

Operation Twiga Field Report



Murchison Falls National Park, Uganda, January 2016

Introduction

In the last 20 years, giraffe populations have declined by an estimated 40% from over 140,000 in the late 1990s down to approx. 85,000 today. The Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF) is working hard to arrest this silent decline and at the same time draw attention to it. As one means to reach a wider audience GCF launched World Giraffe Day – 21 June in 2014 to raise awareness and funds for the conservation of giraffe populations in their natural habitat. For the second World Giraffe Day – 21 June held in 2015, GCF launched a targeted fundraising campaign for Operation Twiga – an initiative dedicated to ensure the long term survival of endangered Rothschild's giraffe in Uganda.

With an estimated 1,500 Rothschild's giraffe remaining in the wild, Murchison Falls National Park (MFNP) in north west Uganda, is home to approx. 1,250 of these and therefore home to almost 85% of the global wild population and 95% of the population considered viable for their ongoing IUCN RedList Assessment.

GCF is working closely with the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) to secure a sustainable future for Rothschild's giraffe in the wild. Currently listed as 'Endangered' on the IUCN RedList, Rothschild's giraffe populations are at risk of further decline. Their main threats are human disturbance, particularly habitat loss, habitat destruction and fragmentation, as well as poaching. The latter is a particular threat in MFNP in the form of snaring. While giraffe are not a target species, opportunistic snaring is a real threat and causes injuries in giraffe that can at worst be fatal. The high-risk scenario is exacerbated by increasing mining pressure as oil has been discovered in MFNP and exploration is imminent.

Through Operation Twiga support, in mid-January 2016 UWA in collaboration with GCF and Uganda Wildlife Education Centre (UWEC) and other partners, set out to translocate giraffe from the northern part of MFNP to the southern bank of the River Nile in an effort to increase the range of Rothschild's giraffe in Uganda and establish a new and distinct subpopulation.

Operation Twiga 2016

After a successful fundraising effort, Operation Twiga finally came to life in January 2016. GCF was not only able to donate a specialized translocation truck and monitoring equipment such as GPS satellite collars, binoculars, cameras, GPS, etc. to UWA, but also supported the rather complex operation by providing technical expertise and extra man/woman power.



The Ugandan team, which was made up of staff from UWA, UWEC, Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries, Makerere University, and Gorilla Doctors, was complimented by GCF's delegation, which included GCF staff, two additional veterinarians (a game capture expert from Namibia and an animal care expert from Cheyenne Mountain Zoo), an MSc student from Michigan State University and representatives of Leiden Conservation Foundation.



The event was flagged off at UWA's headquarters in Kampala, where the Executive Director of GCF Dr. Julian Fennessy officially handed over the translocation truck to UWA, while UWEC presented the giraffe transportation cart.

Over a period of two weeks, a total of 23 giraffe were individually captured in the northern part of MFNP.



Twenty giraffe were transported to a boma (enclosure) located at the Tangi Gate/Ranger Post, where they were monitored by UWA rangers and UWEC staff, before the translocation exercise to the southern bank of the Nile River to form a new distinct population. Three giraffe were released after capture as the responsible veterinarians decided it was in the best interest of their safety and health.

Eighteen giraffe (13 female and 5 male) were translocated by truck in three batches of six to the southern part of MFNP. During this journey the giraffe crossed the River Nile on a pontoon ferry to reach their release site. Five of the female giraffe were equipped with GPS satellite collars, allowing for regular monitoring of their movements remotely and in the field.

