



# The Meerkatter

The Friends of the Kalahari Meerkat Project Report – [www.kalahari-meerkats.com](http://www.kalahari-meerkats.com) – March 2026

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## Months of Lumps

The history of tuberculosis (TB) here at the Kalahari Meerkat Project has been the subject of both extensive research and public attention. Although symptoms had been observed in our study population from the very beginning in 1993, it was only confirmed as TB in 1998 (Alexander et al., 2002). The disease appears to be caused by a novel strain of *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* specific to meerkat hosts (Parsons et al., 2013). The species is highly virulent, typically manifesting as large lumps at swollen lymph nodes, most commonly beneath the jaw (submandibular). These lumps eventually burst, and at this point the disease is thought to be terminal, with no evidence of individual recovery. At a late stage of infection with the bacteria, meerkats are generally in extremely poor state, struggling to forage or remain with the group. Since its identification and diagnosis in our population, TB has been a near-constant presence within our study groups, though its effects and prevalence have fluctuated throughout time. Transmission routes within groups are likely to include grooming and receiving aggression, while transmission between meerkat groups may be enabled by male roving visits (Drewe, 2009), in which males make brief visits to other groups in search of mating opportunities. After the unfortunate disintegration of Renegades due to TB in June of 2025, our study groups appeared to remain clear of obvious TB symptoms for the following months, with no diagnostic lumps recorded on any of our meerkats as winter turned into summer. However, this period was not set to last, and the disease has made a sudden and fierce return over the last few months.

Towards the end of last year, Elrond's Council, one of our Life History Monitoring groups, had several individuals beginning to show symptoms of TB. The first symptoms displayed were in dominant male Jonsnow (VECM070) who developed a large submandibular lump. As a previously wild individual for whom habituation had been slowly progressing, this was a blow to many of our observers who had spent considerable effort on increasing his comfort level with the scale and observer movement. Within a few weeks, the bacteria had spread to subordinate yearling male Seven (VECM069) and subadult female Scary Mary (VECF075), who began to show growing submandibular and forehead lumps respectively. Initially, the infected individuals appeared to be in otherwise good health, displaying no other symptoms and continuing to forage well. However, by the start of this year, these lumps on all individuals had burst, and this was accompanied by a stark worsening in their individual states. At the start of the year, Seven generally weighed over 600

grams during morning sessions, however by the start of February, his weight never rose above 500 grams even after a full day foraging. This significant weight loss was accompanied by difficulties in movement, with Seven developing a limp and frequently appearing to struggle to keep up with the group. By the start of February, further spread had occurred in the group, with subordinate yearling female Nalane (VECF067) showing a large submandibular lump and sub-adult male Fergie (VECM072) severely limping and showing very poor condition.

As the month came to a close, Jonsnow, Nalane, Seven and Scary Mary were all in an extremely poor state. Given their condition, the decision was made for them to be euthanised for scientific sampling at the end of February. Samples from their bodies will be used to better investigate the causes, transmission and progression of TB in meerkats, contributing to our overall understanding of the bacteria's spread, development and manifestation in different individuals. After these events, only Fergie displayed clear external TB symptoms by March, with the rest of the group appearing healthy. Fergie's condition initially appeared to improve, and he maintained his weight and body condition for the first few weeks of the month. However, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March, he was observed struggling to keep up with the group and was sadly left behind by the group that evening. Fergie has not been seen since, and although unlikely, observers continue to monitor for the possibility of his return.

