



The Meerkatter

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

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Split Ends

Cohesion in meerkat groups is vital in ensuring that group movement, decision-making and predator responses are well-coordinated. As meerkats forage independently within their group, individuals may spread out over large areas. Strategies are therefore needed to maintain contact with other group members to prevent splits. As a result of the frequent and prolonged rain that the reserve has received in recent months, this need is further compounded by the vegetation present. Kalahari sour grass (*Schmidtia kalahariensis*) currently covers most of the reserve, restricting visual contact between individuals. Close calls, short contact calls emitted by foraging individuals, have been shown to be a key strategy in this maintenance of cohesion by allowing individuals to remain in audible contact with each other and acting as a signal of group centre of mass (Gall & Manser, 2017). As a result, individuals are likely aware of their position relative to their group and can remain in contact through vocalisations without the need to visually see other members of their group. However, increasingly in recent months, observers have noticed that close calls may not always be an effective strategy when individuals are spread across large areas while foraging.

Our full data collection group Alba was formed in 2021 by females from their ancestor group Elrond's Council. In 2024, following the death of previous dominant female Tolkien (VECF019) after a snakebite, Cleopatra (VALF008) assumed dominance as the only eligible female in the group. Since then, she has raised 7 successful litters, and Alba is now the second largest group on our reserve with 25 members. Whilst a larger group size is often beneficial, the combination of high vegetation coverage and the group spreading over a large distance whilst foraging appears to have increased the frequency of splits within the group. Indeed, Alba has had the same number of group splits recorded so far in 2026 as they had from all the years 2021 to 2025 combined. Whilst the majority of them have been daily group splits in which observers have noted the group separating while foraging or following predator alarms, at the beginning of this month a much more significant split occurred. On the afternoon of the 9th, the observer at the group found 9 individuals missing from the rest of the group – subordinates Xue (VALM024), Bachue (VALF025), Albert-Le-Blanc (VALM034), Pembroke (VALM036), Lorraine (VALF041), Richard Attenborough (VALM044), Skee-Lo (VALM046), Big-AI (VALM047) and Lil-Mookie (VALM048). As the group woke up together that morning, it is unclear as to why the group separated. Following group splits, groups have been found to return to the same sleeping burrow

more often (Strandburg-Peshkin et al., 2019), and the group did indeed return to the same sleeping burrow that they had been using for several days that evening. However, the split individuals did not return that evening, with their whereabouts unknown.



Fig. 1: Members of Alba vigilant after a predator alarm. (Photo: Sean Nelson)

For the next week, all 9 individuals remained unseen by observers at the group, leaving Alba with only 16 individuals. Even in this smaller remaining group, however, the group splits continued. On the 10th, a daily group split was recorded with a further 9 individuals separating before reuniting shortly before the group returned to their sleeping burrow. Over the course of the next few days, the remaining group moved between sleeping burrows but the split individuals were never sighted. It was over a week later, on the morning of the 17th, that all 9 individuals were seen returning together to the group shortly after the group had begun foraging in the morning. A mix of dominance assertions by Cleopatra and submissions by the split members ensued, and all individuals were accepted back into the group, with the group foraging together for the rest of the morning. Such a long group split is unusual within meerkat groups, and although the actual split was not observed, the area in which Alba was foraging at the time of the split was populated by particularly tall and dense grass. It is possible that this contributed towards the group split by further reducing visibility of the group members.

It was not only Alba that experienced a long split this month. On the evening of the 3rd, the Kuruman River, which runs directly through our reserve, flowed strongly again for the first time in several years. Whilst the riverbed has experienced small flows in recent years, the last major floods were in 2021, 1995 and 1976 following extended periods of heavy rainfall. With the river flowing once again, the reserve was split into two sides, with both observers and meerkats unable to cross. As the water flowed

steadily from Kuruman in the north-east, enough warning was given so that observers were able to move across the riverbed before access was cutoff. As a result, nearly all the project's study groups remained accessible thanks to the presence of observers on both sides of the river. One exception, however, was the group Jaxx. The current territory of Jaxx stretches west of the reserve on neighbouring farmland, which is accessible only through the main gravel road that runs south of the riverbed. The group uses sleeping burrows on both sides of the riverbed, and so on the 4th an observer was sent to check on which side of the river Jaxx was on. Unfortunately, the signal from the radio-collared individual showed that the group were north of the river, making the group inaccessible from our reserve. To ensure that the group's location could be monitored, observers made consistent visits to their territory over the next few days, and the group was visually sighted across the river on the 11th. Thankfully, a dry period immediately after the river's flow has resulted in water levels falling fairly rapidly. Indeed, after nearly two weeks, the water level on neighbouring farmland dropped low enough that an existing vehicle bridge was passable. On the 16th, the first observer session at Jaxx was possible again.



