



## Lessons in parenting from Mweya's Mongooses!

By Charlotte Beauvoisin

I often forget when we go out into the Bush how, even on short distances, a vehicle is necessary. And so, armed not with a gun or a machete, but a long radio antenna, we jumped into the back of a pickup truck and headed off the main track and into the scrubby bush.

The sun was shining as we watched Pink-backed Pelicans sailing down the Kazinga Channel towards us. Within just a few minutes, our researcher guides Solomon and Francis had tracked down our family, one of six habituated groups of Mongooses living on the Mweya peninsula. Fifteen years of research have given Solomon, Kenneth and Francis an intimate knowledge of the nine families of Mongooses.

Our job for the morning was to weigh each of the 32-members of the family. But where do you start?

With a call of "coo-coo-coo-coo-coo" the mongooses come trotting out of the bush, snorting, sniffing, whistling and chirruping.

Well, would you believe it – these guys can be identified by their different haircuts! Every two weeks each mongoose has a number clipped into the fur on its back to identify it, invaluable in monitoring their health.

As the family rolled up, we set to work. Each Mongoose was individually weighed and its personal number and

weight noted down. (What impressed me was how Solomon managed to remember which ones he'd weighed). Later, the data is compared to check that pups are growing healthily and to monitor pregnancies amongst the family.

Known as 'cooperative breeders' the females will all give birth on the same day. Incredible! As many as 15 pups will be born and can be suckled by any of the females. Pups will then choose which male – the babysitters of the species – will care for them. According to Solomon, a pup can distinguish between a good or a bad parent. (These fascinating creatures could surely be good role models to a few men we could mention!)

If a subordinate female becomes pregnant, when the dominant four females aren't, she will be "beaten up" in Solomon's words, and forced to abort. If she's lucky, she will then be allowed back into the group (the risk being that if subordinates keep getting pregnant they threaten the dominance of the group).

No! Not the French Cut again! Let's do the Māhawk for a change.



When they find a rat, "they go crazy and make a lot of noise," Solomon said, to attract the rest of the group to the hunt. We watched as a Mongoose (carefully) attacked a giant Millipede, bashing it against the ground to first remove its poison. The others were quick to dive in and help him eat it.

When they're not busy foraging or fighting, mongooses can be seen removing the ticks and lice from compliant warthogs. Did you know this behaviour only happens in Queen Elizabeth? Other unusual behaviour witnessed here was the sight of a Mongoose taking a dip in the lodge pool! (I hear the lodge waives the entrance fee for Mweya residents).

"If they see a leopard they will just freak out and run" said Solomon. "Even if they find the dung of a lion, they run!" (So might I!)

The Mongooses' greatest enemies are the leopard and the python. At Kabatoro Gate, a python had eaten a mongoose wearing the radio collar. They'd tracked the perpetrator of course! (I wonder how long it was before the researchers realised exactly what they were tracking?)

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