



The Meerkatter

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

| | | | |
|----------------------|-----|------------------------------|-----|
| A Welcome to Khoisan | 1-2 | Pregnancies in February..... | 2 |
| | | Life History Details..... | 2-5 |

A Welcome to Khoisan!

The foundation of all data collection at the Kalahari Meerkat Project (KMP) is the habituation of our study groups, where continued efforts by our observers allow for the collection of consistent life-history, behavioural, and weights data from our meerkat population. Despite its importance, habituation is not achieved easily – the complete habituation of a meerkat group can be a painstakingly long process and may take multiple years. The current study population incorporates approximately 300 individuals across a total of 14 observation groups: including 10 full-data collection groups and 2 habituation groups. Whilst the current study population remains stable, habituation efforts are continued whenever possible. Sightings of wild meerkat groups on our reserve are generally rare: groups are often noticed quickly as the majority of group territories overlap, leading to interactions between groups. However, a combination of meerkat immigration from neighbouring wild groups and emigration from our study groups still allows for the natural formation of wild groups (Doolan & MacDonald, 1996). This month, an opportunity to begin this slow habituation process presented itself.

Through the start of February, occasional sightings of wild meerkats were reported in Johnny’s Land, later followed by a reliable sighting of what appeared to be an unknown meerkat group further south than our current group territories. Around 17 wild individuals including juveniles and at least one pregnant female were sighted on the 13th, around 1.5km south of Whiskers’ usual territory. After senior observers visited the area to ascertain the group’s composition and reaction to human presence, one adult male was noticed to be significantly more comfortable than the rest of the group, suggesting the possibility of a previously habituated individual from one of our study groups. Despite this, the rest of the group remained highly cautious, immediately alarming and retreating whenever observers approached at a distance of 40 metres. The following day, on the 14th of February, an observer approached the group with the intention of checking if the semi-habituated male had a transponder fitted. It was exciting to reveal that the male did indeed, and was in fact Princess Carolyn (VTDM013), originally from Trackie-Daks. Princess Carolyn had left his natal group in September 2023, where he revisited frequently throughout October of the same year before disappearing. In January 2025 he reappeared and immigrated into Whiskers, where he remained until June of that year. It was on the 27th June 2025 that he was last seen leaving Whiskers and he was not seen again until the present.

Having an individual who is already partially habituated greatly benefits the habituation process, making it possible to collar the individual and therefore track the group. Interactions between better habituated individuals and observers are also a great asset in gaining the cooperation of other group members. Additionally, during the collaring of Princess Carolyn, he was observed to have enlarged anal glands, a possible sign of dominance in the group - although we cannot yet confirm dominance until more time has passed and submissive behaviours are seen, having a previously habituated dominant male would be a highly positive step towards whole-group habituation.



[Fig. 1: Individuals from our newly identified group Khoisan sunning in the morning from their sleeping burrow on Johnny’s Land. (Photo Credit: Sean Nelson)]

Princess Carolyn was collared on the 17th of February, and since then the group has been regularly visited every few days to collect life-history data, improve group comfort with observer presence and monitor their current territory range. The group was initially found at burrow R09B, which was used by Whiskers until around 2021 when their territory shifted north, however the group has now shifted further south near to Johnny’s Farmhouse. This area was occupied by Drie Doring for most of the lifespan of the project, yet no project groups have used this territory since they were lost in 2016. It will therefore be exciting to monitor whether this group remains in this area, or whether the group moves further north, creating the potential for conflict with Whiskers or Vetkoeks. With an established group such as Whiskers increasingly pressured from the north by Vetkoeks (see the January Life History article!), it remains to be seen how a newly formed group will fare in holding territory in the area, particularly if Whiskers continues to be pushed further south.



Fig. 2: Sub-adults from Khoisan at the morning sleeping burrow. The current priority is increasing the group's comfort level with observer presence. (Photo Credit: Sean Nelson)

For the first few weeks after the group's discovery, the group had been referred to as Trackie-Daks 2 (T2), reflecting the natal group of the suspected dominant male meerkat, Princess Carolyn. However, with its status now as a habituation group, it was up to the researchers here to decide on a suitable name for the new group. After a centre-wide vote, just one vote separated the top two choices. Despite strong support for the group to be known as the Yankie-Doodles, the winning name was Khoisan (KS). The Khoisan were South Africa's first people, and now generally considered an umbrella term that describes two distinct groups: the Khoe and the San people, who were predominately herders and hunter-gatherers respectively.

