

Northwest Namibia – Field Report

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After having collectively worked with captive giraffe for over 34 years, we thought we knew quite a lot about them. Turns out we only know a very small percentage of how this gentle giant has adapted to a desert life in one of the most beautiful landscapes we have ever seen.

Bringing the zoo keeping community and the wildlife conservation community together is what the Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF) is good at and what a great way to do it by embarking on a field trip to the remote northwest Namibia. Our field trip was a convoy of three 4x4s filled with three Australasian zookeepers (Jimmy Sanders from Taronga Zoo, Nat Sullivan and Emma Wells both from Auckland Zoo), one of Africa's most amazing wildlife vets (Dr Pete Morkel), two giraffe PhD students (Emma Hart and Maddie Castles), a wildlife photographer (Randall Hinz) and of course, one of the world's leading giraffe experts (Dr Julian Fennessy, GCF).



On our first day we drove for many hours until we reached a community campsite in Damaraland (Hoadia), meeting Maddie on the way as she is based in Etosha National Park. The long car journey allowed the group to mingle and discuss the adventure ahead, as well as the many conservation issues facing giraffe and Africa in general. As the sun set we pulled into camp, and enjoyed a long night under the stars listening to jackals and barking geckos serenading us to sleep.

Early doors we hit the road again heading further northwest to the Hoanib River. Along the way we stopped at one of Julian's special spots to learn more about the local flora, discuss the amazing community conservation efforts in the country and check out the magical fairy circles – supposedly caused by the breath of dragons as the local Himba people believe! Throughout the drive we saw an abundance of springbok, ostrich, oryx and a healthy herd of Hartmann's mountain zebra.



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We set up camp just north of the Hoanib River – home for the next 5 days. Importantly, the camp was out of immediate danger from wildlife, particularly elephant and lion, who often roam the dry riverbed throughout the night.

We weren't there for an easy ride though, and once we hit the study area it was straight into searching for and identifying individual giraffe: taking photos of each side (easier said than done when driving on soft sand and having sceptical giraffe on

the move), recording who they hang out with to build up an idea of individual bonds, and recording GPS coordinates. With previous data from Julian's earlier work we also tried to track where the giraffe are moving to and from, and whether they move individually or together.

It wasn't long until we came across our first desert elephant, happily munching away on a Mopane tree. In addition to taking a few personal shots, we also identified him and recorded his GPS coordinates as this will help with Emma's study on the competition between giraffe and elephant in these ephemeral river systems. Further down river we spotted more giraffe, this time only a pair of females, making the data collection much easier.

As the sun set again we headed back to base camp for a fun-filled night with Pete sharing some of his wildlife adventures. This man has had more than his fair share of nine lives and worked with an amazing variety of wildlife across Africa and the world.

We spent the following few days exploring the lower Hoanib River systems and collecting data from the various giraffe and elephant we observed. Despite being extremely arid, this part of the world is just amazingly beautiful and a stunning place to collect data. In contrast, the dry riverbed was full of greenery, which meant that wildlife was abundant. Beautiful oryx often mingled amongst the herds of springbok, steenbok scuttled across the tracks, and we observed several bull elephant standing on their hind legs to reach high up leaves and seedpods as giraffe have created a tall browse line on their favourite trees. In addition to solving the world's problems, as one does on these trips, we noted that the giraffe in this area of Africa are often quite pale and some individuals appear to have almost no colour left on their spots. Just another exceptional feature of this unique landscape.



But our field trip should become even more exciting and we had to up our game when we started training for the best day of our lives – tackling giraffe and fitting them with GPS satellite collars! The collaring team was supported by six American giraffe enthusiasts who with the support of Ultimate Safaris in Namibia joined us for the big day. This was an experience none of them, or us, will forget for a long time.

In preparation for the capture, Pete and Julian talked us through the process and we simulated the capture a few of times beforehand. It would have been quite a sight to watch us from afar running around in the desert trying to catch Pete, our fake giraffe. Turns out, he was almost harder to catch than the real thing!

Finally, game day arrived and we were off to an early start. Not an issue as most of us were up early anyway, excited about the day ahead. Before we loaded up the cars we practiced one last time. This time with some extra support from a few lads from Ultimate Safaris – a bit of a relieve for all of us as we had already sustained some niggles from the practice sessions.

The aim was to capture and collar two adult female giraffe to learn more about their habits and use of this huge landscape. The capture team piled into the back of one bakkie (ute/truck) with the support vehicle close



behind and followed by the conservation supporters. Within the first half hour Julian spotted some giraffe and Pete decided it was time to dart, capture and collar our first girl.

