

Northwest Namibia – Field Report

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In October 2016 we embarked on a field trip to northwestern Namibia in support of the Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF). The team consisted of GCF PhD researcher Emma Hart, myself, ecologist Dominique Rhoades (UK), Justine Godin (Paris Zoo, France), Michelle Wagener (Naples Zoo, FL USA), Brooke Rose (Wildwood Wildlife Park, WI USA), Paige Milligan (Columbus Zoo, OH USA), and Katie Lind (Dakota Zoo, ND USA).



After packing up both field vehicles with everything we would need to sustain ourselves for the next ten days, we began our two-day trek northwest into one of the oldest deserts in the world, the Namib. It didn't take us long to start seeing wildlife along the road with sightings of warthog, baboon and kudu, but what made us stop and pull over was the "spotting" of our first wild herd of giraffe just north of Outjo. A very exciting moment for the team.

The landscape is ever changing throughout the drive, and the geology of the northwest exhibits spectacular views of unique bolder kopjes, plateaus, mountain ridges, and valleys. On the trip up we also saw our first

of many herds of Hartman's Mountain zebra – from my previous visits to Namibia, the number of sightings has definitely increased which was encouraging to see!

We made it as far as Palmwag in Damaraland on the first day, where the landscape is dominated by red rocks of varying shapes, mostly between apple and pumpkin size. You can't help but look across these vast fields of rock with very little vegetation, and no sign of water, and wonder how anything manages to survive out there. How amazing to watch a herd of springbok or kudu run over this mine field of debris with the grace of ballet dancers. Palmwag is the home of *Save the Rhino Trust*, and this part of the country boasts the healthiest wild populations of black rhino in the world. Another wow-factor to think about.

The next morning we woke to the sun rising over the crest of the mountain ridge, the call of the pied crow, the cluck of the red-billed francolin, and a bull elephant walking between our row of tents! After he sauntered by with ghostly silence, I quietly asked from the refuge of my 6ft x 6ft tent, "Tell me someone else just saw that?" Excitingly voices from the other tents started to respond, "We can't believe that just happened!!" After assessing that the area was clear, we all emerged from our tents to see that this magnificent bull elephant had

literally walked right through the middle of our camp, and down into a small spring-fed ravine to begin eating his breakfast. Needless to say, I believe over the next half hour every wrinkle of his body was photographed by all eight of our cameras. 😊



After our exciting first wild elephant experience, we broke camp and headed north into the Kaokoveld. We were now on a single dirt track driving around hills, through valleys and over vast sandy desert plains with sparse grass and mopane tree shrub. Just before coming to a very small village called Tomakas, we spotted our first giraffe in the research area and it was time to get to work. One of our main objectives for

GCF's long-term monitoring programme is surveying the current population dynamics of giraffe (and elephant) in the lower Hoanib, Hoarusib and Khumib River catchments. We pulled out the data collection equipment and began a routine of what we would continue to do for the next eight days: record GPS position, time of day, herd size, sex and age dynamics, body condition scores, and attempt to photograph right and left side profiles of each giraffe to assist us with identifying the individual giraffe. Each giraffe has a unique spot pattern, which allows researchers to identify giraffe by matching the pattern with previous ID sheets/photos. This also allows us to research where s/he has moved, or to add him/her to the database if it is a new giraffe. This particular herd was made up of one male and two females – a perfect size to introduce everyone to the tasks ahead.

Back on track towards the remote village of Puros we spotted three more giraffe herds. All of them were recorded and ID'd – not bad for our first day in the field. We finally arrived at the Puros community campsite just in time for a spectacular sundowner with lots of talk about our first exciting full day as giraffe field researchers.



We spent the next four days exploring the Hoarusib River around Puros, driving up and down the dry sandy river bed, and up along the scrub covered rocky banks. Besides giraffe, we located our first elephant herd, which to our excitement included a cow with a very young calf. This little gem created a lot

of 'Oohs' and 'Ahs' in the vehicle and provided a very popular topic of conversation at the evening campfire. We continued to find large herds of giraffe, along with locating two of the three females that had been previously GPS collared in this area. The last collared giraffe had ventured south towards the Hoanib River, and we made a plan to try and find her later in the week.

We also ventured further north to the Khumib River, which was part of the initial study started in the early 2000s. One of the most exciting moments for me on this trip was when we identified an adult female giraffe from the 'old days', who had been a sub-adult then. Even more interesting, and important for the history of giraffe research, was finding an adult male that I had first seen and identified as an adult male giraffe in 2002.



Fourteen years on means that this guy is approximately in his early 20s. Currently there is very limited data available on how old giraffe get in the wild, so our work is contributing to a better understanding of this and their conservation.