The majority of the wild individuals at Khoisan are currently comfortable, but cautious, sunning in the mornings 40 metres away from an observer, whilst still keeping watchful eyes out for any movement. The majority of the group appears to be composed of younger sub-adults and juveniles, a possible benefit for group habituation, as younger individuals may follow the behaviour of older meerkats such as Princess Carolyn. The presence of a potentially pregnant female at the group provides both the opportunity for pup habituation, and also means the group will babysit at a burrow for an extended period, allowing observers to easily locate the group and continue habituation work. As the weeks pass, observers will consistently visit the group to collect basic life-history and group composition data, with the aim of slowly increasing the group's comfort with observer presence. We all wait to see the trajectory of this new group and are excited to follow the start of their journey here at the KMP. A warm welcome to Khoisan!

References

Doolan, S. and MacDonald, D., (1996). Dispersal and extra-territorial prospecting by slender-tailed meerkats (*Suricata suricatta*) in the south-western Kalahari

Pregnancies in February 2026

| | |
|--|----------|
| Females pregnant in February | 9 |
| Females who aborted | 2 |
| Females who gave birth, litters lost | 0 |
| Females who gave birth, litter emerged | 3 |
| Females who gave birth, unknown outcome | 1 |
| Females still pregnant at the end of the month | 3 |

February 2026 Life History Details

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

Full data collection group (FDC)

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

Life History monitoring group (LHM)

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

Habituation group (HAB)

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

Sub-group (SUB)

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

Full Data Collection Groups:

Alba (FDC):

- All 26 members were present at Alba throughout February.
- Dominant female Cleopatra (VALF008) was made officially pregnant this month. Subordinate yearling female Chia (VALF023) aborted her litter this month.
- On the 4th, subordinate adult male Bibu (VALM014) and subordinate yearling male Xue

(VALM024) left the group – they returned that same evening.

- There was 1 daily group-split observed at Alba this month. On the 2nd, dominant male Pucky (VECM023), subordinate yearlings Chia (VALF023), Samurai (VALM027), Sunbeam (VALM028), Disco (VALM029), Yibo (VALM030), subordinate sub-adults Little-Creek (VALF033), Albert-Le-Blanc (VALM034), juvenile Lorraine (VALM044), and pups Skee-Lo (VALM046), Big Al (VALM047), and Lil-Mookie (VALM048) all left the rest of the group for just under an hour before return time.
- There were no encounters or inter-group interactions observed at Alba throughout February.
- Bibu currently has advanced tuberculosis. All other members appeared to be in good health this month.

Brussels Sprouts (FDC):

- Brussels Sprouts decreased from 19 to 18 members present at the end of the month.
- On the 6th, subordinate yearling Shittake (VBSM014), subordinate sub-adult males Gazpcho (VBSM017), and pups Messi (VBSM024) and Tobias (VBSM025) left the group – they returned later that same day. Also on the 6th, dominant male James Sawyer (VGDM011) left the group – he returned to the group on the 8th. On the 7th, Tobias was not observed to wake up with the group and remained missing indefinitely. On the 12th, Gazpcho left the group but returned later that same day. On the 17th, juveniles Neer (VBSM021) and Noiree (VBSF022), and Gazpcho all left the group – Neer and Noiree, both, returned later that same day and Gazpcho returned the following day.
- Enough time has passed for Tobias to be given his last seen – he is assumed to have been predated.
- There were 2 group-splits observed at Brussels Sprouts this month. On the 4th, a daily group-split including Shittake, Gazpcho, Neer, Noiree, juvenile male Papon (VBSM023) and pups Messi, Tobias, Dolly Parton (VBSF026), and Joaquina (VBSF028) was observed. Another split occurred later on the 4th, including James Sawyer, subordinate yearling male Porcini (VBSM012), Shittake, subordinate sub-adult male Bubek (VBSM019), Noiree, Papon, Messi, Tobias, Dolly Parton, and Joaquina – this split continued overnight before rejoining the group the following day.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health throughout the month.

Gold Diggers (FDC):

- All 27 members of Gold Diggers were present this month.
- Enough time has passed for yearling male Broson (VGDM064) to be given his last seen.
- There were 2 group-splits observed at Gold Diggers this month. On the 2nd, subordinate adult male Snackajack (VGDM063) and subordinate adult females Peanut (VGDF047)

and Manchego (VGDF054) were absent from the group upon the observer's arrival – they all returned to the group that same day.