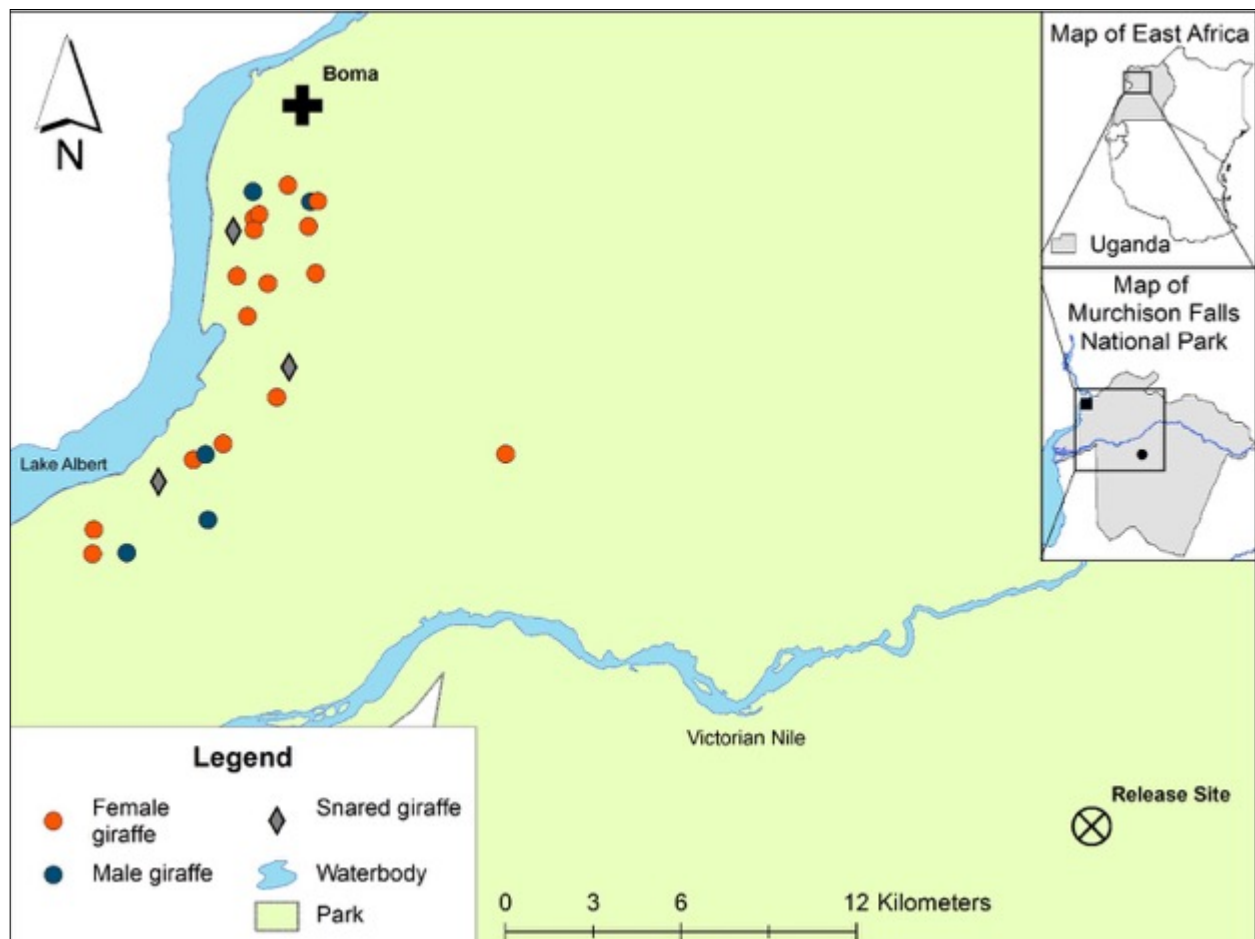
Two female giraffe were relocated to UWEC in Entebbe in accordance with an agreement by the Ugandan government.

In concurrence with the translocation, GCF surveyed for snare injuries in giraffe, a wildlife conservation concern in the region. Several giraffe with old snare wounds were observed in the Park as well as a carcass with a snare on its hind leg.



Timeline of Operation Twiga 2016:

Date	Event
15 Jan 2016	Meeting and press briefing with acting Executive Directive of UWA – Nightingale Mirembe Ssesonga (Acting Executive Director of UWA), Dr. Julian Fennessy (Executive Director of GCF), James Musinguzi (Executive Director of UWEC) at UWA headquarters in Kampala. Official flagging off Operation Twiga at UWA headquarters: handing over of translocation TATA truck to UWA donated by GCF and relocation cart donated by UWEC.
16 Jan 2016	Inspection of boma and preparation of capture equipment.
17 Jan 2016	Briefing and simulation of capture and loading of giraffe, led by Dr. Patrick Atimnedi, Dr. Robert Ahuro, Dr. Margaret Driciru, Dr. Eric Enyel and Dr. Peter Morkel (GCF associate); Assigning of roles for participants.
18 Jan 2016	Capture of three giraffe and transfer of two into the boma for habituation. One giraffe was released for health concerns after falling during the loading process.
19 Jan 2016	Capture and transfer of three giraffe into the boma; two of these were fitted with GPS satellite collars.
20 Jan 2016	Capture of four giraffe and transfer of three into the boma. One giraffe was released after discovering the animal was lactating and therefore nursing a calf. The animal was released to rejoin her calf. One giraffe was fitted with a GPS satellite collar.
21 Jan 2016	Capture and transfer of three giraffe into the boma.
22 Jan 2016	Capture and transfer of one giraffe into the boma in the morning. In the afternoon, the team inspected the suitability of the release site and made preparations for the translocation.
23 Jan 2016	Translocation of six giraffe to release site in the southern bank of MFNP. One giraffe was severely injured by kicks of other giraffe during the translocation process and succumbed to its injuries the following night.
24 Jan 2016	Repair and maintenance of translocation truck and cart.
25 Jan 2016	Translocation of six giraffe to the release site in the southern bank of the MFNP.
26 Jan 2016	Capture and transfer of three giraffe into the boma; one giraffe was fitted with a GPS satellite collar.
27 Jan 2016	Capture and transfer two giraffe into the boma.
28 Jan 2016	Capture and transfer of two giraffe into the boma but released one into the wild after the animal fell during the off-loading process.
29 Jan 2016	Capture and transfer of two giraffe into the boma.
30 Jan 2016	Repair and maintenance of translocation truck and cart.
31 Jan 2016	Rest day.
01 Feb 2016	Translocation of six giraffe to the release site in the southern bank of the MFNP. Translocation of two giraffe to UWEC in Entebbe.



