

# Baboon Politics

The leader has been deposed. How long will his successor last? Not long, history suggests.

No, we are not talking about South African politics. This article, describing the social life and ever-changing hierarchies in a baboon troop, is the fifth in a series about wildlife and flora at Wildcliff, a nature reserve in South Africa's Langeberg mountain range. The social life of baboons can be seen in several aspects of their daily life, including aggression, vocalizations, feeding, grooming, and how they treat their babies (see previous article on baboons and bonding).

At Wildcliff, we study a variety of aspects of the natural environment, from ericas to primates. The principal baboon researcher is Paula Pebsworth, a primatologist from the United States. Joining the research team more recently is Dr. Cedric Sueur, who with his assistant Alexandre Brotz is investigating "democracy" in a baboon troop's collective decision-making, with a focus on troop movements. They come from the University of Strasbourg, in France.

As explained in the last article, the female baboons maintain a relatively stable social hierarchy based on birth, whilst the males regularly compete for supremacy and mating rights. Primatologists describe such a society as "matrilineal." Most males eventually part from their natal group and seek to join another troop – this reduces inbreeding, a serious problem for the Cape Point baboons, whose possibilities for migration are limited by the urban barrier.

**Baboon politics: physical and non-physical aggression.** The new "alpha" male of the large troop at Wildcliff is called Jack London (we use famous authors' names to identify the baboons!) Grooming and mating patterns confirm his status, but we do not know how he achieved this, since much of the troop's interactions occur in the forested kloof. Confrontations between males, vying for seniority, are common. They are the means of re-arranging rankings. Most confrontations take the form of shouting matches ("wahooing"), or teeth-baring (which looks like yawning), or staring matches. These avoid unnecessary wounding. Fierce chases or physical attacks are less frequent, but an injured leg or bloodied fur is evidence that fighting does take place. A successful attack would likely result in displacement of the alpha male. Male-female attacks do occur, but have not been seen at Wildcliff.



*Jack, the alpha male in the 70+ baboon troop at Wildcliff, dominates the troop and claims primary reproductive rights. Next to him, two juveniles seek his favour by trying to groom him. Photo: Paula Pebsworth.*

**The privileges of leadership.** Getting groomed by juveniles as well as adult females is certainly a benefit enjoyed by the alpha male. However the main privilege is primary reproductive rights. In a large troop, other males may be permitted to mate with females – especially if the females are of lower rank, or if they are not in oestrus (ready to get pregnant). The female's degree of oestrus will influence his interest in taking advantage of mating rights: the goal is to maintain his genetic line, not just to mate. Secondary males will, on occasion, sequester a female, and hastily mate where they cannot be seen by the alpha. This is facilitated by the females' promiscuity,

sometimes called “Mamma Mia” behaviour after the play by that name. A higher-ranking female will try to mate with several males – particularly when the males are likely to achieve higher or even alpha status. Paula explains that this can lead each of them to believe that he might be the father of her offspring, reducing the chance of that male attacking her babies (or even herself). Infanticide of other males’ progeny is well documented, although we have never seen it occur at Wildcliff.

**Vocalizations** play an important role in male hierarchy challenges and other aspects of the social life of baboons. From the early hours of the morning, a variety of sounds emanates from the trees and bush. Later we’ll see the baboons in the open, or our researchers will follow them into the forest. At the risk of over-generalizing, one can divide their vocalizations into five categories: wahooping, gurgling, grunting, barking and squealing.

- *Wahooping*. A loud Haahoo! or Wahoo! by the adult males signals confrontation posturing. It’s an indirect, non-physical form of confrontation, asserting superiority or challenging it. The louder, deeper and longer the Wahoo, the greater is the probable strength and health of the animal. If one big male voices a bold Wahoo, other males may echo this with challenging calls, or may back off. Another form of Wahoo is the reprimanding call: one may observe the alpha male, seeing another attempting to mate with one of his preferred females, may utter an annoyed Wahoo, followed by chasing and squealing.
- *Gurgling*. Immediately after mating, a female baboon typically voices a loud gll-gll-gll-uh-uh-uh or similar sound.
- *Grunting*. The term does not describe the sound well – it’s more like mrhh-mrhh-mrhh. Grunting is quite frequent, but a softer sound. It is a contact call, seemingly establishing presence: “I am here!” Grunting may be initiated by males or females, and is sometimes used by juveniles to help them re-establish contact with their mothers, or with the troop, if they’ve gone astray.
- *Barking*. Infrequently, researchers hear a serious distress bark or exclamation – probably signalling panic, separation from the individual’s troop or family. “Where is everybody!?!?”
- *Squealing*. Often heard, but with different degrees of intensity or persistence. Mostly we’ll observe “drama” screaming: “Mommy, he pushed me!” These, voiced by infants and juveniles, are mostly ignored by the rest of the troop. Less often, one hears shrill, ongoing squealing and screaming. This is the aggression/fear squeal. Somebody is being attacked, possibly injured. It’s a plea for help, and may be followed by males, females or sub-adults coming to the aid of their family, siblings or allies.



*Victor Hugo, the silver-backed ousted leader, sits on a rock looking despondent. Photo: Paula Pebsworth.*

Wildcliff welcomes comments on these articles. In addition, special visits can be arranged. You can reach us at 028 722 2633 or [ian@wildcliff.org](mailto:ian@wildcliff.org). Or telephone Keith Riggle, Wildcliff Manager, at 079 180 0827.

#### **About the writer**

Dr. Ian Giddy is a professor at New York University. He and his wife, Jenny, are former South Africans who founded Wildcliff in 2007. The reserve, which lies northeast of Heidelberg off the Gysmanshoek road, is dedicated to conservation and research.