

Northwest Namibia – Field Report

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This month eight people banded together for an adventure into arid and beautiful northwest Namibia. Researcher Emma Hart was joined by wildlife vet Dr. Pete Morkel, researchers Maddie Castles (University of Queensland), Barry McGovern (University of Pretoria) and Stefanie Urban (Namibian University of Science and Technology), and research assistants Anabel Kühn (Rio Safari Ranch, Spain), Andrea Capobianco Dondona and Carsten Frank.



The adventure began at Palmwag Lodge, a campsite deep in the rocky desolate terrain of Damaraland, where the team assembled. On the long drive from Windhoek we had already been lucky enough to spot many baboons and warthogs hanging out by the side of the road. The highlight of our drive however was to see our first wild giraffe silhouetted by the setting sun just after the mighty Grootberg Pass.

The drive between Kamanjab and Palmwag took us through mountainous areas speckled with bright green splashes of mopane trees, inhabited by the mopane worm – a popular delicacy for many indigenous southern Africans. We arrived at the Palmwag campsite just before the sun set to meet up with our other team members and to set up camp. That night we thoroughly enjoyed the first of the many delicious meals we had on our journey.

The next day we gathered all our belongings and just as we left Palmwag to head in the direction of Sesfontein, we spotted several elephants – all visibly enjoying the delicious vegetation in the riverbed. What an awe-inspiring view, especially for those of us who had never seen wild elephants in their natural environment before.

Our journey continued further north to the Hoanib River, where we camped for the three following nights. We spotted many so-called fairy circles – mysterious circular bare spots speckling the Namib Desert on a stretch from northern South Africa to southern Angola – among the yellow grasslands along the way.

We unpacked the vehicles in the sizzling heat of another beautiful afternoon in northwest Namibia and prepared ourselves for the biggest adventure of this trip: capturing one of the five collared giraffe in order to remove her tracking collar. The collared giraffe was in good condition and seemed to do well, however her collar appeared to be rubbing on her jaw and the GCF team had decided to remove it in order to avoid any discomfort to the giraffe.

Before catching the real giraffe, we needed some practice. The procedure for giraffe capture is that the giraffe is darted with an immobilising drug, then once the immobiliser kicks in the team ropes the giraffe and brings her to the ground. Once on the ground the team sits on her neck to hold her down while the antidote is injected immediately and the collar is removed.

We practiced this procedure several times on a fake giraffe – played very aptly by Dr Morkel – and after having a couple of good laughs in between, we called it a day. It was after these practice runs that we realised the real-life situation would not be as easy as it sounded! We went back to camp in the late afternoon and set up our tents next to a cliff face, tinged orange and red in the sunlight, just outside the Hoanib River. That night the supermoon (the closest moon since 1948) surprised us as it emerged slowly over the cliffs on the other side of the river.

The next day we woke up in anticipation of the adventurous day and an once-in-a-lifetime event ahead of us. After a quick breakfast and coffee to wake up our senses, we drove out for another practice run and then searched for the collared giraffe, based on the latest GPS coordinates. After a short search, we found the collared female feeding on the near-by tree branches along the river bank. After Dr Morkel was happy that he could dart the giraffe safely, he fired his shot. We followed the giraffe slowly until the immobiliser kicked in and the giraffe started to run. This was the point when the adrenaline kicked in and our senses were on high alert. Emma drove as fast as she could to get ahead of the giraffe, while we were crouched on the back of the bakkie, holding on to each other for support.

The bakkie stopped abruptly and we all jumped off. From then on, everything was a blur of dust and the sound of our footsteps as we ran across the sand towards the tallest mammal in the world. Barry and Carsten expertly managed to get the rope across the giraffe's chest, ran with her and finally brought her to the ground, while the rest of us scrambled and stumbled after them. As she fell down two of us jumped on the giraffe's neck, making sure to avoid the dart which had carried the immobilizer.

The feeling of sitting on this beautiful, charismatic and truly African mammal in the middle of the oldest desert in the world was indescribable and very humbling. After immediately injecting the antidote, Dr Morkel took off the collar before we released the giraffe again safely – helping her up with one last big push. She ran off swiftly to join her buddies further along. This was the absolute highlight of the trip! In the afternoon we jumped into a man-made waterhole to cool off after the day's work – another memorable moment.

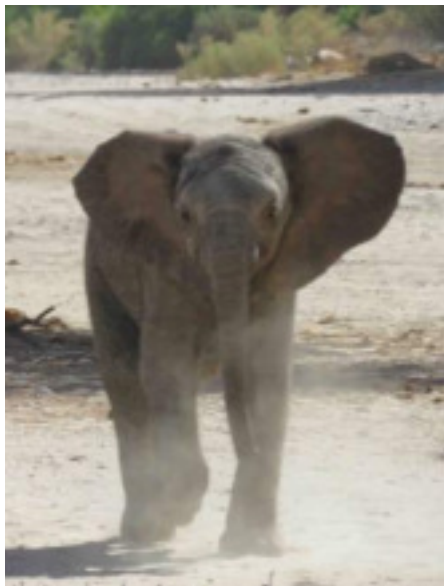


Over the next few days we worked hard on the other main purpose of the trip – to find giraffe herds in the area and to identify each individual from photographs taken on previous field trips. The key is to take a photo of either side of the giraffe's body, find a memorable and easily recognisable spot, and then page through the books of female and male giraffe until the same individual has been found. If the giraffe is not in the book, clear photographs must be taken of the right and left side of the body.