Map showing locations where giraffe were captured, monitored (boma) and finally released.

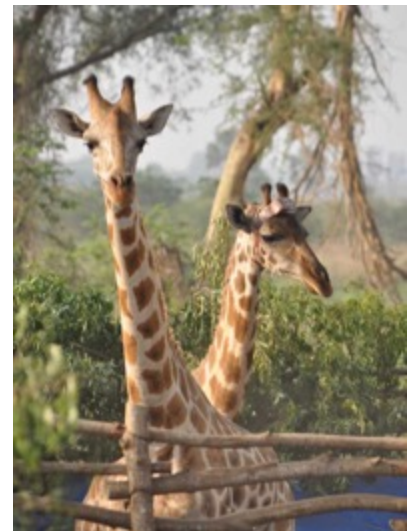
Conclusion

Operation Twiga was a significant accomplishment for the conservation efforts of the endangered Rothschild's giraffe. We successfully translocated 18 giraffe from the northern bank of the Park to the southern bank, and an additional two giraffe to UWEC in Entebbe. The translocation of the animals will boost the tourism income and increase the biodiversity in MFNP's southern sector. Operation Twiga also raised awareness to the plight and conservation issues of Rothschild's giraffe in Uganda. GCF in collaboration with UWA also capitalized on Operation Twiga to train local students from Makerere University and Michigan State University, rangers and vets from various parks in Uganda in order to build capacity in the region.

Working with partners and sharing expertise was an important part of this complex operation: GCF partnered with two veterinarians who supported Operation Twiga hands-on: Namibian veterinarian Dr Peter Morkel brought vast experience (spanning decades) in large game capture and management. He trained participants in the various roping, loading and translocation techniques for a large animal such as a giraffe. Dr Liza Dadone, a veterinary by training and the Director of Animal Health and Conservation at Cheyenne Mountain Zoo gathered clinical diagnostic information (blood gas, electrolytes, chemistry and

acid-base) of the captured giraffe in real-time using a portable VetScan I-Stat Analyzer that was lent to the project by Abaxis. The data from the I-Stat was used to closely monitor all animals during the capture. Additional hands-on experience from GCF’s Dr Fennesy helped with the capture of the giraffe and fitting of the GPS satellite collars.

With the help of the GPS satellite collars on five of the 17 giraffe on the south side of the Park, the new giraffe population can be effectively monitored and protected. After the success of Operation Twiga, we have already started discussing Operation Twiga II – a future translocation of additional Rothschild’s giraffe to the southern side of MFNP to further boost the population. GCF is committed to supporting conservation efforts and long-term monitoring initiatives that seek to understand the ecology of giraffe in MFNP. Additionally, GCF will continue to support UWA’s efforts to curb poaching in MFNP and secure the long-term future of Rothschild’s giraffe in Uganda – all of this will be captured in more detail in the first National Strategy of Giraffe in Uganda, which GCF is also supporting.



Operation Twiga Budget	Amount [USD]
Translocation Truck (donated to UWA)	37.500
GPS satellite collars incl. download time	13.500
Monitoring equipment (donated to UWA)	10.000
Veterinarian support[#]	6.000
GCF technical support and field expenses of GCF support team (incl. East African student)*	28.000
TOTAL	95.000

[#] Dr Dadone’s travel was directly supported by Ceyenne Mountain Zoo and is not included in this budget.

* Incl. 3 months staff salaries funded specifically by Leiden Conservation Foundation

The funding target of USD100.000 for Operation Twiga through GCF’s World Giraffe Day – 21 June 2015 campaign was almost reached. All remaining funds will be used for post-translocation monitoring.

Thank you to all donors

Operation Twiga would not have been possible without all our generous donors. The support we received for World Giraffe Day – 21 June 2015 was amazing. We would like to use this opportunity to thank all of our donors and in particular Leiden Conservation Foundation, Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, Bioparc Valencia, Blair Drummond Safari and Adventure Park, Cleveland Zoological Society, Dallas Zoo AAZK, Dickerson Park Zoo, Duisburg Zoo, Elmwood Zoo, Erlebniszoos Hannover, Friends of Lyon Zoo, Gaia Zoo, Houston Zoo, Iowa AAZK, Knoxville Zoological Gardens, Longneck supporters, Naples Zoo, New England Zoo, Niabi Zoo, Noah’s Ark Zoo Farm, Oakland Zoo, Odense Zoo, Parco Zoo Falconara, Racine Zoo, Roosevelt Park Zoo, Taronga Zoo Keepers, Topeka AAZK, Wildlife Safari Game Park, Woburn Safari Park, Yorkshire Wildlife Park, Zoo Schwerin, and many individuals, schools and businesses around the world.



