

UNDERSTANDING BABOONS

Baboon troops vary in size from 12 to 150 individuals – sometimes splitting into sub-troops as they forage for food. They form an integral part of the ecology of the Cape Floristic Kingdom, foraging from the coastline to the tops of our highest mountain ranges, dispersing seeds and bulbs as they go.

The core of the troop is made up of females: mothers along with their babies and juveniles, grandmothers and sisters. Dominant females 'inherit' their social status in the baboon hierarchy from their mothers.

In natural conditions, there is one adult male to every three or four adult females in the wild – males move between troops and suffer higher mortality from predators when on their own, or from injuries sustained from males when attempting to join a new troop.



THE ALPHA MALE

The troop is led by the most dominant adult male – known as the alpha male. A mature male baboon weighs up to 40kg. He is extremely protective over the females and infants within the troop and jealously guards his right to mate with receptive females when they are at the height of their oestrus cycle. He can be a very tender father to his offspring and a formidable fighter against other males hoping to take over his position in the troop. The males 'yawn' to show off their canine teeth to other males and their loud 'wahoo' bark is also a form of communicating their strength and social position to others.



ADULT FEMALES & INFANTS

All adult females go through stages of pink swelling as part of their reproductive cycle. During the peak of the approximate 17 day cycle she shows a preference to mate with the alpha male. Six months later she will give birth to a single infant (rarely twins) and will care and nurture her baby with great tenderness. Mom and her new arrival are the focus of the troop; she will be fussed over and groomed constantly by those who want a peek at her newborn. Babies are born with a bright pink face and black fur. They cling to their mother's belly for easy access to milk and protection against the elements. By three months baby learns to ride mom's back 'jockey-style' – a fantastic way to get around and see the world. At this stage they start trying foods such as grass or flowers. They are fully weaned at about one year of age.

The Urban Baboon

Humans have encroached on natural areas as towns expand. With urban sprawl comes animal conflict as the latter are displaced and make for uneasy neighbours.

Baboon troops that live close to urban areas have fewer adult males than undisturbed troops. The lack of natural predators suggests that the males are being killed as a result of direct conflict with humans. Lone dispersing males are often seen as 'rogues' and are treated as a threat to humans. It is important to realise that lone males reflect the natural movement of the males between troops which is nature's way of preventing inbreeding, as males do not mate with their mothers, sisters or aunts.

Killing males within troops has much wider implications for it opens the door for new males to immigrate into the troop. When this happens the new male typically kills the previous males' offspring. One study of an urban troop reported that 53% of all infants born, died within their first year. It was suspected that most of these deaths were due to infanticide. The males engage in this shocking behaviour because without the cost of nursing an infant, females quickly come into oestrus and he is thus able to mate with her sooner than had she raised her infant.



DISPERSING MALES

Unlike females who typically remain in the same troop their entire lives, males disperse when sexually mature to find unrelated females. When alone, male baboons are called transient or dispersing males. During this period he is alone for long periods of time and is extremely vulnerable without the support of others.

It triggers great displays of 'wahooing' with much chasing and vicious fighting. If the new male succeeds in the 'take-over', the troop's hierarchy is upset and new rivalries and relationships may arise among the females.



JUVENILES

Approximately half of most baboon troops are made up of juveniles, so it is normal to see many young in a troop.

Juveniles of similar ages tend to hang out together – playing boisterously – so one may get the impression that there are many more than there actually are.

Juveniles act as baby-sitters in the troop, often carrying, handling and playing with the younger, newly weaned babies. They will grab and hide with a youngster should a fight break out among the adult males, even though they are hardly bigger themselves. They take their playing and caring tasks very seriously!



SUB-ADULTS

Sub-adult baboons are often mistaken as mature animals by the public. Although they are braver and more out-going than the juveniles, they still need the protection of the troop.

Females reach adulthood around five years of age; males on the other hand are still adolescent at this age. They undergo a rapid growth spurt, resulting in long gangly legs, and a longer snout with a set of pointy canines. Over the next year or two they will start looking more like full-grown adult males as their chests and necks fill out and their canines grow long and sharp for the battles ahead.