Our full data collection group Alba holds territory only a few kilometres south of Elrond's Council. Subordinate adult male Bibu (VALM014) left Alba in August 2025 and was not seen until December, when he consistently approached the group yet was chased away by group members. This period of absence coincided with the months that individuals from the disintegrated group Renegades were occasionally sighted in the area. Whether Bibu interacted with any of these individuals, as potential carriers of TB, cannot be confirmed. Regardless, Bibu was eventually accepted back into the group Alba in December, yet throughout the start of the new year he frequently left the group for short periods. Following this period of suspected roving, observers began to notice a small submandibular lump on his right side, and this signalled the start of his declining health. The lump continued to grow throughout February and March and was accompanied by swellings on both of his armpits and groin region, signs of swollen lymph nodes associated with TB infection. By the start of March, his lumps began to burst, and Bibu began to lose large amounts of weight – dropping to an average of 650g despite

consistently weighing over 800g at the start of January. It was therefore concerning when on the 13<sup>th</sup> March, Bibu was not seen during the morning session, and he remained absent for several days. With his poor condition, whether he would be seen again was unknown, however nearly a week later on the 19<sup>th</sup> Bibu woke up with the group at their morning sleeping burrow. This return was short-lived, however, as the next day on the 20<sup>th</sup>, Bibu was again no longer seen when an observer arrived for the afternoon session. His reappearing acts did not stop there, however. After 10 days without being sighted, he was opportunistically seen by an observer on the 30<sup>th</sup> of March, foraging alone but in an extremely poor state. As a group-living species, lone meerkats are at high risk of predation, particularly when in such a poor state. As March comes to a close, only time will tell whether Bibu will reunite with his group.

Neighbouring Elrond's Council to the west is Side Quest, a group that has shown remarkable success since it was first discovered in 2021. With dominant female Pumba (VZUF048) and male Legolas (VECM009) remaining as the only dominant individuals since the group's formation, Side Quest has shown impressively high productivity, fostering 18 successful litters in just 5 years. It was therefore a major blow when observers first started noticing what appeared to be a small lump on Legolas' jaw at the beginning of March. This grew quickly and it soon became clear that Legolas was suffering from a large and growing submandibular lump. A few days later, subordinate adult male Tex developed a small lump below his ear, and this has since also grown into a large submandibular lump below his right jaw. Currently, both Legolas and Tex appear to be in good condition and continue to forage well. Both individuals have maintained their weights for the past few weeks, and do not appear to yet be suffering any other external symptoms. Of particular concern, however, was the appearance of an open lump on the left foot of dominant female at the end of February. Whilst initially assumed to be an unrelated injury, the persistent nature of this lump has raised concerns over the potential for it to be TB-related, and she will be closely monitored. The possibility of TB in both dominant individuals at Side Quest is alarming, and raises questions about the future trajectory of the group.

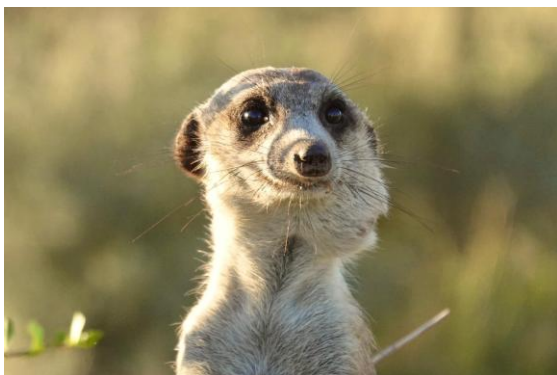


Fig. 1: Side Quest dominant male Legolas (VECM009) showing a large submandibular lump. Whilst not showing any other ill effects, the lump has since burst, generally indicating the TB stage becoming unrecoverable. (Photo Credit: Sean Nelson)

