

## Northwest Namibia – Field Report

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Armed with a bakkie full of camping gear, supplies and a biopsy dart gun we hit the long and dusty road northwards. Our aim - to build on the long-term data set of giraffe ID and DNA in the ephemeral Hoanib and Hoarisib Rivers.

Leaving 'busy' Windhoek in our wake the road soon began to cut through commercial game areas, which many many hours later led us into the communal land of southern Kunene. Our long drive was punctuated often by sightings of kudu, oryx, springbok and mountain zebra. We attempted to ID the many birds flitting through the bush and soaring above, but overwhelmed by their numbers we eventually settled down to just enjoying the ride.

By late afternoon we headed towards the mighty Grootberg Pass but not before our first wild giraffe sighting in the #Khoadi-//Hoas Conservancy. The fences in this area range from relatively low to non-existent, and allow the giraffe to pass unimpeded through the landscape.

We camped the first night in the community-owned Hoada campsite. The sun was dropping fast and we quickly scrambled up a nearby rocky outcrop. We cracked a beer and watched as the fading light played across the wide-open landscape – a brontosaurus wouldn't have looked out of place browsing amongst the prehistoric rock formations.

Excited to be out in the wild at last we decided not to pitch tents but instead to sleep under the stars. Unfortunately, we hadn't factored in the effect of the recent rains on the mosquito population and spent a restless night being thoroughly chowed – lucky it's not a malaria area!

We started early the next morning, winding our way ever northwards, through Palmwag, Khowarib and Sesfontein. Along the way we chatted to some curious school children who were delighted to be given a booklet on giraffe conservation-opportunistic environmental education!



Leaving the last vestiges of civilization behind us we hit the open arid plains on the approach to the Hoanib River. As we sped on the usually barren plains shimmered with green. The early February rains had brought forth tiny blades of new grass. Skittish springbok proned on both sides as the landscape seemed to grow and stretch and swallow us whole.

From our bushcamp base we spent the next four days observing and recording the giraffe population of the Hoanib River and its tributaries. While the majority of our giraffe sightings were of herds within the river beds, the recent rains meant that some giraffe had ventured further than usual from these lifelines in search of fresh growth on the harsh open plains.

Working together we collected identifying data for each giraffe, photographing both left and right sides and also logging age, sex, herd size, GPS co-ordinates of the sightings, and collecting DNA samples of a select few. This data will be used in ongoing research aiming to better understand the behavior, health and social dynamics of these giraffe.



After packing up camp in the Hoanib, we started north towards the village of Purros on the Hoarusib River. The drive took almost a full day, but time passed quickly over the interesting landscape. We came across two herds of giraffe along the way, one of which included a young calf only a few months old! This was the first calf we had seen all week. According to Julian, the lions in the Hoanib River have been hunting giraffe a lot more frequently, and calves are usually the first to go. This could have detrimental effects on the future giraffe population in the area, if there are no young to replace the old. We were happy to see a healthy calf and hope for future generations.

We also got the lucky experience of a black rhino sighting! We had picked up some tracks on the “road” we were driving but were doubtful we’d actually spot him. But there he was, walking along some bushes in the distance. Since the wind was in our favour, we were able to climb a hill and get a better look.



His horns had recently been cut off, an anti-poaching strategy, although they had already grown back a few inches. We just stared at each other. It was a thrilling and fascinating moment, and a reminder that there are many other species in peril as well.

The campsite in Purros had been washed away by the Hoanib River, so we stayed the night in an old abandoned camp. There was a large giraffe herd nearby which we analysed, but we were not able to get to many other areas around, so we left to head toward Palmwag the next day. Julian had a meeting in Palmwag with some local conservancy members to discuss plans





for a “Giraffe Research Camp”. This research base for GCF in the Hoanib River would be affiliated with a lodge for tourists. Despite some car troubles (a giant hole in the rear differential), we were able to get it patched and to the meeting in time. We also got our first shower in over a week!

In total we observed 55 giraffe over an action-packed week. It was a pleasure to be able to re-identify many of the giraffe identified by previous teams working with GCF. Collecting data on individual giraffe over time allowed us to gain unique insights into their habits, including who they

associate with and how far they travel over time.

While the field observations will help us to understand the social relationships of giraffe, we also collected 14 DNA samples from identified giraffe using remote biopsy drop darts. Once analysed, the genetic information from these samples will allow us to see not only who identified giraffe associate with over time, but also whether such associations have a genetic or familial basis – do giraffe spend time with family members? Do they form friendships or pair bonds? Hopefully the data collected will help to answer these questions in the future.

Back in Windhoek/civilization, it is easy to see what a unique and awesome opportunity we had to be by ourselves in such a harsh landscape, surrounded by some of the most amazing animals on earth. It is baffling how certain species can thrive up there, and truly speaks for the power of adaptation and determination. It is our hope that our time spent up there and the data we collected will help not only the individuals we saw personally, but the species of giraffe as a whole.



Stay tuned for the next update and please contact GCF for more information: [info@giraffeconservation.org](mailto:info@giraffeconservation.org)

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