

Northwest Namibia- Field Report

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After a busy few weeks catching up with the University research team back in Ireland, it was time to head back to the field and kick off the new year. The long haul up to the north-west was punctuated by sightings of kudu and warthog making the most of the new grass on the verges, the result of recent rains in Namibia.

During the first night at Palmwag Lodge, there was time to do some last-minute vehicle repairs as the front bumper had decided it was a good time to part from the rest of the vehicle. At first light, I headed north towards the Hoanib River, keen to catch up with the giraffe after the Christmas break.

While it had rained further south, there had still been no rain in the northwest and the Obias Plains



looked charred from the dual-effects of the scorching sun and the hundreds of cattle that were herded across them regularly by local Hereros. Oryx and springbok grazed between the domestic livestock, but despite the drought both cattle and game looked healthy and well fed.

Arriving at the Hoanib junction I headed down river, passing a large herd of springbok, the heat rising around them as they caught the shade of an *Acacia* tree. Rounding a corner my eye was immediately caught by a huge round mound beneath a tree.

Creeping closer I saw that it was the rock-like lumpy shape of an elephant. What's more, it wasn't alone. Next to it I spotted a smaller mound: an elephant calf, and a bit further on, under the next tree, another elephant, legs and trunk stretched out at odd angles. I froze, not poachers surely?

Pulling out my binos I had a closer look, and with great relief saw that the mound was moving rhythmically as the elephant breathed in and out. Not poached, just lounging away the heat of the day under a tree. Wise move I thought, as I continued downriver in the scorching heat.

I soon began to come across the first giraffe. While giraffe often spend time out of the riverbed on the arid plains above, this time they seemed to be particularly bent on hiding just out of sight. Every now and then I'd spot a flicking ear or a curious head, but by the time I'd maneuvered the vehicle the giraffe would have moved on. This resulted in a



long game of peek-a-boo where I would drive ten metres, hop onto the roof of the vehicle or riverbank with my binos and camera, quickly record as much information as possible, then repeat the entire process. Luckily it paid off and, in addition to spotting some old favourites, I also recorded a new calf on the riverbank in the Skeleton Coast Park.

I didn't stray too far from the vehicle as passing Dr. Flip Stander and the Desert Lion film crew reminded me that I might not be the only one in the riverbed hungry for giraffe sightings. I watched my step too, particularly after a cobra twisted across the track ahead of my vehicle, lifting its head and opening its hood in warning as it passed. It is always unsettling to see how fast a snake can move but a beautiful sight all the same.



While the giraffe sightings were good, I had yet to spot HNB60 or *Present* the collared giraffe that seems to prefer the lower section of the Hoanib River. Camping in the mountains above Amspoort for the night I planned to head out early in search of this particular giraffe. The morning search proved fruitless, and I managed to get stuck at the western side of the flood plain with a bunch of elephant blocking my path, including two young calves playing in the dust on the narrow path ahead. Luckily all the collared giraffe can be tracked online from GCF's office in Windhoek. I decided to give Julian a quick call while I waited, and found out *Present's* most recent coordinates. The elephant had moved a little to the side by then and, considering that staying put could mean a night stuck in the river during flood season, I took my chances and stole past them.

Armed with the coordinates I finally found *Present* and, after checking her collar for any signs of wear or damage, headed happily north out of the Hoanib River towards Okongwe. While this mountainous region between the river systems does not support the same quantities of giraffe as in other areas, it seems to be a favourite haunt of our most elusive collared giraffe HSB60 or *Oracle*.

Traversing the area from to the Obias Plains and back, a good three-hour drive, and then again heading



through the mountains a second time on yet another winding rocky track, I still had no luck. There were signs of giraffe: high browse lines on trees, scat and spoor, just no giraffe. The sun was setting so I made camp overlooking a game track, and slept to the snorts and brays of curious mountain zebra.

In the slanting sunlight of the morning I noticed lion tracks passing along the road by my camp, each one as big as a saucer. I headed further north towards the Hoarusib River and was greeted there by the usual large herds of giraffe



that occupy the riverbed. In the upper Hoarusib River a herd of eighteen giraffe moved amongst the vegetation, and in the lower river I spotted multiple herds of between two and sixteen giraffe. Amongst these giraffe were the two collared giraffe HSBF05 and HSBF08, both in good shape.

A day's round trip took me even further north to the Khumib River, where the Khumib herd were browsing up river from the Skeleton Coast National Park. It was good to find this crew, as we hadn't been able to locate them during our November trip. After covering the Hoarusib River one final time I headed south for the mountains again, determined to find *Oracle* and armed with her latest coordinates.

Winding through the mountain paths in the searing heat I had almost given up hope when suddenly, in the far distance, the trunk of a tree moved. Not a trunk, a leg! There she was, with two other female giraffe, nonchalantly pretending to be trees.

It was fantastic to find all four collared giraffe and confirm their healthy condition, and also to spot some of the adoptees from GCF's 'Adopt a Giraffe' programme (<https://giraffeconservation.org/adopt-a-giraffe/>). In total 116 giraffe were identified and recorded, with 107 of those previously in the database, and nine new giraffe added. Of those nine I'm pleased to report that four are new juveniles, each an important addition to the giraffe population in north-west Namibia.

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

Stay tuned for the next update!