- On the 6th, Manchego, Snackajack, dominant male Shrew (VUBM018), adult male Tampin (VGDM055), yearling female Dottie (VGDF071), subadults Larkin (VGDF077) and Sid (VGDM079), juveniles Emeraude (VGDM080) and Pistache (VGDF083), and pups Mort (VGDP085), Ferris (VGDP086), Doc (VGDP087) and Marty (VGDP088) were found absent from the group on the afternoon of the 6th, but all returned to the group that evening.
- There were no encounters or inter-group interactions observed at Gold Diggers during February.
- Snackajack had a small wound on the corner of his right eye at the start of the month, but this had healed by the end of February. All other individuals appeared to be in good health throughout the month.

Jaxx (FDC):

- Jaxx increased by 5 individuals, from 19 to 24 members present at the end of the month.
- On the 13th, four pups Callywag (VJXP219), Mikey (VJXP220), Tailbase (VJXP221) and Chunky (VJXP222) emerged for the first time, followed by Gylly (VJXP223) on the 23rd. All five pups foraged with the group for the first time on the 28th.
- On the 4th, yearling male Gobi (VJXM194) was found absent from the group in the morning, but he woke up with the group on the 5th morning. On the 9th, subadult female Milo (VJXF205) and Minnie (VJXM206) were not seen in the afternoon, but were found with the group the following morning.
- There was 2 group splits observed at Jaxx this month. On the 9th, yearling subordinate Ictruck (VGDM196) and subadult male TunafishV (VJXM202) and female Fifi (VJXF211) were seen foraging far from then group in the afternoon but rejoined the group that evening. An overnight group split on the 27th involved Milo, Callywag, Mikey, Tailbase and Chunky along with yearling subordinate male Doomsday (VJXM198), who were all seen waking up from a different sleeping burrow to the rest of the group. They rejoined the group on the morning of the 28th.
- There were no encounters or inter-group interactions observed at Jaxx this month.
- Habituation is classed as *Advanced Progress*. Habituation of the Dominant male Mr Worldwide (VJXM200) continues. He has not yet shown interest in egg, yet occasionally shows some interest in water at the sleeping burrow, where he is generally comfortable with observers sitting at a 2 metre distance.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health throughout February.

Lazuli (FDC):

- Lazuli decreased from 20 to 19 members present by the end of February.

- On the 5th, pup VLP330 (Mac) left the group during the morning session and was no longer seen with the group. Enough time has passed, and the pup was given its last seen on the 15th, with predation assumed. On the 20th, yearling subordinate female Pataud (VLF319) was not seen waking with the group in the morning, but she rejoined the group later that morning.
- There were 3 group splits observed at Lazuli this month. On the 4th, dominant male Rogelio de la Vega (VGDM015), subordinate adult males Tumtum (VGDM315), Pot Belly (VLM317), subadult males Reblochon (VLM322) and Avon (VLM325), juveniles Finn (VLM328) and pups Elmo (VLP331), Sole (VLP332), Bean (VLP333) and Mad-One (VLP334) separated in a daily group split. On the 10th, another daily group split involved Tumtum, Pot Belly, subordinate yearling female Bumble (VLF320), Finn, juvenile female Liv (VLF329), Sole, Bean and Mad-One. The final daily group split was on the 12th, where Pataud, subordinate adult males Tinashe (VLM310), Fat Belly (VLM316), Pot Belly and Reblochon split but reunited in the evening.
- There were no encounters or inter-group interactions observed at Lazuli during February.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health throughout February.

Side Quest (FDC):

- Side Quest increased by 3 individuals, from 20 to 23 individuals at the end of February.
- Dominant female Pumba (VZUF048) gave birth on the 9th, and babysitting and lactation began immediately at the group.
- On the 6th, subordinate adult male Brioche (VSIM032) and sub-adult female Cece (VSIF046) were not seen with the group in the afternoon, however they woke up with the group on the 7th morning.
- There were no encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits at Side Quest this month.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health this month.

Trackie-Daks (FDC):

- All 21 members of Trackie-Daks remained present throughout February.
- Dominant female Refilwe (VTDF041) was made officially pregnant this month, however, she aborted her litter on the 17th.
- There were no individual movements, 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) continues to drink water and allow observers to within 1 metre; he was weighed 4 times in February.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health this month.

Ubuntu (FDC):

- Ubuntu increased by 4 individuals, from 18 to 22 individuals at the end of February.
- Dominant female Agazoth (VUBF039) gave birth on the 9th, and after several weeks babysitting 4 pups were seen at the burrow entrance by the end of the month, yet they had not fully emerged independently.
- There were no individual movements, group-splits or encounters observed at Ubuntu in February.
- Subordinate adult female Hotfoot (VUBF071) was observed to be limping on her right forepaw at the start of the month, but this healed by the end of the month. All other members of the group appeared to be in good health throughout February.

