



The Meerkatter

The Friends of the Kalahari Meerkat Project Report – www.kalahari-meerkats.com – April 2026

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Lazuli in Limbo

For over 30 years, Lazuli has remained a constant presence on our reserve. Formed in 1995 by evicted females from their ancestor group Avatar, the group is the oldest group on our reserve at present. However, in contrast to the group’s longevity, female dominance in recent years has been notably short-lived. Following the disappearance of dominant female Filthy McNasty (VLF223) in 2019, dominance was immediately assumed on the same day by Sigma (VLF230). Sigma’s tenure as dominant female lasted 4 years, ending on the 5th of May 2023 after she received a bite to the head from a puff adder. Her body was recovered the next day, leaving the dominant position at Lazuli open. That same week, adult female Dumpling (VLF272) received enough submissions from the group’s females to be recognised as dominant female. Dumpling’s dominance was again short-lived, as in December 2024 she too was bitten by a snake and was subsequently found dead in a bolt-hole. Following her death, only one eligible female remained in the group – yearling female Masiwa (VLF308). As a result, Masiwa was immediately considered dominant. Since then, she has raised 3 successful litters, with group size doubling from 10 to 20 individuals between January 2025 and January 2026. Despite this success, April would mark the last month of her tenure as dominant, bringing huge challenges to even our most established meerkat group.



Fig. 1: First emerge of Masiwa (VLF308) and her littermates, looked over by adult subordinate female Ma Di Tau (VLF278). Photo credit: Maahir Jusabani.

The series of unfortunate events at Lazuli started at the end of March this year. On the 18th, pup Bean (VLF333) was found dead at the group’s sleeping burrow after acting highly lethargic in the morning. An autopsy suggested a puff adder bite to her left shoulder. Just two days later, Lazuli would again face trouble. On the 20th, Gold Diggers, currently the largest group on our reserve comprising 26 individuals, had slowly encroached onto Lazuli’s territory while foraging. That evening, Gold Diggers returned to the same burrow that Lazuli had been occupying for several days, leading to an inter-group interaction between both groups. Lazuli, with just 18 individuals, was immediately chased by Gold Diggers, and fighting broke out between group members. Group size represents a key determinant of inter-group interaction outcome (Dyble et al., 2019), and this appeared true in this encounter, with Lazuli retreating. During the encounter, pups Sole (VLF332) and Mad-One (VLF334) became separated from their group after being chased repeatedly by Gold Diggers. At only 2 months old, both pups were still not able to forage fully independently and instead remained reliant on their group to meet their feeding requirements. Survival was highly unlikely, and both pups were not seen again after the inter-group interaction, reducing Lazuli’s member count to 16 by the end of March.

April would not prove to be a month of respite for the group. On the 12th, subadult female Liv (VLF329) woke up with the group but was no longer seen at the start of the afternoon session, and she remains absent at the end of the month. That same day, juvenile female Elmo (VLF331), the only individual now remaining from her litter, was observed to be trailing behind the rest of the group while foraging and appeared extremely lethargic. Her condition worsened throughout the day, and she did not wake up with the group the next morning - she has not been resighted. With this final disappearance, none of the five pups born in December 2025 remained in the group, and the group’s member count had dwindled to just 14 by mid-April. Unfortunately, this number would continue to reduce in the following few days.

As the month progressed, the condition of several individuals appeared to quickly worsen. This was particularly clear in dominant female Masiwa, who was breathing rapidly and would frequently lay down while foraging. On the 18th, subadult male Baxter (VLM327) was no longer seen with the group after experiencing similar symptoms, and on the 19th Masiwa’s condition deteriorated. Masiwa slept in a different burrow to the rest of the group that evening, with the group reuniting the next morning. As the

dominant female, this split was highly unusual and was a signal of her poor condition. The next day, after struggling to forage during the morning session, Masiwa was found dead in a bolthole by the observer at the group. With uncertainty as to the reason behind the poor condition of so many members at Lazuli, her body was recovered and an autopsy conducted to determine her cause of death. Over the next few days, conditions at the group appeared to improve, with fewer observations of individuals showing lethargy and respiratory weakness. It appeared that the group was recovering, yet the question still remained over the cause of such a rapid deterioration of so many group members.



Fig. 2: Dominant female Masiwa standing tall at Lazuli. Photo Credit: Marianna Macorig, Meerkat Volunteer.

