UVP Newsletter

February 2026

Monkey Updates

Simbithi monkeys commonly interact with other wildlife

The eco-estate habitat facilitates much wildlife to come together and interact. During our days following the vervet monkeys at Simbithi, the UVP team commonly observe the monkeys forage, groom and play in symbiosis with other species. One of the most consistent interactions we see is with the antelopes, such as duikers or bushbucks. When certain trees are fruiting, the monkeys feed high in the canopy, dropping pieces of fruit to the ground below. Antelopes often position themselves nearby, feeding on these leftovers. The monkeys appear largely indifferent to their presence. We also observe antelopes moving through the same areas as the monkeys, potentially even following them. These encounters tend to be brief and peaceful.

Besides interactions in a feeding context, affiliative interactions between species also occur. For example, antelopes may approach and "present" to the monkeys to initiate a grooming interaction: they will stand next to a monkey and position a body part in such a way that allows the monkey to groom it. Monkeys can also approach the antelopes to start grooming it. Several monkeys can be grooming a single antelope at the same time (Figure 1). These affiliative interactions can also include play behaviour. The field team has seen several instances of monkeys playing with red duikers for example, where they chase the red duiker and the red duiker flees and chase back. This behaviour is classified as play, as it occurs without agonistic behaviours and the red duiker keeps returning to continue the chase-flee play interaction. Similarly, the field team has seen instances of monkeys attempting to play with banded mongoose as well, with monkeys approaching and being really curious towards the mongooses without being sure on how to interact with them. Some researchers had the chance to observe a kind of a 'hide and seek': while some mongooses went in a hole of a big tree, others ran underneath a terrace. Monkeys were running playfully after them, tried to touch them few times and looked through the holes to look at the mongooses. These later ones remain silent when the monkeys were nearby, but as soon as the monkeys were going to check on the other mongooses, they started calling again which attracted the monkeys again!

Have you ever seen the monkeys interacting with other species in the estate? We would love to hear from your observations!

Figure 1: Vervet monkeys interacting with different antelope species; a young bushbuck (left) and a red duiker (right).

New publication on vervet monkey diet at Simbithi

UVP's former MSc student, Joey Felsch who was at Simbithi from July until December 2023 thereafter worked in the laboratory at the University of Lausanne, analysing his collected poo samples. His findings were recently published in the scientific journal of *Ecology and Evolution*. We used two methods (direct observations & DNA metabarcoding: analysing 447 poop samples to identify the DNA of the plants and animals the monkeys consumed) to discover exactly what the Simbithi monkeys are eating. This will help us understand how much they integrate human food into their diet. While watching the monkeys provided good info, the DNA testing revealed a much wider variety of foods that the researchers missed with their own eyes. This way our research confirmed that the monkeys' diet only consists of less than 3% of human food. Suggesting, while they like to seize each opportunity, they can get the "good stuff" they still mostly feed on vegetative sources such as Strelizia and Ficus trees. Even though they lived in the same general area, two different groups of monkeys (Acacia and Savanna) had distinct diets. Moreover, family ties mattered, so that monkeys within the same female family line (matrilines) tended to eat more similar things than they did with the rest of the group, suggesting foraging habits might be passed down through families.

The full publication can be read here: Felsch et al, 2026, Ecology and Evolution or on our UVP website under "Publications"