The infection of both dominant individuals in a group is not without precedent. Our most recently disintegrated group, Renegades, had followed a similar trajectory. At Renegades, dominant female Ricky Baker (VGDF031) was lost after a TB infection, and newly dominant female Maya II (VGDF039) developed symptoms shortly after. This was followed by the development of symptoms by dominant male Coquillet (VTSM014). Maya II had her collar removed due to her deteriorating condition and rapid weight loss, and she was lost in June of 2025. Following her disappearance from the group, a lack of eligible females in the group resulted in the emigration of several of the group's males who left to search for other groups to integrate into. Males from Renegades were occasionally sighted in the area, however due to the inability to track the group, the group was no longer followed. Whether Side Quest will follow a similar trajectory is yet to be seen. If Pumba's injury is not a result of TB, it is likely that the death of Legolas will not result in group collapse – loss of dominant males generally only results in the immigration of a new dominant male. The loss of the dominant female, however, has serious implications for the group's survival – whilst existing females in the group may assume the role of dominant, this is not guaranteed. It is positive that Side Quest currently has 4 yearling females who could potentially assume the dominant position, however it is highly likely that they are all related to the current dominant male, Legolas. As a result, the group will continue to be monitored closely to assess both the condition of the affected individuals as well as the group's response in the event of the disappearance of the dominant pair.

As wild animals, the risk of diseases such as TB are a natural part of the lives of our meerkats. Although it is never easy for observers to see individuals in a poor state, our habituated groups provide a unique opportunity to improve our general understandings of the progression, causes and development of TB in the species. The ability to freely observe both behavioural and physiological changes in response to infection is extremely valuable, and we will continue to monitor the status of our infected groups as the weeks and months pass.

## References

- Alexander, K.A. et al. (2002). *Mycobacterium tuberculosis: an emerging disease of free-ranging wildlife*.
- Parsons, S.D.C et al., (2013) *Novel cause of tuberculosis in meerkats, South Africa*
- Drewe, J. (2009) *Who Infects Whom? Social Networks and Tuberculosis Transmission in Wild Meerkats*

**Pregnancies in March 2026**

<b>Females pregnant in March</b>	<b>4</b>
Females who aborted	2
Females who gave birth, litters lost	1
Females who gave birth, litter emerged	0
Females who gave birth, unknown outcome	1
Females still pregnant at the end of the month	0

**March 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):**

- Alba decreased by one individual, from 26 to 25 members present at the end of March.
- Dominant female Cleopatra (VALF008) aborted her litter this month.
- On the 8<sup>th</sup>, subordinate adult male Bibu (VALM014) left the group in the morning but was seen to have rejoined the group that same afternoon. Bibu was again not seen with the group on the 12<sup>th</sup>, though he was later seen returning in the evening. He left again on the

13<sup>th</sup>, where he was not seen until the 20<sup>th</sup>. He left a final time on the 20<sup>th</sup> and has remained absent from the group at the end of the month, though was opportunistically seen foraging alone in poor condition on the 30<sup>th</sup>.

- There were no group splits, encounters or inter-group interactions observed at Alba throughout March.
- Bibu continues to suffer from advanced tuberculosis with obvious submandibular lumps. All other members appeared to be in good health this month.

**Brussels Sprouts (FDC):**

- Brussels Sprouts decreased from 18 to 17 members present at the end of the month.
- On the 12<sup>th</sup>, subordinate adult male Gurke (VHMM036) left the group briefly before returning that evening. On the 16<sup>th</sup>, Gurke was not observed waking up with the group, but he rejoined the group on the next morning. Gurke again was not seen with the group in the evening of the 27<sup>th</sup>, yet he woke up with the group on the 28<sup>th</sup>.
- On the 28<sup>th</sup>, subordinate subadult male Bubek (VBSM019) was not seen with the group after being injured during an inter-group interaction (IGI). He remains absent at the end of the month.
- Brussels Sprouts had one observed IGI this month. On the 28<sup>th</sup>, the group encountered Zulus – Zulus war-danced and chased Brussels Sprouts, attacking Bubek, while the group war-danced and retreated.
- There were no individual encounters or group splits observed this month.
- Bubek was injured during the IGI with Zulus, showing multiple bleeding wounds. Juvenile female Dolly Parton (VBSF026) appeared to develop an infection on her right eye, but this appears to be improving at the end of the month. All other individuals appear to be in good health.