Fig. 2: View from Sox Dam on the 3rd (left) and 4th (right) of May, showing the rapid overnight river flow. (Photos: Sean Nelson)

The presence of a habituation individual, Mr Worldwide (VJXM200), at Jaxx raised some concern over the impact of such an extended observer absence from the group. As a wild immigrant dominant male first sighted in 2025, his habituation requires consistent attention. Further, the period of absence means that individual dye-marks applied to the group members were likely to have faded. As a result, the first observer session was spent identifying and remarking meerkats through their unique transponder codes, and all of the group members remained present after the two week period. It was also positive to note that the habituation of Mr Worldwide did not appear to have suffered, and the resumption of regular sessions at the group allow for continued efforts towards his habituation.

At the end of May, the river level continues to drop. Several of our groups, most notably Gold Diggers and Lazuli, occupy territories spanning both sides of the riverbed and frequently forage in the dry riverbed

itself. Both groups were north of the riverbed as the water flowed and have therefore had their typical territories constricted as a result of the water. Any consequence of this range restriction or lasting effects on group territories will be of particular interest – it is a unique benefit of such a long-term research project that both the short and long-term effects of events such as these can be quantified. As the dry winter period of the Kalahari begins, it currently appears that the riverbed will be fully dry by the start of June. As a result, the end of May brings the end to a month filled with group, and reserve, splits.



Fig. 3: Sunrise along the river en-route to Jaxx. (Photo: Sean Nelson).

References

Gall, G. and Manser, M. B (2017). *Group cohesion in foraging meerkats: follow the moving 'vocal hot spot'*.
 Strandburg-Peshkin, A. et al. (2019). *Burrow usage patterns and decision-making in meerkat groups*.

Pregnancies in May 2026

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

May 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 remained present this month.
- On the 7th, subadult male Speedy Gonzales (VALM045) was not seen in the afternoon, however, he woke up with the group the next morning.
- There were 3 group splits at Alba in May. On the 6th, a daily split involved subordinates Xue (VALM024), Sunbeam (VALM028), Disco (VALM029), Yibo (VALM030), Florence (VALF031), Fleetfoot (VALF032), Albert-Le-Blanc (VALM034), Pembroke (VALM036), Juanita (VALF040), David Attenborough (VALM042), Stella (VALF043), Richard Attenborough (VALM044), Speedy Gonzales (VALM045), Skee-Lo (VALM046), and Big Al (VALM047). On the 9th, an overnight group split involved subordinates Xue, Bachue (VALF025), Albert-Le-Blanc, Pembroke, Lorraine (VALF041), Richard Attenborough, Skee-Lo, Big Al and Lil-Mookie (VALM048). These individuals were absent until the 17th when they returned in the morning. During the overnight split, a further group split on the 10th involved subordinates Tress (VALF020), Samura (VALM027), Sunbeam, Florence, Fleetfoot, Lola (VALF039), David Attenborough, Stella and Speedy Gonzales, who all returned the same evening.
- There were 2 individual encounters at Alba this month. On the evening of the 9th, an unknown meerkat was seen and chased away by the group. On the 10th, an unknown meerkat again approached the group in the morning but retreated after being chased away.
- There were no inter-group interactions observed at Alba throughout May.

- Samurai continues to show a submandibular lump but otherwise appears outwardly in good condition. 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 16th, dominant male James (Sawyer) (VGDM011) was not seen with the group in the afternoon, however, he returned later in the evening.
- There were no encounters, inter-group interactions or group splits at Brussels Sprouts this month.
- All individuals appear to be in good health throughout the month.

Gold Diggers (FDC):

- All 26 members of Gold Diggers remained present at the end of May.
- On the 2nd subordinate adult female Serafina Pekkala (VGDF049) was found missing from the group in the afternoon. She had returned by the next observer session on the 5th.
- There were no group splits, individual encounters or inter-group interactions at Gold Diggers in May.
- All individuals appeared to be in good health throughout the month.