Vetkoeks (FDC):

- All 17 members of Vetkoeks remained present throughout February.
- *Male Dominance* is still unconfirmed at Vetkoeks this month.
- There were no individual movements, group-splits, encounters or inter-group interactions observed at Vetkoeks this month.
- Juvenile male Josephine (VVKM039) was observed to have worms hanging from his anus at the start of the month, but this healed and all other individuals appeared to be in good health this month.

Zulus (FDC):

- Zulus increased by 4 individuals, from 22 to 26 individuals by the end of February.
- Yearling subordinate female Bonnie (VZUF077) gave birth on the 10th. On the 27th, 4 pups Dee (VZUP095), Moratua (VZUP096), Makgabo (VZUP097) and Phuti (VZUP098) emerged for the first time. By the end of the month, all 4 pups were still being babysit at their burrow.
- There were no individual movements, group-splits, individual encounters or inter-group interactions observed at Zulus this month.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health throughout February.

Life History Monitoring Groups:

Dik-Diks (LHM):

- Dik-Diks increased from 18 to 22 individuals by the end of February.
- Dominant female Juliet (VGDF009) gave birth on the 6th. On the 25th, 4 pups Jules (VDDP035), Rose (VDDP036), Syl (VDDP037) and Watkin (VDDP038) emerged for the first time, and on the 28th, VDDP038 joined the group while foraging for the first time while the rest of the pups were babysat at their sleeping burrow.
- Subordinate adult female Shelby (VGDF022) was made officially pregnant this month.
- On the 11th, Juliet was observed to be in oestrus and dominant male Rufaro (VUBM046) was seen attempting to mount her, however, she chattered in response and no more mating

attempts nor signs of oestrus were seen on the following days.

- 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) continues to improve - she was weighed 9 times this month, regularly drinks water and allows follows at 1 metre.
- All individuals at Dik-Diks appeared to be in good health throughout February.

Elrond's Council (LHM):

- Elrond's Council decreased by 3 individuals, from 16 to 13 individuals at the end of February.
- *Female Dominance* remains unconfirmed at Elrond's Council this month.
- On the 3rd, pup Wazza (VECP079) did not emerge from the group's sleeping burrow. Enough time has now passed, and Wazza was given his last seen, with predation assumed.
- On the 6th, dominant male Jonsnow (VECM070) was not seen emerging from the group's sleeping burrow, but was found to have rejoined foraging with the group later that morning.
- At the end of the month, subordinate yearling male Seven (VECM069) and subadult female Scary Mary (VECF075) were emigrated from the group following their declining state as a result of tuberculosis.
- There were no encounters, group-splits or inter-group interactions observed at Elrond's Council in February.
- Habituation is classed as *Advanced Progress*. Dominant male Jonsnow (VECM070) continues to improve – he fairly regularly eats egg and is comfortable with observers standing at a 2-meter distance despite not being weighed this month.
- The group continues to suffer from advanced tuberculosis. Jonsnow and subordinate yearling female Nalane (VECF067) continued to show large submandibular lumps this month and appeared to be in poor condition. All other members appear to be in good health.

Habituation Groups:

Hogwarts (HAB):

- All 19 individuals at Hogwarts remained present at Hogwarts throughout February.
- Dominant female Salazar (VZUF051) was made officially pregnant this month.
- There were no individual movements, encounters, inter-group interactions or group-splits observed at Hogwarts this month.
- Habituation is classed as *In Progress*. Habituation of yearling male Buckbeak (VHWM002) and dominant male Caraxes (VHWM004) continues to improve. Buckbeak is very comfortable around the scale and all observer actions. Caraxes will approach the observer when lying down, and occasionally

drinks water at the sleeping burrow. Further habituation with observer movements is needed, but whole group habituation is strong.

- All individuals appeared healthy throughout the month.

Whiskers (HAB):

- All 19 individuals at Whiskers remained present throughout February.
- There were no individual movements, inter-group interactions, encounters or group-splits observed at Whiskers in February.
- The group's habituation is classed as *In Progress*. Adult subordinate male Agent K (VWM276) eats egg fairly regularly and is comfortable with a 2-5m distance when the observer remains seated. He was not weighed this month. We will continue to try and increase familiarisation with the scale and observers' movements.
- All individuals at Whiskers appeared to be in good health this month.

The following authors contributed to this report:

Sean Nelson, Life History Coordinator