

Northwest Namibia- Field Report



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The February field-trip got off to a slightly shaky start. On the morning of departure everything was packed and ready, when the electrics in the trusty research vehicle *The Beast* began to go haywire. I spent the morning hours with the mechanics at Bushwhackers poking, prodding and replacing wires. Nothing was working and I was started to glance anxiously at my watch, wondering how far north I could make it as the hours slipped by. Finally, we ran a new wire from the cigarette lighter, through the back window to the fridge – an ingenious work-around that allowed me to get on the road!

On the way at last I headed north, through Okahandja and on towards Otjiwarongo. The drive was pleasantly cool as there were dark rain clouds banking up ahead, preventing the sun from shining directly into the car. The grass on this stretch of road has been radically transformed in recent weeks, from yellow stumps to lush borders of green. I soon found out exactly why.

As I sped north the dark rain clouds closed in and suddenly I was driving in a torrential downpour. Born and raised in southern Ireland, I am not unaccustomed to driving in the rain. This, however, was an African rainy season sort of rain. The sort of rain that gets it all over-and-done-with in one go.

The road, which moments before had shimmered with a heat mirage, was now under inches of water. The clouds rumbled ominously, and cracks of lightening shot down every few minutes. One in particular met the ground a few hundred metres to my left and I was glad to think of the sturdy rubber tyres on *The Beast*. Towards sunset I pulled into Otjiwarongo for the night, unsure how much further I could make it in daylight, and wary of driving in the dark due to animals on the road.

However, *The Beast's* electrics had one last trick to play – once locked-up for the night the vehicle alarm started to go off every five minutes! There was nothing for it but to unload everything and carry it into the guesthouse so I could leave the vehicle unlocked for the night. Luckily I wouldn't need the central locking once I got up to the field!

From there on the trip went much more smoothly. An early start had me to the Okongwe area between the Hoanib and Hoarusib Rivers by the following day and it was wonderful to track down the collared giraffe *Oracle* who has been spending time in that area. She looked in great shape and interestingly, although first spotted in the Hoarusib River, she was now in the company of two giraffe originally identified in the Hoanib River. Further evidence that these two populations mingle.

These two Hoanib girls were also the first giraffe to be biopsy darted on this trip. Part of our research in the area aims to take tiny tissue samples from each giraffe to understand their population genetics. These biopsies are obtained by shooting each giraffe with a drop dart that includes a tiny barb. The dart falls out immediately, taking a piece of skin and fat with it, and can be picked up from the ground when the giraffe moves off. No harm is done to the animals and no drugs are required. These biopsies are then analysed, helping to unravel the



mysteries of giraffe genetics and social structure – key knowledge in terms of informing ongoing and future conservation efforts.

From the Okongwe area I headed north to the Hoarusib River where the usual large herds of giraffe were waiting to be ID'd. It was great to see them all looking so healthy despite the prolonged dry-season. I was very grateful to have the new equipment kindly sponsored by Idea Wild to hand. The new Vortex binoculars and Nikon camera made getting close-up shots of the giraffe much easier, especially as some of the giraffe seemed bent on rock climbing! From the Hoarusib River I headed still further north to the Khumib River. We had received reports of a giraffe carcass in the area and I was keen to check it out.



Quite far west down the Khumib River, right in the Skeleton Coast NP, I came across what was left of the carcass: a dry crisp shell of giraffe hide. Closer inspection revealed bones and entrails dragged from the site, and all around hyena and jackal spoor (tracks) and vulture scat (droppings). It is hard



to determine if the giraffe fell prey to another animal, or whether she died of illness or injury, but we can be sure that her carcass fed a variety of scavengers out there in the dry riverbed.

From the Hoarusib River I headed south, twisting through the mountains before cutting down a tributary to reach the main Hoanib River. Here it was possible to ID many of the Hoanib stalwarts, and also to spot a few giraffe who we haven't seen in a while, and even add a few newcomers to our database.

I was especially keen to find *Present* the collared giraffe who usually spends her time in the lower Hoanib River. I drove the lower section of the river many times but with no luck. The steep sides of the riverbanks make it tricky to see whether there are giraffe browsing just out of the river on the banks above. I tried my usual trick of driving a few metres, then climbing on the roof to check, then repeating the process, but to no avail.

Looking for an alternative method I started instead to size up scale-able parts of the riverbank, then make quick darts up the bank and pop my head over to glance around. This seemed to be quite a good strategy (apart from startling a few oryx) so I kept it up. Jumping back in the car I pulled forwards around a river-bend only to slam my foot on the brake. A lioness lay crouched in the road ten metres ahead of me. My heart beat against my ribcage and my legs turned to jelly as I thought about where I had been only two minutes



before. I decided to put an end to the bank climbing antics for the day.

That evening I was making camp upriver and into the Obias River area when I heard the unusual sound of another car engine. It was bat researcher Theresa Laverty and her research assistant Malorie. I had mentioned to them that I would be in the area and they had come to find me so we could camp together and catch up. We enjoyed an evening around the camp fire discussing the wildlife of the area and our research projects.

The next day I headed down river again at dawn. African Wild Tracking had kindly passed on *Present's* latest coordinates and I was determined to find her. Luck was not on my side however, as just as the river begins to narrow after Amspoort I met a group of eleven elephant. They were busy digging for roots amongst the sand and were spread widely across my path. I settled down to wait for a chance to pass.



It is never really a chore being stuck behind elephant. They are such social and charismatic animals that it is always a pleasure to spend time in their company. One youngster was particularly entertaining. Sliding on his belly under his mum's watchful eye, his little feet sticking out behind him. I was enjoying his playful silliness when his mother suddenly and entirely without warning swung around and mock-charged my vehicle. Dropping my camera in my lap I quickly reversed out of her reach. The mother elephant swung back to her baby, shaking her massive ears in annoyance.



That was my first time being mock-charged, and it is a little unsettling to say the least. I eventually found *Present* browsing with a group of giraffe close to the Hoanib floodplains, but I took my time getting past those elephant!

All in all it was a successful field trip. It was great to see the collared giraffe, and also to spot some of the adoptees from GCF's *Adopt-a-Giraffe* programme (<https://giraffeconservation.org/adopt-a-giraffe/>). Another big plus was to collect ten new biopsy samples from the population. In total 107 giraffe were identified and recorded, with 102 of those previously in the database, and five new giraffe added. Of those five, two were new juveniles and three are newly recorded adults. Where these adults had been hiding before, we will likely never know!

A big thank you to GCF, University College Dublin, and to the sponsors for making this conservation research possible.

Stay tuned for the next update from the field!