**Gold Diggers (FDC):**

- All 27 members of Gold Diggers were present this month.
- On the 17<sup>th</sup>, subordinate adult females Peanut (VGDF047) and Serafina Pekkala (VGDF049), along with juvenile female Pistache (VGDF083) were not seen with the group in the afternoon, however they returned later that evening.
- There were 2 group splits observed at Gold Diggers this month. On the 7<sup>th</sup>, dominant female Goldeneye (VGDF007) was separated from the group after a predator alarm, however the group reunited later that afternoon. On the 23<sup>rd</sup>, dominant male Shrew (VUBM018), subordinate adult male Captain Patel (VGDM048) and subordinates Bokkie (VGDM067), Aapje (VGDF068), Bubba (VGDM069), Dottie (VGDF071), Larkin (VGDF077), Sid (VGDM079), Ebene (VGDM081), Cacahuete (VGDM082), Pistache and Acajou (VGDF084) were seen to have split from the group in the afternoon before reuniting in the evening.
- There was one inter-group interaction observed this month. The group encountered Lazuli after returning to their evening sleeping burrow,

chasing and fighting with Lazuli's members before Lazuli retreated. This appeared to be a clash over sleeping burrow location, though both groups fled from the initial burrow contested.

- There were no individual encounters observed at Gold Diggers during March.
- All individuals appeared to be in good health throughout the month.

**Jaxx (FDC):**

- All 24 members remained present at Jaxx at the end of March.
- On the 4<sup>th</sup>, yearling male Gobi (VJXM194) was found absent from the group in the morning, but he woke up with the group on the next morning. On the 9<sup>th</sup>, subadult female Milo (VJXF205) and Minnie (VJXM206) were not seen in the afternoon, but were found with the group the following morning.
- There were 2 daily group splits observed at Jaxx this month. On the 2<sup>nd</sup>, dominant male Mr Worldwide (VJXM200) and subordinates Pulpi (VJXF189), Gobi (VJXM194), Skinner (VJXM199), Orsybear (VJXF203), Sprout (VJXM210), Matty G (VJXM212), Tainn (VJXF215), Elms (VJXF216) and Tailbase (VJXM221) split for several hours during a morning session but reunited later that day. On the 11<sup>th</sup>, Gobi, Skinner, Orsybear, Sprout, Tailbase, Icetruck (VJXM196), Doomsday (VJXM198), Tunafishv (VJXM202), Milo (VJXF205), Minnie (VJXM206), Fennel (VJXF208), Liam (VJXM217), Callywag (VJXM219) and Chunky (VJXM222) separated from the group for several hours in the morning before reuniting.
- 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) appears to be improving. He has occasionally shown some interest in water at the sleeping burrow, and he generally allows follows of 3-5 metres though this varies.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health throughout March.

**Lazuli (FDC):**

- Lazuli decreased by 3 individuals this month, from 19 to 16 members present at the group by the end of March.
- On the 18<sup>th</sup>, pup Bean (VLF333) was found dead after a suspected puff adder bite. On the 20<sup>th</sup>, pups Sole (VLF332) and Mad-One (VLF334) split from the group during an inter-group encounter with Gold Diggers. They were not seen again, and enough time has now passed for them to be given their last seen, with predation assumed.
- There were two group splits observed at Lazuli this month. On the 9<sup>th</sup>, dominant male Rogelio de la Vega (VGDM015), subordinate adult males Tumtum (VGDM315), Fat Belly (VLM316), Pot Belly (VLM317), Petit Bidon (VLM318), yearling female Bumble (VLF320) and subadult males Reblochon (VLM322), Thrutch (VLM324), Avon (VLM325) and juvenile male Baxter (VLM327)

separated in a daily group split, returning that evening. On the 25<sup>th</sup>, Rogelio de la Vega and subordinates Tinashe (VLM310), Tumtum, Fat Belly, Pot Belly, Petit Bidon, Pataud (VLF319), Reblochon, Avon, Baxter, Finn (VLM328), Liv (VLF329) and Elmo (VLM331) split during the morning session but were seen to have reunited by the next afternoon.