The photo numbers and further information, such as the giraffe ID and name (if already identified on previous field trips), GPS coordinates, herd number and sex, are then meticulously recorded on a field



sheet. This process involved a lot of driving and Emma proved her off-road driving skills as she navigated the bakkie between and around the giraffe in between the vegetation and rocky terrain to find giraffe herds and to get the perfect angle for a photo.

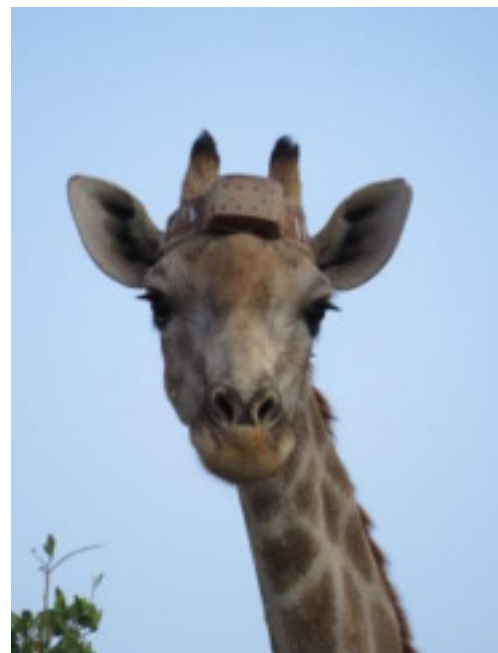


Along our way we spotted graceful oryx and springbok, and most notably several elephant herds with young calves. We kept a safe distance from the elephants as they walked past us through the riverbed, browsing on the vegetation as they went. Once, our good intentions of not getting too close to the elephants were defied by a naughty and curious elephant calf that walked towards our parked cars with its trunk bobbing around wildly and ears spread out. Luckily it lost some of its bravado along the way and came to a standstill a few metres away, daring us to come closer. I must admit that my heart skipped a beat there – one should never underestimate wildlife, especially elephants that are in company of young ones.

One afternoon our research trip took us into Skeleton Coast National Park where some of the giraffe herds spend their time browsing on the river banks before the dune fields begin. The park is well-known for its famous shipwrecks and its unforgiving and barren environment. The San and the Portuguese called it “The Land God Created in Anger” and “The Gates of Hell” respectively – very suitable names for this seemingly inhospitable environment. Nevertheless, the park hosts a great variety of animal species and the wide open spaces are unforgettable.

After a few evenings spent around the camp fire under the starry Namibian sky with good company and delicious meals cooked in potjie pots (three-legged cast-iron pots that are used for cooking over an open fire) it was time to say goodbye to the Hoanib River and to move north to the Hoarusib River. We still had to locate and check on the four other collared giraffe to ensure that their collars were still fitting well. With luck on our side we found our two collared giraffe in the Hoanib River quite early on and the two in the Hoarusib without too much difficulty. We can happily report that they are all doing well.

The Hoarusib River is equally as beautiful as the Hoanib River and Emma, who knows a lot of interesting lookout spots in her study area, took us to different places each evening for sundowners. We enjoyed the breathtaking views of the setting sun and the changing colours of the landscape as day turned to night. The evenings were spent cooking delicious meals on the open fire, cleaning and maintaining camp equipment and identifying giraffe we had spotted during the day.



On one afternoon, we saw children from the Himba tribe on their way to the river to collect water. We gave them an ingenious waterbag that had been generously donated by Columbus Zoo. The bag



will make their future water collection trips much easier as it can be carried like a backpack and has a water dispensing nozzle at the bottom.

The last night in Purros, as we were sitting around the fire, a White Lady spider (as large as a hand) came for a visit. Though we found her quite pretty, we decided to temporarily put a food bowl over her so we could concentrate on our research!

On Tuesday, we left Purros to start our return trip to Windhoek with one more night spent in the Hoada community campsite. This was another beautiful camp in between large boulders. Several people from the near-by settlement treated us to a choir performance singing some beautiful songs in the indigenous Damara language. We joined in on their dance at the end – this was sadly the end of our unforgettable journey.

Back in the office we entered the data collected from our field trip into the GCF database. This data will aid in the long-term research of giraffe in terms of their behaviour, social structure and movement patterns, which is key to better understanding how to conserve these charismatic mammals for future generations.

Please stay tuned for the next update from north west Namibia and for more information visit <http://giraffeconservation.org> or contact: info@giraffeconservation.org

Thank you to the Ministry of Environment & Tourism (MET), local conservancies, private donors as well as the following for supporting GCF's giraffe conservation programme in northwest Namibia:



