

# Northwest Namibia – Field Report



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The July fieldtrip was quite a special one. We headed north not just with our usual intention of surveying giraffe, but also with the specific aim of fitting giraffe in the Hoanib River area with new GPS satellite units. Last year we successfully collared five giraffe across the programme area and have monitored their movements since. This year we are planning to replace these GPS satellite units with the newly designed and tested 'ossi-units' while also adding another five units, bringing the total number to ten giraffe that will be tracked in the northwest. These new units are much smaller and solar powered. Using new technology, we expect them to transmit important GPS data for several years. As these new units do not involve any head-harnesses, they should also be more comfortable for the giraffe to wear and ultimately be safer for the animals.



For this part of our mission we were joined by GCF Director Dr Julian Fennessy, renowned wildlife vet Dr Pete Morkel and an experienced local Namibian capture team. The new units were generously funded through a conservation safari organised by Ultimate Safaris, as well as a Beauval Zoo Conservation Grant. During a quick training session, we all learned our roles in the collaring and data collection exercise before successfully equipping one male (*Long-Spot*) and two females (*Coffee-Girl* and *Present*) with the new ossi-units. *Present* had worn her collar for the past year already, so she probably was relieved to have it taken off and replaced with the new much smaller ossi-unit!



After a few intense days of giraffe capture, the majority of the team hit the long road back to Windhoek, while the four of us headed west into the wilds of the Skeleton Coast Park in Emma's research vehicle. We spent a magic day finding giraffe on the northern banks. While exploring the area we found a new-born calf walking across a lunar-like landscape in the shadow of his mother, a wonderful new addition to the Hoanib River population. We were also surprised to find *Coffee-Girl* right out amongst the rolling dunes. It looked like she was heading back to the riverbed after spending the night out in the desert – perhaps she was taking some time out after her brief capture the evening before!



From the Hoanib River we headed north through the mountains towards Okongwe. On our way, we spotted a host of wildlife, from an industrious little mole rat to oryx, springbok and zebra fat on the recent flush of grass. We also added sightings of leopard and rhino

spoor to an already impressive array of tracks including hyena and jackal. We were also lucky enough to catch glimpses of scorpions, a honey badger and a puff-adder! None of these sightings however compared to the up close and personal encounters we had on our first night at the Purros community campsite in the Hoarusib River.

After a great day ID-ing the many giraffe herds in the lower Gomatum River, we were all asleep early in our tents under the broad branches of an Acacia. It was not to be a restful night, however. At some point in the small hours of the morning we were awoken by the low unmistakable rumble of approaching elephant. Lying still in our sleeping bags we strained our ears and soon enough could hear the heavy crunching steps of approaching pachyderms.

Hearts beating against our ribcages we listened as the elephant ripped branches down all around our tents, accompanying their destruction with all the sounds of a good digestive system! With her tent flaps open, Emma was able to watch as the elephant passed back and forth only a metre away, their



great looming bulk blocking out the bright stars. They spent over an hour carefully stepping around our tents to reach the tastiest branches before disappearing rumbling softly into the night.

The next day we headed out hoping to spot our night time visitors in daylight and were not disappointed. We counted a total of twelve elephant in the Hoarusib River, including a tiny calf. Between all the elephant excitement we also spotted many giraffe herds, adding



substantially to our evening work ID-ing individuals around the campfire.

Finally heading back towards civilisation, we camped a night on the beautiful sweeping Giribis Plains. We finished ID-ing the giraffe we had spotted earlier in the day and spent some time going through all our data to make sure that everything was ready for the data entry back in the office in Windhoek. We slept to the sound of zebra calling to each other across the plains. A fantastic ending to an amazing adventure that we will certainly never forget!



In total, we successfully identified 153 giraffe, and recorded 37 herd compositions along with collecting phenology data on giraffe browse species as well as equipping three adult giraffe with GPS satellite units – all in a good weeks work!



