Male dominance was still undecided at the end of this month.
- On the 17<sup>th</sup> an intergroup interaction was observed between Vetkoeks and Mandalore. Both groups war-danced towards one another, and, following a fight, Vetkoeks chased Mandalore away.
- Vetkoeks encountered adult male Floki (VWM241) from Mandalore. He was spotted around the entrance of the sleeping burrow and was watched closely by Vetkoeks, leaving soon after.
- There were no group encounters or group-splits observed at Vetkoeks in June.
- All individuals appeared healthy at the end of the month.

#### **Zulus (FDC):**

- Zulus increased by 4 individuals with 12 members present at the end of June.
- Dominant female Leona (VZUF070) gave birth on the 5<sup>th</sup>, with clear signs of lactation and babysitting beginning the next day. 4 pups (VZUP081, VZUP082, VZUP083, VZUP084) emerged for the first time on the 25<sup>th</sup>, and all foraged with the group for the first time on the 30<sup>th</sup>.
- On the 5<sup>th</sup>, subordinate yearling male Sweep (VZUM072) was absent from the group. He woke up the next day with the group.
- On the 29<sup>th</sup> Zulus encountered Brussels Sprouts' subordinate adult male Gurke, who woke up with the group. They frenzied and alarmed – he stayed with the group from 07:30-09:30 before leaving again.
- Zulus had no inter-group interactions 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):**

- Dik-Diks decreased by 2 individuals with 17 members present at the end of the month.
- Dominant female Juliet (VGDF009) aborted her litter this month.
- On the 7<sup>th</sup>, subordinate yearling female Florentine (VDDF008) left the group and was spotted foraging over 200m away. On the 24<sup>th</sup>, subordinate yearling female Devil (VDDF005) left the group.
- On the 1<sup>st</sup>, subordinate adult female Tuna Fish II (VGDF026) approached the group twice, with the group ignoring her both times. She approached the group two times on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and retreated when spotted. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> she approached the group 4 times, and was ignored by the group all times, including after going below with the group following an alarm call. On the 4<sup>th</sup> she approached 3 times and was ignored by the group. On the 8<sup>th</sup> she emerged from the burrow before the group and stayed foraging nearby but was not acting as part of the group. On the 17<sup>th</sup> she approached the group and was ignored. On the 20<sup>th</sup> she emerged from the sleeping burrow prior to the group and retreated when the group emerged.
- Dik-diks had one observed daily group-split this month. There were no inter-group interactions this month.
- Dominant male Rufaro (VUBM046) has a puncture scab on his right cheek and has lumps on both cheeks. Subordinate yearling male Scramble (VDDM007) was observed to have bumps on both sides of his muzzle. Subordinate adult female Tuna Fish II (VGDF026) has a large scab under her left shoulder and a small scab to her left thigh. All other group members seem to be in good health at the month's end.
- Habituation of the group remains in *Advanced progress* at the end of the month. Dominant female Juliet (VGDF009) drank water but was not comfortable with hands and did not eat egg at this moment – she had not been weighed this month. Subordinate adult female Shelby (VGDF022) had also shown progression by eating egg – she did not drink water and was not comfortable with hands – she was weighed once this month.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health at the end of the month.

#### **Elrond's Council (LHM):**

- Elrond's Council increased by 1 individual with 19 members present at the end of June.
- Dominant female Snoop Kat (VECF039) gave birth on the 14<sup>th</sup>, with lactation & babysitting following.
- Two pups, VECF076 and VECF077 emerged from the sleeping burrow for the first time on the 30<sup>th</sup>.

- On the 5<sup>th</sup>, adult female Mojo JoJo (VECF038) was evicted. Mojo JoJo is yet to return to the group by the end of the month.
- On the 6<sup>th</sup> the group encountered an unknown adult – they chased the individual, who fled. On the 6<sup>th</sup>, the group had an encounter with Alba's subordinate yearling male Bibu (VALM014) the group chased him, and he retreated.
- Elrond's Council had no inter-group interactions or group-splits observed in June.
- Habituation was classed as in *Advanced Progress*. The males were comfortable enough that we were collecting behavioural data on the group, whilst remaining aware that the priority was the habituation of the two males. Habituation of dominant male Jonsnow (VECM071) and sub-adult male Jatu (VECM070) was 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-meter distance. The males were comfortable with group follows but foraged at a distance from observers.
- Adult male Jatu (VECM071) had an open wound on the left side of his chest. Snoop Kat had an open wound on the left side of her chest. Dominant male Jon Snow (VECM070) had an open wound on the inner side of his left thigh. Yearling female Cadenza (VECF059) had been observed to have a wound on the left of her muzzle. All other members of the group appeared to be in good health.

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

- All eligible females were no longer seen by the end of the month.
- On the 1<sup>st</sup>, dominant male Coquillet (VTSM014), subordinate adult male Gary (VTDM033), subordinate yearling male Johto (VTDM039), and juveniles: (VRGF002), (VRGM003), and (VRGM004) all returned to the group.
- On the 12<sup>th</sup>, dominant female Maya II (VGDF039) was not with the group on arrival. She had been showing strong indications of tuberculosis and was presumed dead.
- On the 14<sup>th</sup>, Johto did not wake with the group and had not been seen by the month's end.
- On the 26<sup>th</sup>, Coquillet and 4 juveniles (VRGF001, VRGF002, VRGM003, VRGM004) were not with the group upon arrival. On the 26<sup>th</sup>, subordinate adult male Gary was found away from the group.
- Renegades had no encounters, group-splits, or inter-group interactions this month.
- Gary was observed to have lumps on his right cheek this month.
- Unfortunately, due to the loss of the group's dominant female, Maya II, and the ongoing health issues at the group, we are expecting the group to be officially disbanded in the following weeks.

#### **Habituation Groups:**

##### **Hogwarts (HAB):**

- All 11 members of the group were present at the end of the month.
- Dominant female Salazar (VZUF051) was made officially pregnant this month.
- There were no encounters, group-splits, or inter-group interactions observed this month.
- Habituation was 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 was weighed once this month on the 1<sup>st</sup>. Dominant male Caraxes (VHWM004) drank water and had become more comfortable with the scale but was not weighed this month. Both individuals were comfortable with less than two meters sitting and movement.
- All individuals appeared healthy at the end of the month.

##### **Whiskers (HAB):**

- Whiskers decreased by 3 individuals with 7 members present at the end of June.
- Female dominance remained unsettled at Whiskers.
- On the 27<sup>th</sup>, juvenile female Soli (VWF281) didn't wake up with the group. She had not returned by the month's end. On the 30<sup>th</sup>, subordinate adult male Princes Carolyn (VTDM013) and yearling subordinate male Kanto (VTDM036) did not wake up with the group. They did not return by the end of the month.
- Previous dominant female Archangel (VWF259) was given her last seen this month.
- Whiskers had one intergroup interaction observed with Mandalore on the 24<sup>th</sup>. Our observer arrived as the groups were fighting, and the groups soon split, running in opposite directions.
- 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 had 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, which had fully healed by the end of the month. All other members of the group appeared to be in good health.

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