- Lazuli had one observed inter-group interaction with Gold Diggers this month – Gold Diggers repeatedly chased and attacked members of Lazuli, causing pups Sole and Mad-One to become separated from the group as Lazuli retreated.
- There were no individual encounters observed at Lazuli during March.
- Pup Mad-One appeared injured after falling off a branch this month, however she recovered from this within several days. Dominant female Masiwa (VLF308) developed scabs on her legs which had also healed by the end of the month. All other members of the group appeared to be in good health throughout March.

**Side Quest (FDC):**

- Side Quest increased by 1 individual, from 23 to 24 individuals at the end of March.
- On the 1<sup>st</sup>, pups Doodlebob (VSIF062) and Hammy (VSIM063) emerged for the first time, followed by Blanket (VSIF064) on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and Ajax (VSIM065) on the 5<sup>th</sup>. All 4 pups foraged with the group for the first time on the 7<sup>th</sup>.
- On the 31<sup>st</sup>, subadult Finder (VSIM055) and pups Blanket (VSIF064) and Ajax (VSIM065) were found to be absent from the group in the afternoon, however they woke up with the group the next morning.
- There were no encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits at Side Quest this month.
- Dominant male Legolas (VECM009) and subordinate adult male Tex (VSIM035) both developed submandibular lumps this month, which have burst in Legolas. They appear to otherwise be in good health. Dominant female Pumba has a small lump on her left foot which has persisted throughout the month. All other individuals appear to be in good health.

**Trackie-Daks (FDC):**

- All 21 members of Trackie-Daks remained present throughout March.
- Subordinate yearling female Kibo (VTDF049) left the group on the morning of the 28<sup>th</sup>, returning to the group later that evening.
- There were no 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) continues to drink water and allow observers to within 1 metre; he was weighed twice in March.
- All members of the group appeared to be in good health this month.

**Ubuntu (FDC):**

- All 22 individuals remained present at Ubuntu throughout March.
- On the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4 pups Bezoar (VUBM095), Lollapot (VUBF096), Emma (VUBF097) and Julieta (VUBF098) emerged for the first time, with all pups foraging with the group for the first time on the 11<sup>th</sup>.
- There were no individual movements, group-splits or encounters observed at Ubuntu in March.
- All members appeared to be in good health throughout March.

**Vetkoeks (FDC):**

- All 17 members of Vetkoeks remained present throughout March.
- *Male Dominance* is still unconfirmed at Vetkoeks this month.
- On the 4<sup>th</sup>, subadult male Louis Cyr (VVKM035) left the group in the afternoon, but was seen to have returned to the group by the 6<sup>th</sup>.
- There was one individual encounter at Vetkoeks this month. On the 16<sup>th</sup>, Whiskers' sub-adult male Katana (VWM286) approached the group, but retreated after the group war-danced and chased him.
- There were no group splits or inter-group interactions observed at Vetkoeks this month.
- Juvenile male Olly (VVKM036) was seen to have a large wound on his left thigh and continues to limp at the end of the month, but the wound has closed and his limp appears to be improving. All other individuals appeared to be in good health throughout March.

**Zulus (FDC):**

- All 26 members at Zulus remained present through March.
- There was one inter-group interaction observed at Zulus this month. On the 28<sup>th</sup>, Zulus saw, chased and attacked Brussels Sprouts, injuring Brussels Sprouts subadult male Bubek (VBSM019). Brussels Sprouts retreated in response.
- On the 16<sup>th</sup>, subordinate adult male Sweep (VZUM072) was not seen with the group in the afternoon, however he returned to the group that evening.
- There were no individual movements, group-splits or individual encounters observed at Zulus this month.
- Subadult male Lulin (VZUM084) developed large skin scabs on his abdomen and legs this month, but these were healed by the end of the month. All other individuals appeared to be in good health through March.