Jaxx (FDC):

- Jaxx decreased by 5 individuals, from 24 to 19 individuals present at the end of May.
- On the 18th, subordinate adult female Pulpi (VJXF189) was found alone separated from the group in the afternoon; she returned later that evening. On the 12th, subadult male Matty G (VJXM212) did not wake up with the group and he remains absent at the end of the month. On the 28th, subadult male Minnie (VJXM206) was not seen in the afternoon, however, he woke up with the group the next morning.
- There were 3 group splits at Jaxx this month. On the 20th, 14 subordinates split from the group in the morning but had returned by the afternoon. On the 24th, 12 individuals split from the group while foraging, but the group reunited later the same morning. An overnight split involved subordinates Liam (VJXM217), Callywag (VJXM219), Mikey (VJXF220) and Gylly (VJXM223) who did not wake up with the group on the 1st June, and they remain absent.
- There were no individual encounters or inter-group interactions at Jaxx this month.
- Habituation of dominant male Mr Worldwide (VJXM200) continues and is classed as in *Advanced Progress*. He has allowed follows of 5 metres this month but remains very cautious of observers and shows no interest in egg or water.
- All individuals appeared to be in good health throughout the month.

Lazuli (FDC):

- Lazuli decreased by 1 individual this month, from 12 to 11 individuals at the end of May.
- On the 4th, subadult male Finn (VLM328) was absent from the group on the afternoon, however, he returned the following day. On the 6th, Finn was again found missing from the group and has since remained absent at the end of the month. On the 16th, subordinate adult male Pot Belly (VLM317) separated from the group during an inter-group encounter, however, he relocated the group and returned on the same evening.
- Enough time has passed for juveniles Liv (VLF329) and Elmo (VLM331) to be given their last seen this month.
- There was one inter-group interaction observed this month. On the 16th, Dik-Diks encountered Lazuli in the evening, war-dancing and chasing the group. Lazuli retreated in response.
- There were no individual encounters or group splits observed at Lazuli this month.
- *Female Dominance* remains unconfirmed at Lazuli. General dominance behaviour has been observed in both yearling females Pataud (VLF319) and Bumble (VLF320), but no direct submissions have yet been recorded.
- All individuals appeared to be in good health throughout the month.

Side Quest (FDC):

- All 24 individuals at Side Quest remained present throughout May.
- On the 6th, subordinate yearling female Cece (VSIF046) was found missing from the group in the afternoon but was seen returning that evening. On the same day, subadult females Bucket (VSIF052) and Buffy (VSIF057) were seen leaving the group as they returned to their evening sleeping burrow. Both returned after the group had gone below.
- There were no group splits, individual encounters or inter-group interactions at Side Quest this month.
- Dominant male Legolas (VECM009) and subordinate adult male Tex (VSIM035) continue to show large burst submandibular lumps. They remain in generally good condition but are beginning to show losses in weight. Dominant female Pumba (VZUF048) is in worsening condition, with burst lumps on her legs. As a result, the radio collar at the group has been changed from Pumba to Mrs HS Balls (VSIF047). All other individuals appear to be in good health.

Trackie-Daks (FDC):

- All 21 members of Trackie-Daks remained present throughout May.
- 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) was weighed 3 times this month, consistently allowing close

follows at 1 metre and allowing observers to groom him at the sleeping burrow.

- All members of the group appeared to be in good health this month.

Ubuntu (FDC):

- All 21 members of Ubuntu remained present at the end of May.
- On the 26th, subordinate yearling male Pawpaw (VUBM080) was found missing from the group in the afternoon. On the next observer session on the 28th, he woke up with the group.
- Enough time has passed for juvenile male Sam I Am (VUBM093) to be given his last seen this month.
- There were no group splits, inter-group interactions or individual encounters at Ubuntu this month.
- All members appeared to be in good health throughout the month.

Vetkoeks (FDC):

- All 17 members of Vetkoeks remained present throughout May.
- *Male Dominance* remains unconfirmed at Vetkoeks.
- On the 12th, subordinate subadult male Tumbleweed (VVKM041) did not wake with the group in the morning, however, he was found foraging with the group the next day. On the 14th, following an inter-group interaction with Whiskers, subordinate yearling male Theodore (VVKM028) was chased away by the group after becoming separated. By the following morning, he was seen acting as part of the group again. On the 22nd, subordinate males Seabiscuit (VVKM022), Tshembo (VVKM024) and Lele (VVKM031) were found absent from the group in the afternoon, however, they returned later that evening. On the 26th, eldest subordinate male Zuma (VZUM05) was found missing from the group along with Seabiscuit and Theodore. Zuma returned later that afternoon, and Seabiscuit and Theodore returned the next day.
- There were two inter-group interactions at Vetkoeks this month, both with Whiskers. On the 10th, Vetkoeks saw and war-danced at Whiskers, who remained 30 metres away from the group. Both groups ignored and remained slightly apart from each other for the rest of the observer session. On the 14th, both groups returned to the same burrow – Vetkoeks attacked Whiskers and excavated at the burrow, causing Whiskers to retreat.
- There were two individual encounters at Vetkoeks this month. On the 10th, an unknown adult retreated after Vetkoeks saw and war-danced towards them. On the 25th, the group again war-danced at an unknown individual, who remained on the edge of the group and later retreated.
- There were no group splits at Vetkoeks this month.
- All individuals appeared to be in good health through May.