With all seven members of the capture team all huddled in the back of the car, Pete lined her up and darted. Waiting for his call when the drugs kicked in (only a matter of minutes) and some speedy driving, we were off. Once in front of the giraffe out we jumped, putting to practice what we had learnt to rope the animal. No luck, the first attempt failed as she was still too strong, but it gave some of the team opportunity to practice their superman impressions. Full of adrenalin and after another failed attempt, we brought the giraffe down relatively softly and our rugby skills came



into action to take control of her head and neck to prevent her from getting leverage to stand up again. All in all, not an easy feat when dealing with megafauna standing 4m tall and weighing at least 800kg. Pete immediately administered the reversal drug and we attached a blindfold to keep her calm.

For the next fifteen minutes we took a range of measurements of the giraffe including hooves, neck, ears, ossicones, height and of course the all-important GPS satellite collar was fitted being careful to allow for normal jaw action and just enough pressure to keep the device on without causing too much discomfort. The hope is that the collar will work for at least a couple of years providing exciting new data of movements of this specially adapted desert giraffe. Once all the data was collected including a small piece of skin for DNA sampling we jumped up and removed the blindfold. Amazingly, she got to her feet within seconds and took off to rejoin her mates. Everyone was euphoric when she ran off, it was without a doubt the most amazing operation we had been a part of.

No rest for the wicked though, as we had to do it all over again with a second female. Julian and Pete identified another suitable giraffe and the dart went in. Luckily for us (because by now we all felt like we had run a marathon) the giraffe came down by herself without us having to rope her. Just as with the previous animal, measurements and DNA sample were taken, the collar snugly fitted and a lot of photos snapped. Once again the giraffe got to her feet within seconds, however, this time she turned to look at Julian and they appeared to check each other out for a couple of seconds before she ran off into the distance.

We had collared two giraffe and it wasn't even lunchtime! No one was hurt in the making of it all, well, except for Julian who managed to get a good kick in the shin by the giraffe when he was measuring the hooves, but nothing he couldn't handle. Tough guy he is!

A total different procedure to what we zoo people used to when anaesthetising a giraffe, and we learned so many new great skills to take home for future giraffe procedures.

The next day we went on a road trip to black rhino country where we continued to take photo IDs of any giraffe we encountered as well as collecting DNA samples using remote biopsy dart system. Unfortunately, no rhino showed up, but we came across a lot of fresh spoor (hoof prints) in the sand. It was just cool to know that we were in close range of the amazing desert rhino. To make up for this, we came across two bull elephant on the



way back to camp. A very impressive sight as they were tussling for dominance until eventually one wandered off down the river.

We finally broke camp and moved north to the Hoarusib River in the Purros Conservancy where we made home for the next couple of days. It was a little surreal camping in the middle of a desert with naughty jackal scrounging for food around camp, various herbivore droppings around your tents, elephant walking out and about, and trying to work out what the other strange noises were when waking up in the middle of the night!

During our time in the Hoarusib River we came across large herds of giraffe including an all-male group of twelve individuals. As you can imagine it was quite a challenge to get photos of both sides of each animal whilst trying to negotiate rocks, trees, soft sand and giraffe scattering in all directions. Even with some amazing 4x4 driving skills we still got stuck and needed to be towed out at one stage. We IDed both the large group of males and then a mixed group of eleven animals consisting of adults, sub-adults and a couple of very young calves (probably no more than 3 months old). We also collected more DNA samples which will allow genetic analysis to determine who is related to who in the area and which will then be linked to social network analysis.

Our job in the field was finished, and on our long drive back to Windhoek we were lucky to get a glimpse of the elusive desert lion. The field trip was a great success with two giraffe successfully collared, 12 DNA samples collected, and a total of 112 giraffe spotted throughout the Hoanib and Hoarusib River systems. However, our work wasn't finished – a few fun days in the office awaited us to write reports and enjoy the ever important data input to accurately find out what giraffe we had seen and if there were any new faces to be added to the long-term data set.

A big thank you to GCF's Julian and Steph for allowing us all the opportunity to embark on the field work and bringing zoos and field conservation together. With the incredible work of the GCF we can help unlock the mystery of giraffe, assisting greatly in their conservation and management. Without a doubt the experience has left us all fired up and eager to assist GCF in whatever way possible in their continued efforts to help conserve not only the desert-dwelling giraffe in Namibia, but all giraffe across Africa.

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

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