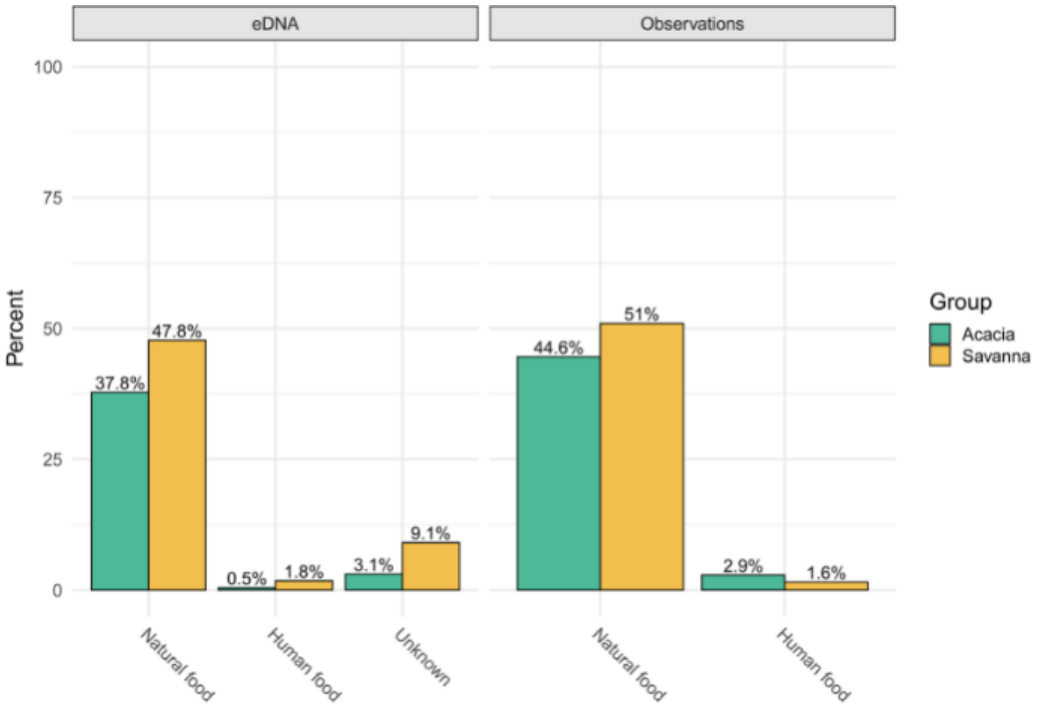


Figure 2: Percentage of natural and human food eaten by vervet monkeys in Simbithi, based on the sum of the relative read abundance for faecal data (left) and for observational data (right), for Acacia (green) and Savanna (yellow). Extracted from Felsch et al. 2026.

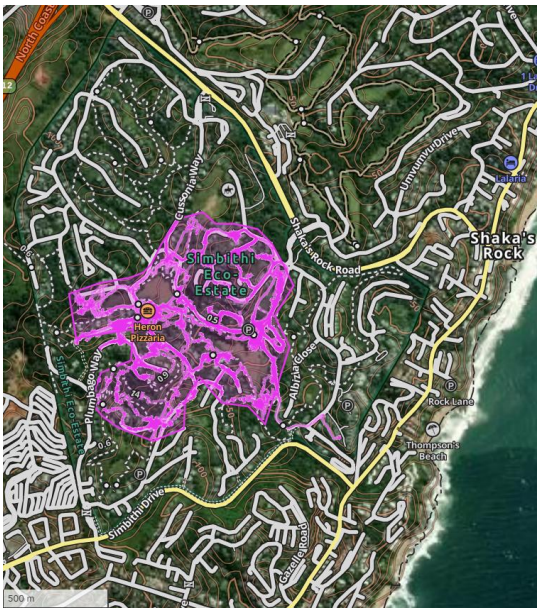
? UVP's QUESTION TO YOU SIMBITHI RESIDENTS ?

When residents share their observations with researchers

Thank you to the residents who took the time to share their recent observations with us following our last newsletter, we really appreciate it as these kinds of insights are extremely valuable and we are happy providing our explanations to learn together to better understand them. The first observation was an increased balcony visits during busy holiday periods. While researchers have also noted that before, due to monkeys being very good at learning patterns and potentially associating higher human activity with increased chances of food access (intentional or not), we do think that a threshold might exist. When the estate gets 'too busy' for the monkeys, it seems that they then avoided places with too many noisy humans present and rather stayed in their forest to keep foraging in the more quieter

places. But this is an interesting topic that would be great to dig further! The second observation reported was an adult female who grabbed a youngster by the tail as someone approached. This is a lovely example of attentive caregiving. This behaviour is commonly used to prevent young monkeys from moving into potentially risky situations (they sometime do that if researchers approach too closely, or to prevent a little one joining a big play with older juveniles) and reflects the heightened protectiveness of adults. Observations like these help us better understand how monkeys navigate shared spaces with people and highlight just how observant and responsive they are to their environment. Thanks for sharing and we look forward to hear more observations made by residents (using the contact page of the UVP website) ☺

Current study troops and new identified monkeys

Savanna	Pink
Savanna home range for February 2026 © GAIA GPS	 Pink home range for February 2026 © GAIA GPS
Little changes have been noted for Savanna this month. The babies are all healthy and growing quickly, and the group is spending a lot of time resting and foraging in their usual spots. **Toronto**, the first baby of the low-ranking female **Tornado**, has sustained some head injuries during the month, but is healing well. This could be due to the fact that **Tornado** is a first-time mum and is therefore still learning how to care for a baby. Otherwise, as she is low-ranking, she might be subjected to more aggression than others, increasing the risk for her and **Toronto** to become injured. The subadult female **Paloma** is often seen interacting with all the babies, and is frequently carrying the babies when the group is moving during the day. The subadult males, **Elf** and **DentedChin** are still around the group most of the time, with no indication that they might disperse soon.	The last baby in the Pink troop has been born in the beginning of February: the sub-adult female **SpottedChin2** has given birth to her first baby, which means that she is now an adult. There is a total of 13 adult females, and 13 healthy and growing babies in Pink now, that all love to play. The previous dominant male in the troop, **Egg**, has received some injuries in the past weeks due to fights in the group, which indicated a potential change in the hierarchy between the males with **Fig** potentially rising in rank. In the last week of the month, **Egg** has not been seen with Pink and has probably dispersed to find another troop. **Fig**, on the other hand, is seen interacting with and grooming the adult females more often. Finally, a 2-year old male, **Fluo**, was found with a big injury on his arm in the last week of February. He is still eating and moving with the troop, and the injury will hopefully heal by itself.

*Subadult female **Paloma** holding **Hurricane** and babysitting another baby at the same time*
© V. Konst

***Nickel**, her baby **Nutmeg**, and several other babies playing on the sidewalk*
© Y. Snijder

Team Updates

Research update: exploring the monkeys' "landscape of joy"

After six months of fieldwork at Simbithi and a semester of courses at the University of Zurich, **Emma Chen**, UVP student, is now developing her Master's thesis, focusing on what we call the "landscape of joy." Instead of only looking at predators' risk or conflict, this part of the research asks a different question: which places, if any, do monkeys actively seek out because they offer something positive?

Over the coming months, Emma will classify different types of "pleasure locations" present in the estate. These include natural food sources such as large fruiting trees, houses where accessible bins or outdoor food may attract monkeys, and open grassy areas or safe spots where troops frequently rest and play. Using GPS movement data and spatial mapping tools, she will test whether these locations influence the monkeys' movement decisions - in other words, whether monkeys are deliberately navigating toward certain rewarding areas. By understanding what attracts monkeys, rather than only what deters them, the project aims to provide a more balanced picture of vervets' decision-making and how they use the estate.

Figure 3: Emma Chen will be analysing data for the UVP on "landscapes of joy", to understand whether monkeys are deliberately navigating towards areas that represent positive experiences, including safe spots where the troop can rest or play.

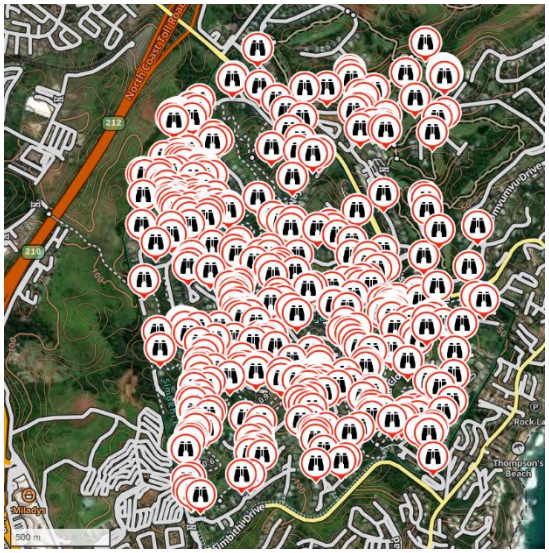


Figure 4. Map showing all sightings reported by the residents in Simbithi © GAIA GPS.

Citizen Science Data

Thank you all for your participation and for the many pins that keep coming in every day! Our dedicated team is entering these sightings into our database, and we are still receiving reports from all around Simbithi - many thanks for your continued efforts. This ongoing contribution is truly invaluable. We encourage you to keep up your great work as citizen scientists and continue sharing your sightings.

Simbithi Monkey Group

Groupe · 127 membres

The Urban Vervet Project – (our webpage)

Director: Dr. Sofia Forss, University of Zurich, Switzerland, Contact: sofia.forss@ieu.uzh.ch
Onsite Manager: Dr. Tobias Süess (Simbithi)
Data Manager & Educationalist: Dr. Stephanie Mercier. If you have concerns about monkeys or would like advice and/or information on harmonious co-existence, you can contact Stephanie directly (+27662596259 – stephanie.mercier.1@unil.ch).
For general monkey incidents in Simbithi, kindly report them by emailing the environmental team of Simbithi: environmental@simbithi.com.
Current onsite team members: Yke Snijder (MSc student), University of Utrecht, Vera Konst, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands & Linda Lukhuele, South Africa
Social media officer: Emma Chen, University of Zurich, Switzerland.
Follow us on **X @UrbanVervet** & **Blueskies @urbanvervetproject.bsky.social**

We are grateful for any feedback and contribution from the Simbithi community