After four nights in Puros we broke camp and headed south towards the Hoanib River. Along the way, another amazing surprise awaited us: we had a very rare sighting of a black rhino. While I mentioned earlier that this region has one of the largest populations of black rhino outside national parks, it is very rare to actually see one. It was remarkable to watch this prehistoric giant mosey along over this desolate land. He climbed up to the top of a rocky hilltop and, silhouetted by the clear blue sky, gazed upon us from his desert throne.

This particular day ended up becoming a day of exploration. During my previous travels through the Kunene region, I had seen many little natural treasures. One of these was the location of one of the largest *Welwitschia* plants that I had ever seen. *Welwitschia* is a monotypic gymnosperm genus, comprising solely of the distinctive *Welwitschia mirabilis*. This highly adapted desert plant is comprised of only two leaves that continue to grow and curl over its lifetime with a root system that goes just as deep as its leaves are long. *Welwitschia* plants are estimated to live for up to 5,000 years and are commonly referred to as “living fossils”. I recognised the little canyon where it used to be, so we decided to see if it was still there. And low and behold, a little way down the canyon we found it up on the rock cliff. After a few photos, we decided to explore the canyon further as neither Emma nor I had continued on the track before. It brought us back to the Hoarusib River and we trekked on to see whether we might spot any giraffe or elephant. The scenery got even more spectacular as we got closer to the Skeleton Coast, with high cliffs, sand dunes nearly four stories tall, and one of the most beautiful mountain passes that I have ever seen. We all named it the “Heavenly Passage!”



We were able to get almost within 8-10km (5-6mi) of the Atlantic Ocean, but then as the hours of sunlight were fast disappearing we turned back. We drove back up river, and back out onto the desert plain. As the sun was setting we found a great little kopje, engulfed by the desert within a ring of mountains, to set up camp. We were truly in “no man’s land” with the heat of the day quickly cooling as the sun set beyond the mountain horizon, and the vast desert began to show off her star filled sky.

The following day we reached the Hoanib River where we spent the next four days. We began our survey of the river by climbing to the top of a small hill top ridge near Amspoort. At the top of this peak the spectacular view allowed a great vantage point to survey a large portion of the river bed and its surrounding habitat.

On our drive upriver, we encountered two solitary elephant bulls and a maternal herd of desert elephants including two young calves. We also spotted a small herd of giraffe and we again recognized one of the females from the 2002 field work.





After setting up camp, we surveyed further upriver for giraffe and managed to find another gorgeous sundowner spot atop a hill looking down over the river bed and the steep surrounding cliffs. Sundowners are a southern African tradition after all.

Over the next few days we were happy to add a few new giraffe to the ID files, see some familiar ones and also check on four more GPS collared females. GPS data gives us a better understanding of giraffe movements and how they use their habitat and all this can be done from a computer anywhere in the world, however, it is important to check on the collars regularly and see that the giraffe

are doing well.

During dry times in the river, wildlife relies on the pods of Ana trees for food. We had all heard how elephant would shake the trees to get pods to fall to the ground and we were lucky enough to witness such an encounter as we watched a bull elephant shaking a huge Ana tree by pressing his trunk and tusks into it. It literally rained pods all over him. Breakfast was served.

It was an amazing ten days in the field, with 177 individual giraffe sightings (of which 64 giraffe were newly identified). This puts the total number of identified giraffe in the NW at a strong 261 individuals. We also recorded 23 elephants and saw numerous Hartman's mountain zebra, gemsbok, springbok, baboon, and warthog. For the avian enthusiasts, we spotted pied crows, yellow-billed hornbills, korhaan's, Ludwig's bustard, bee-eaters, hammerkops, snake eagles, lappet-faced vultures, grey louries, red-billed francolins, weavers, LBJs, and flocks of ostrich. We were also lucky enough find kudu, steenbok, black-faced impala, black-backed jackals, and black rhino. And, we can't forget our arachnid friend the Long-Spinnered Bark Spider, that kept us company in the Puros community campsite bush toilet. While we found cheetah tracks close to camp in the Hoanib River and lots of evidence of lion in the area, we didn't see any felines on this trip. More reason to come back!

A huge thanks to GCF, Dr. Julian and Steph Fennessy, for a fantastic trip and for having me back to Northwest Namibia, my "Home Away from Home!". A big thank you too to the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium, and their CMC board. Their support allowed me to return to Namibia for this field trip and provide financial support for this amazing programme. A special thank you to Emma Hart, the GCF and University College Dublin PhD student, who coordinated this field trip and was a great host, guide and friend. Thank you also to all GCF donors for your support.

Stay tuned for the next update and please contact GCF for more information: info@giraffeconservation.org

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