The results of the autopsy provided a possible explanation for the events at Lazuli. Masiwa's cause of death was found to be acute heart failure, and this may have been caused by envenomation from a Cape cobra, with their venom being cardiotoxic. Meerkats are generally moderately resistant to snake venom, yet the autopsy further found that she carried a high parasite load. Two large roundworms, 8cm long and 1.5cm thick, were found in her stomach, along with additional large roundworms and tapeworms in her small intestine. This high parasite burden may have suppressed any immune response to the snake venom and was therefore a potential contributing factor in her death. The fact that multiple individuals at Lazuli developed similar symptoms at the same time suggest that the envenomation may have been received during a mobbing event, in which the group converges around perceived threats. Despite their resistance to cobra venom, it is probable that the high parasite load present in Masiwa is reflected in the other members of the group. This may explain why so many individuals

reacted more strongly to the venom than expected. It was therefore positive that in the following days, individuals that were previously showing lethargy and respiratory distress at the group were all beginning to slowly improve. By the end of the month, all remaining individuals at the group appeared to be healthy, a greatly positive sign for Lazuli.

With the death of Masiwa, female dominance at Lazuli has now entered a period of instability. The two eligible females present in the group are yearling littermates Pataud (VLF319) and Bumble (VLF320). Although no direct dominance competition has been observed at present, both individuals have been showing varied dominance behaviour towards each other, with frequent dominance assertions between the two. Observers are closely monitoring for any submissions between the sisters and awaiting to see who will take over dominance at the group. Lazuli has been no stranger in recent years to dominance changes, and whilst the future of the group is unknown at present, we are positive that they will emerge from this period as strong as ever.

References

Dyble, M. et al. (2019). *Intergroup aggression in meerkats*.

Pregnancies in April 2026

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

April 2026 Life History Details

Due to the large number of groups we are covering, four different levels of data collection are currently in use, briefly outlined below.

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 25 members of Alba were present at the end of this month.
- On the 9th, subordinate adult female Tress (VALF020) left the group in the afternoon but was seen waking up with the group the next morning. On the 13th, subadult female Lola (VALF039) was found missing during the afternoon session, yet she was seen foraging with the group the next day.
- Enough time has now passed for Bibu (VALM014) to be given his last seen. He was suffering from advanced tuberculosis when last sighted.
- There were 3 group splits at Alba this month. On the 14th, a daily group split included dominant male Pucky (VECM023) and subordinates Tress, Chia (VALF025), Samurai (VALF027), Disco (VALM029), Yibo (VALM030), Florence (VALF031), Little-Creek (VALF033), Albert-Le-Blanc (VALM034), Pembroke (VALM036), Lola (VALF039), Juanita (VALF040), Lorraine (VALF041), David Attenborough (VALM042), Richard Attenborough (VALM044), Skee-Lo (VALM046) and Big Al (VALM047). On the 15th, there was another daily group split involving Florence, Fleetfoot (VALF032), Little-Creek, David Attenborough, Stella (VALF043), Richard Attenborough, Speedy Gonzales (VALM045), Skee-Lo, Big Al and Little Mookie (VALM048). On the 25th, Pucky, Florence, Albert-Le-Blanc, Pembroke, Skee-Lo and Little Mookie were seen to have split from the group in the morning, and they remained split that evening. Dominant male Pucky woke up reunited with Alba on the 26th, yet all other individuals only returned on the evening of the 27th.
- There were no encounters or inter-group interactions observed at Alba throughout April.
- Samurai appears to have developed a small submandibular lump this month but otherwise appears outwardly healthy. All other members appeared to be in good health this month.

Brussels Sprouts (FDC):

- All 18 members remained present at Brussels Sprouts this month.
- On the 1st, subordinate yearling male Bubek was seen to have returned to the group after being

separated during an inter-group interaction with Gold Diggers on the 28th March.

- On the 18th, subordinate adult male Gurke (VHMM036) left the group briefly before returning later that afternoon.
- There was one individual encounter at Brussels Sprouts this month – on the 23rd, three meerkats with unclear dye marks approached the group but fled after being chased away.
- There was one inter-group interaction this month. After encountering Gold Diggers on the 22nd, Brussels Sprouts fled after briefly fighting with their members.
- All individuals appeared to be in good health this month.

