

Northwest Namibia – Field Report



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Written by Rebecca Sefl (SDZ Global), Kaitlin Rebello (Seneca Park Zoo), Sonja Scheermeyer (Germany), Taryn Bodrug (Finland), Michelle O'Sullivan (Ireland), Emma Hart (GCF, UCD)

Day one of our trip started off with lots of wildlife from the get-go. Just outside Windhoek we spotted a baboon carrying her baby across the road and it only got better from there! About a half-hour outside Kamanjab we found our first giraffe! A family of three: mom, dad, and baby. They were right along the road, and observed us as we took some spectacular photos. Then, just as the sun set over the Grootberg Pass, SURPRISE!!! A juvenile male elephant stood right by the road as we passed in our cars! We saw the rest of his family, about 8 other elephant, on a hill in the distance. We made it to camp at Palmwag at sunset, and Emma had another surprise for us when she showed us a scorpion fluorescing with her handy UV light.

Early next morning we left Palmwag and headed towards the research area. Along the way, we spotted some mountain zebra, springbok, and several herds of cattle. After a lovely lunch among mysterious "fairy circles," we made it to our next campsite. After setting up camp, we headed into the Hoanib River to start our fieldwork. It took us about 30 minutes to find our first giraffe. What first looked like two turned out to be four! Two males, an adult female (pregnant) and a sub-adult female. After following them for some time, in the river and out, we could identify them and even successfully darted one called *Paw*. A quite productive afternoon! To conclude our evening, a fearless jackal visited our campsite and made off with one of our Tupperware containers!

We started early on Day 3 so we could follow the Hoanib River downstream in search of our quarry. We successfully darted a sub-adult female who was travelling with three adults. Soon after, we encountered three adult females, one with a baby! We also found another baby with two adults travelling across the dunes. They climbed a remarkably steep one to observe us from above. Our



team also did a little mountaineering in an attempt to locate a collared female named *Present*. We got a couple 'bleep bleeps' on the telemetry receiver, but after following their direction, we could not find our target. We did however spot another male giraffe wandering near the floodplain with two ladies. We tried our telemetry once more from another high point, but came up empty. Non-giraffe highlights of the day included a family of baboons, fresh lion tracks, and several beautiful antelope sightings.

After finding three new giraffe on the morning of Day 4, we headed into the mountains to see if we could spot *Oracle*, a female whose collar has stopped transmitting. No such luck by the time we reached the waterhole at Okongwe, but the weather had cooled off considerably and as we turned back south we headed towards the edge of a thunderstorm. Drops fell and lightning flashed as we continued our search of the mountains. Soon, we found ourselves having to ford a river as we

approached the normally arid Giribis Plains! We were all astonished to see that the Plains were covered in water, and that the water was continuing to rise! We started heading back towards camp, crossing the Obias River several times in the process. Emma jumped out and walked the deeper patches before attempting to cross by vehicle, but as we approached the narrow section of the Obias River the water deepened considerably. Darkness was falling and with the rising water Emma made the call to find some higher ground to spend the night. Luckily we had plenty of food with us and we baked some apples on an open fire.

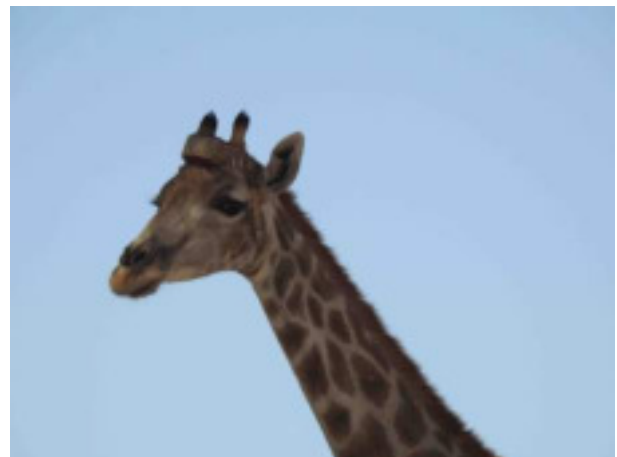
The next morning, we got up at first light eager to see what had become of our campsite! We



managed to traverse the transformed landscape back to our campsite. While the road had been totally washed away, luckily most of the camp was on higher ground and although a couple of tents had been moved by the water and a few personal items were soggy, overall no major damage was done. Still, we were glad we had not been inside the tents when the flood arrived! Since the heavy rains meant that the Hoanib River was now also in flood, we made the decision to leave the campsite a day ahead of schedule and travel north to Purros.

On Day 6 we saw our largest herd of giraffe yet. We found a group of twelve in the dry bed of the Gomatum River. We spent a couple of hours snapping photos, identifying giraffe, and successfully biopsy darting two. This group consisted of four young giraffe (two previously unidentified), a sub-adult male, one adult male, and six adult females. We also found one of the collared giraffe amongst the herd, and took several photos of her device, which appeared to still be sitting comfortably on her ossicones. Later in the day, we drove into the mountains, but we did not find any more giraffe until it was time to head back to camp. On the way back, we spotted a lone male named *Chopper* hanging out below a rainbow.

We began Day 7 with a trip across the Hoarusib River. This river was also in flood, however since the flooding had gone down a bit, we were able to navigate part of the western side, where we only encountered one giraffe: a male named *Morpheus*. After lunch, we headed into the Gomatum River again to see if we could find the large group from the previous day. We were not disappointed! We documented 15 giraffe in total, a group of four and a group of eleven. We also recorded several trees in the area for the giraffe browse remote sensing study that is undertaken in partnership with the Namibian University of Science and Technology.



A flat tire and a dead secondary battery meant a slightly delayed start to Day 8, but we still managed a good day in terms of data collection. We caught up once more with the large group of giraffe in the



Gomatum River, and we successfully darted two that had given us the slip before. Afterwards, we headed into the mountains where we came upon four adult females who had originally been identified in the Hoanib River, one of which a female from the Adopt-A-Giraffe programme. We managed to dart one of the four and, on our way back to camp, we were treated to a stunning sight: a black rhino slowly making his way down a dry riverbed! We watched him amble along as the sun set over Purros.



On our last full day in the study area, we witnessed the miracle of life in the form of an hours-old elephant calf finding its feet beside its beautiful mother. We even were privileged to watch mom deliver the afterbirth! After observing mom and baby for almost a half-hour, we continued up the Hoarusib River in search of our last giraffe.

We found two large groups of nine each, and we managed to dart three more. On our way back to camp, Michelle’s vehicle hit some particularly sticky mud and got stuck– but after some “girl power” from the rest of us pushing, Michelle managed to manoeuvre right back out again. We spotted and recorded three more giraffe, including adopted male *Winky Wonk*, before we reached the campsite. Elephant passed by our camp in the night, and we woke to the sound of deep belly rumbles and tearing branches. After a tense few moments in our tents, they soon moved on again and we listened as they splashed their way down the flowing Hoarusib River towards Purros.

Heading back towards civilisation, we encountered one more pair of giraffe, a mom and baby, on the very edge of the study area. Then, after an afternoon clean-up and a relaxing night at the Hoada campsite we turned for home. Thus, ended an amazing adventure, with some remarkable sights and some thrilling twists and turns throughout.

Despite the somewhat challenging conditions we observed 22 groups of giraffes (97 individual sightings), six of which were new babies to be added to the database. We also collected ten biopsy samples and mapped three species of vegetation across the study area for use in the remote sensing study.

A big thank you to GCF and to the sponsors for making this conservation research possible. Stay tuned for the next update from the field!

