

Among vervets

A Moment of Trust

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A fascinating dive into childless families
of south african vervet monkeys



In Mawana, you don't find vervets. They let you in.

First comes the savanna, wide and alive with zebras and impala. You cross rivers, push through grass that reaches your shoulders, scan the tops of acacias against a pale morning sky. And then, finally, a shape. A tail. A pair of amber eyes catching the light from somewhere high above. These two families had been followed by researchers for years before I arrived. They had learned that humans meant nothing, no threat, no food, no disturbances.



Suddenly, there they were at the tops of the acacias, warming themselves in the morning light.



Looking up from below, a vervet reaches into an acacia from what was once a human house.



A female completely surrendering to the soft warmth of the evening sun.

What I didn't know before arriving was that I was photographing families in quiet crisis. That season in 2024, reproduction had nearly ceased, due to miscarriages, and absence of reproduction. No infants, none of the chaos and tenderness that young primates bring. Just adults, going about the slow business of being alive. What struck me most was not the strangeness of it all, but the familiarity I recognized in these moments of quiet existence



A rather young vervet feeding on a Cereus jacamaru

The reproductive crisis had a possible explanation, and one that researchers thought worth investigating. That season had seen an extended drought across the region. Food sources were severely depleted, and the troop had been observed feeding on mushrooms growing on *Cereus jamacaru*, large invasive cacti that dot the Mawana landscape.

These cacti, nicknamed "Queen of the Night" for their spectacular night blossoms, host fungi that researchers suspected might be toxic, and the troop had been feeding on them more heavily than usual that season. "We considered it," says Clémence De Scheemaekere, a field researcher who has followed the Mawana families. "But the analyses didn't support it. They were eating them before, and after, including the years when we had plenty of births."

What the evidence pointed to instead was the severity of that season's drought. By the end of the dry period, with rains delayed, the troop was foraging under extreme stress, at one point eating impala droppings to extract undigested seeds. The losses fell hardest on adult females and their unborn young. Nearly all were miscarriages. By contrast, in urban environments, where food is abundant year-round, some vervets raise two infants a season. At Mawana that year, the margin simply wasn't there.

But drought years end, and questions linger. What chronic stress does to a troop across generations, how resilience is built or lost, these are the kinds of things that only long-term field observation can untangle. Clémence and her colleagues have been watching these families for years and they will keep watching.



A male showcasing vervet monkey's characteristic tail, almost doubling their size

The season I visited was one of near-silence. No newborns, no infants clinging to their mothers, no chaos. Just two families, going about the quiet business of existing. Looking back at the photographs, I can almost sense it, a quietness that goes beyond calm, a stillness where there should have been movement. There was something melancholic in it. I had been watching: a troop in crisis, caught between miscarriages and absence.



A male sitting in the grass. The light golden, the air still.



One hand on a branch, a last goodbye, before the troop moved on

Recently, Clemence sent words of good news: the birthing season had come back strong. Young vervets in the troop again, clinging to their mothers. The crisis I witnessed, it seems, had passed. I find myself thinking about what it will mean to go back. The same rivers to cross, the same acacias to scan, the same long walk not knowing what you'll find. But something different waiting at the end of it. A troop with young. All the noise and tenderness that was missing. But if there is one thing I know, I am not done with Mawana.



"Day dream" the only young vervet observed across both family groups.