Gold Diggers (FDC):

- Gold Diggers decreased from 27 to 26 members present at the end of April.
- On the 2nd subordinate adult male Tampin (VGDM055) was found missing from the group but returned that evening. Tampin was again not seen with the group on the 18th afternoon but returned later that day.
- On the 1st, pup Marty (VGDM088) was killed in a road accident.
- There were 4 group splits at Gold Diggers this month. On the 6th, dominant male Shrew (VUBM018) and subordinates Serafina Pekkala (VGDF049), Manchego (VGDF054), Bokkie (VGDM067) and Ares (VGDF075) split from the group in the morning but were seen reunited that afternoon. On the 16th, all group members apart from dominant female Goldeneye (VGDF007) and subordinate adult male Snackajack (VGDM063) were seen to have split in the morning but returned by the afternoon. On the 18th, Serafina Pekkala, Dottie (VGDF071), Sid (VGDM079), Emeraude (VGDM080) and Ebene (VGDM081) separated from the group in the morning before returning that afternoon. A final daily group split was on the 25th, involving Dottie, Larkin (VGDF077), Ebene (VGDM081) and Doc (VGDM087)
- There was one inter-group interaction observed this month. The group encountered Brussels Sprouts on the 22nd, chasing and fighting with their members before Brussels Sprouts fled.
- There were no individual encounters observed at Gold Diggers during April.
- All individuals appeared to be in good health throughout the month.

Jaxx (FDC):

- All 24 members remained present at Jaxx at the end of April.
- On the 24th, juvenile males Callywag (VJXM219) and Chunky (VJXM222) were not seen during the afternoon session but woke up with the group the next morning.
- There were 3 daily group splits at Jaxx this month, and one split of uncertain duration involving 11 individuals that split during the morning of the 4th and had returned by the next observer session on the 7th morning.

- There were no encounters or inter-group interactions observed at Jaxx this month.
- Habituation is classed as *Advanced Progress*. Habituation of dominant male Mr Worldwide (VJXM200) continues. He occasionally shows interest in water at the sleeping burrow, and generally allows follows of 3-5 metres though this varies.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health throughout April.

Lazuli (FDC):

- Lazuli decreased by 4 individuals this month, from 16 to 12 members present at the group by the end of April.
- On the 12th, subadult female Liv (VLF329) was found missing from the group in the afternoon and remains absent at the end of the month. After appearing in very poor condition, juvenile male Elmo (VLM331) did not wake up with the group on the 13th and remains absent from Lazuli. On the 16th, subadult male Avon (VLM325) left the group in the afternoon but returned later that day. On the 18th, Avon was found missing again in the afternoon along with subadult male Baxter (VLM327). Avon returned the next morning, however Baxter remains absent at the end of the month.
- On the 19th, Lazuli experienced a group split in which dominant female Masiwa (VLF308) slept apart from the rest of the group, before the group reunited the next morning. On the 20th, after her condition deteriorated, Masiwa was found dead in a bolt-hole. *Female dominance* at Lazuli is now unconfirmed.
- There were no inter-group interactions or individual encounters observed at Lazuli during April.
- Masiwa, Elmo, Avon, TumTum (VLM315), Fat Belly (VLM316) and Finn (VLM328) appeared to develop sudden respiratory symptoms in the middle of the month, potentially from an envenomation event. TumTum, Fat Belly and Finn recovered within several days. By the end of the month, all remaining individuals appeared to be in good health.
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Side Quest (FDC):

- All 24 individuals at Side Quest remained present throughout April.
- There were no individual movements at Side Quest this month.
- There was one inter-group interaction this month. On the 8th, the group encountered Hogwarts as they returned to the same burrow in the evening. Both groups fought and fled after individuals sustained injuries.
- There were no individual encounters or group splits at Side Quest this month.
- Dominant male Legolas (VECM009) and subordinate adult male Tex (VSIM035) both continue to suffer with burst submandibular lumps. Dominant female Pumba (VZUF048) has several small lumps on her feet and legs which

continue to persist. All other individuals appear to be in good health.

Trackie-Daks (FDC):

- All 21 members of Trackie-Daks remained present throughout April.
- There were no individual movements, individual encounters, group-splits or inter-group interactions observed at Trackie-Daks this month.
- The habituation level at Trackie-Daks is currently classed as in *Advanced Progress*. Dominant male Guido (VWM275) occasionally drinks water and fairly consistently allows observers to stand at less than 1 metre; he was not weighed in April.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health this month.

Ubuntu (FDC):

- Ubuntu decreased by 1 individual, from 22 to 21 individuals present at the end of April.
- On the 2nd, dominant male Greebo (VHMM048) and subordinate females Hotfoot (VUBF071) and Ursula (VUBF077) were found missing from the group in the afternoon, but all returned later that evening. On the 6th, subordinate juvenile male Sam I Am (VUBM093) was no longer seen during the morning session and he has not been sighted since.
- There were no group splits, inter-group interactions or encounters observed at Ubuntu in April.
- All members appeared to be in good health throughout the month.