**Life History Monitoring Groups:**

**Dik-Diks (LHM):**

- Dik-Diks decreased by one individual, from 22 to 21 individuals present by the end of March.
- Subordinate adult female Shelby (VGDF022) gave birth on the 20<sup>th</sup>, however the ending of

babysitting and burrow moves from the 22<sup>nd</sup> show the litter was lost before emergence. Dominant female Juliet (VGDF009) was made officially pregnant on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, but aborted her litter at the end of the month.

- On the 28<sup>th</sup>, pup Syl (VDDF037) did not wake up with the group. She has not been sighted since and remains absent at the end of the month.
- There were no 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 not weighed this month, but drinks water and allows close follows of 1 metre.
- All individuals at Dik-Diks appeared to be in good health throughout March.

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

- Elrond's Council decreased by 3 individuals, from 13 to 10 individuals at the end of March.
- Both *Female and Male Dominance* is unconfirmed at Elrond's Council this month.
- Due to late-stage advanced tuberculosis, dominant male Jonsnow (VECM070) and subordinate yearling female Nalane (VECF067) were euthanised for scientific sampling at the start of the month.
- On the 12<sup>th</sup>, subadult male Fergie (VECM072), who was also suffering from late-stage tuberculosis, was not seen with the group. He was later found to have returned by the 15<sup>th</sup>, but was left behind by the group on the 17<sup>th</sup>. He has not been seen since and remains absent at the end of the month.
- There was one observed individual encounter at Elrond's Council this month – on the 18<sup>th</sup>, an unknown adult approached the group. The group chased the adult, who reappeared but eventually retreated.
- There were no group-splits or inter-group interactions observed at Elrond's Council in March.
- Yearling male Madarauchiha (VECM068) is in poor condition, appearing to have difficulty breathing and losing weight. Subadult male Noah (VECM076) has also developed small lumps on his paws and nose. All other individuals appear to be in good health.

**Habituation Groups:**

**Khoisan (HAB) :**

- There are thought to be 17 members present at the group, with known male Princess Carolyn (VTDM013) and at least 16 unknown individuals.
- *Female and Male Dominance* is currently unknown at Khoisan.
- Habituation is classed as *In Progress*. At present only Princess Carolyn eats egg, but one juvenile was seen climbing inside the scale when left at the burrow. The group generally tolerates observers standing at 10 metres, and the majority of the group remain cautious but

comfortable with observers laying down at 5 metres. The group are currently all unmarked.

- An unknown sub-adult was observed to have a submandibular lump, but the rest of the group appear to be in good health from a distance.

**Hogwarts (HAB):**

- All 19 individuals at Hogwarts remained present at Hogwarts throughout March.
- Dominant female Salazar (VZUF051) gave birth on the 23<sup>rd</sup> – lactation and babysitting indicate that this litter is alive.
- 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. Buckbeak is very comfortable around the scale and all observer actions. Caraxes occasionally drinks water at the sleeping burrow but further work is still needed on increasing group comfort with observer movement.
- Subordinate yearling male Severus Snape (VHWM010) and sub-adult female Celina (VHWF014) developed wounds on their chest this month, but these have mostly healed. All other individuals appeared in good health throughout the month.

**Whiskers (HAB):**

- All 19 individuals at Whiskers remained present throughout March.
- On the 16<sup>th</sup>, subordinate subadult male Katana (VWM286) was seen roving at Vetkoeks, yet he had returned to Whiskers by the 21<sup>st</sup>.
- There were no inter-group interactions, encounters or group-splits observed at Whiskers in March.
- The group's habituation is classed as *In Progress*. Adult subordinate male Agent K (VWM276) appears to be improving – he eats egg fairly regularly and allows observers at a 1 metre distance if seated. He was not weighed this month, and further work with observer movement is still needed.
- All individuals at Whiskers appeared to be in good health this month.

**The following authors contributed to this report:**

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