Zulus (FDC):

- All 26 members at Zulus remained present throughout May.
- There were no individual movements at Zulus this month.
- There were 3 group splits at Zulus this month. On the 7th, a daily group split involved 8 individuals who split in the morning and returned in the afternoon. On the 13th, a daily group split involved 20 individuals who split for a short period in the afternoon. On the 21st, an overnight group split involved subordinates Sweep (VZUM072), Vesemir (VZUM080), Bopp (VZUM081), McNaught(y) (VZUM082), Io (VZUF083), Lulin (VZUM084), Mandu (VZUM086), Dee (VZUF095) and Makgabo (VZUF097). These individuals did not wake up with the group on the 22nd but reunited later in the morning.
- There were no inter-group interactions or individual encounters observed at Zulus this month.
- All individuals appeared to be in good health through May.

Life History Monitoring Groups:

Dik-Diks (LHM):

- All 21 members remained present at Dik-Diks through May.
- There were no individual movements, encounters or group splits, observed at Dik-Diks this month.
- There was one inter-group interaction at Dik-Diks this month. On the 16th, the group saw Lazuli and war-danced and attacked their members, causing Lazuli to flee.
- Habituation is classed as *Advanced Progress*. Dominant female Juliet (VGDF009) occasionally approaches observers for water and is comfortable with close follows below 1 metre, however, she was not weighed this month.
- All individuals at Dik-Diks appeared to be in good health throughout May.

Elrond's Council (LHM):

- All 9 members of Elrond's Council remained present at the end of the month.
- Enough time has now passed for subordinate yearling male Madarauchiha (VECM068) to be given his last seen. He was last observed suffering from advanced tuberculosis.
- Both *Female and Male Dominance* remains unconfirmed at Elrond's Council this month.
- There were no individual movements, group splits, individual encounters or inter-group interactions observed at Elrond's Council in May.
- Subadult male Noah (VECM076) shows a small submandibular lump and open lumps on his forearms and hind legs. All other individuals appear to be in good health.

Habituation Groups:

Khoisan (HAB) :

- Khoisan appears to have decreased by 2 members, from 17 to 15 individuals at the end of May. Princess Carolyn (VTDM013) remains present with at least 14 unknown individuals.
- *Female and Male Dominance* is currently unknown at Khoisan.
- Habituation is classed as *In Progress*. The group continues to improve and generally allows observers to sit at a minimum of 2 metres. Habituation levels vary between individuals, but the vast majority remain calm with an observer standing at 5 metres. The group still reacts strongly to sound and any movement.
- The majority of the continue to suffer from TB symptoms. Princess Carolyn shows a large submandibular lump, and a large proportion of the group appear to have inguinal lumps or burst submandibular lumps.

Hogwarts (HAB):

- All 20 individuals remained present at Hogwarts this month.
- There were no individual movements, encounters, group splits or inter-group interactions at Hogwarts this month.
- Habituation is classed as *In Progress*. Habituation of dominant male Caraxes (VHWM004) continues. He was not weighed this month but allows observers to within 2 metres at the sleeping burrow and occasionally drinks water.
- All other individuals appeared in good health throughout the month.

Whiskers (HAB):

- All 19 individuals at Whiskers remained present throughout May.
- There were no individual movements, encounters or group splits observed at Whiskers in May.
- There were 2 inter-group interactions at Whiskers this month, both with Vetkoeks. On the 10th, Whiskers was seen by Vetkoeks and after briefly war-dancing, both groups foraged apart for the remainder of the morning. On the 14th, after both groups returned to the same sleeping burrow, Whiskers retreated after being chased and attacked by Vetkoeks, who slept in the contested burrow.
- The group's habituation is classed as *In Progress*. The habituation of subordinate adult male Agent K (VWM276) improves. He was not weighed this month but approached the scale on several occasions. He is generally comfortable with observers at 2 metres but reacts to movement.
- Subadult male Attica (VWM294) developed a small abscess on his shoulder this month, but this has mostly healed by the end of the month. All other individuals appear to be in good health.

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