Vetkoeks (FDC):

- All 17 members of Vetkoeks remained present throughout April.
- *Male Dominance* is still unconfirmed at Vetkoeks this month.
- There were no individual movements at Vetkoeks this month.
- There was one daily group split at Vetkoeks in April – on the 16th, eldest subordinate male Zuma (VZUM059) and subordinates Flicka (VVKF023), Thotho (VVKF027), Juju (VVKF034), Olly (VVKM036), Yossarian (VVKM037), Frankie (VVKM039), Josephine (VVKF040) and Tumbleweed (VVKM041) split from the group briefly in the afternoon.
- There were two individual encounters at Vetkoeks this month. On the 15th, the group encountered an unmarked individual but did not react. On the 29th, they again encountered an unmarked individual and chased it away.
- There were no inter-group interactions observed at Vetkoeks this month.
- All individuals appeared to be in good health through April.

Zulus (FDC):

- All 26 members at Zulus remained present through April.

- On the 6th, subordinate yearling male Rainbow (VZUM078) left the group briefly in the morning before returning later during the day.
- There were no group splits, inter-group interactions or individual encounters observed at Zulus this month.
- All individuals appeared to be in good health through April.

appear comfortable with an observer sitting at 5 metres. Sub-adults at the group occasionally appear relaxed at a minimum of 3 metres. The group still reacts strongly to movement and has no interest in egg or water, but habituation efforts continue.

- The majority of the group appear to be suffering from TB symptoms. Princess Carolyn has developed a submandibular lump, and a large proportion of the group appear to have small inguinal lumps or other sores on their bodies. Observers will continue to monitor the TB situation here.

Life History Monitoring Groups:

Dik-Diks (LHM):

- All 21 members remained present at Dik-Diks through April.
- Enough time has now passed for pup Syl (VDDF037) to be given her last seen.
- There were no individual movements, encounters, group splits, or inter-group interactions observed at Dik-Diks this month.
- Habituation is classed as *Advanced Progress*. Dominant female Juliet (VGDF009) was weighed 3 times this month and continues to allow close follows at 1 metre.
- All individuals at Dik-Diks appeared to be in good health throughout April.

Elrond's Council (LHM):

- Elrond's Council decreased by 1 individual, from 10 to 9 individuals at the end of April.
- On the 14th, subordinate yearling male Madarauchiha (VECM068), who has been suffering from advanced tuberculosis, was left behind by the group. He returned to the group later that day, but did not wake up with the group on the 21st. He remains absent at the end of the month.
- Enough time has now passed for subordinate yearling male Fergie (VECM072) to be given his last seen. He was last observed suffering from advanced tuberculosis.
- Both *Female and Male Dominance* is unconfirmed at Elrond's Council this month.
- There were no group splits, individual encounters or inter-group interactions observed at Elrond's Council in April.
- Subadult male Noah (VECM076) has developed small lumps on his paws and nose. All other individuals appear to be in good health.

Habituation Groups:

Khoisan (HAB) :

- All estimated 17 members appear to remain present at the group, with known male Princess Carolyn (VTDM013) and 16 unknown individuals.
- *Female and Male Dominance* is currently unknown at Khoisan.
- Habituation is classed as *In Progress*. The group has improved significantly, and most individuals

Hogwarts (HAB):

- Hogwarts increased by 1 individual, from 19 to 20 individuals at the end of April.
- On the 15th, 3 pups (VHWP022, VHWP023, VHWP024) emerged for the first time. On the 22nd, pup VHWP022 foraged with the group for the first time, but the remaining 2 pups have not been seen since their emergence despite burrow moves. Enough time has passed for them to both be given their last seen, with predation assumed.
- There was 1 inter-group interaction this month. On the 8th, Hogwarts encountered Side Quest as both groups returned to the same sleeping burrow. Both groups fought and then fled the area, with several individuals from Side Quest being injured.
- There were no individual movements, encounters or group splits observed at Hogwarts this month.
- Habituation is classed as *In Progress*. Habituation of dominant male Caraxes (VHWM004) continues. He shows some interest in water at the sleeping burrow but is still wary of movement. He was not weighed this month.
- All other individuals appeared in good health throughout the month.

Whiskers (HAB):

- All 19 individuals at Whiskers remained present throughout April.
- There were no individual movements, inter-group interactions, encounters or group splits observed at Whiskers in April.
- The group's habituation is classed as *In Progress*. The habituation of subordinate adult male Agent K (VWM276) remains positive. He appears comfortable at the sleeping burrow with observers sitting at 1 metre but is still cautious of observers standing and only occasionally eats thrown egg. He was not weighed this month.
- All individuals at Whiskers appeared to be in good health this month.

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