

# Northwest Namibia – Field Report



November 2018

*Katie Ahl and Nick Pottratz.*

After several long flights from the US, we both arrived in Windhoek, Namibia’s capital to start our adventure of a lifetime with the Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF). We spent the first couple of days recovering from jetlag, helping with last minute supply shopping and packing KT, our trusty vehicle for the exciting journey ahead.

We set out early on Tuesday morning – this trip would see us to the far North to survey for giraffe, and our first destination was a little campsite just out of Opuwo, in Namibia’s north western corner. The drive was long, taking all day to reach the campsite, but was a good opportunity to get to know each other and discuss all things giraffe. The next day was another early start as we began to search for giraffe in the survey area. We found our first giraffe high on a mountain ridge quite a distance from the road. We managed to get a couple of grainy photographs, but they were good enough to be able to identify her from the ID books.



We had planned to survey the Nadas River, just north of Orupembe, then camp nearby for the night, however, as we had made good time and found no giraffe in the Nadas, we decided to head further north to the Ondusengo River, only 100km or so South of the Kunene River, Namibia’s border with Angola. On the drive up, we were thrilled to see a Namaqua chameleon basking on a rock on the side of the road. It was white when we first spotted it, but quickly changed to a dark brown when we got close enough to take photos – a sure sign it wasn’t too pleased to see us!



The following day we surveyed along the dry, ephemeral river and were excited to find four giraffe, including a new born calf. With plenty of food around and little other competition, or predators, we hope the calf will thrive and eventually add offspring of its own to the desert-dwelling giraffe population.

That night we camped at Marble Camp, just outside Orupembe, where we all enjoyed a hot shower and 'adopted' one of the stray dogs who stayed outside our tents for the night.

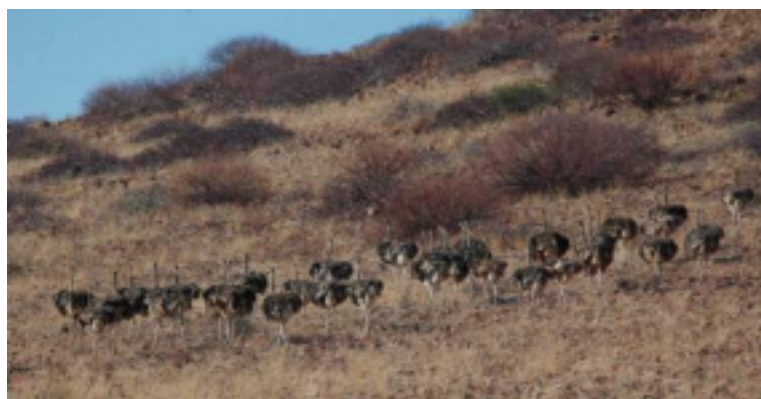


After breaking camp again, the next morning (we became quite efficient at this stage!), we headed to survey for giraffe in the Khumib River. Here we started to see more pairs and trios and our first herd of eight giraffe. It was impressive to see the spotting skills of the GCF team and amazing to see how well camouflaged the giraffe are in the desert environment, even at close range. Our survey took us down the Khumib River into the Skeleton Coast Park, where we found three giraffe in amongst the sparse windswept trees and sand dunes. We continued our long trek south to the Hoarusib River where we set up camp at the Puros community campsite, our home for the next three nights. On arrival at the

campsite we were greeted by two bull elephant who had been wreaking havoc on the water pipes at one of the neighbouring campsites. The same elephant were to visit us the following night, but they were so quiet, none of us realised until we saw their tracks the next morning!

Heading up-river in the morning, we had our first challenge of surveying large herds of 20+ giraffe, many of which were so pale we were hard pushed to identify them from the ID books. The population here seems to be thriving with many juveniles and subadults in the herds. The riverbed was much greener than the rivers we had just come from but still very dry and dusty, with trees and bushes quickly disappearing away from the bank. We survey about 50 different individuals over two days and saw several herds together on both days. Along the way we collected several DNA samples and logged them for processing. In true African safari style, we concluded our work in the Hoarusib River with a well-earned sundowner and a beautiful sunset.

After one last shower we took off to Okongwe, a mountainous area half way between the Hoarusib and Hoanib Rivers. Along the way we came across the remains of a bull giraffe that had died two months previously. The body was very dry and it was interesting to see how quickly it had degraded in the desert heat. High up on a plain we encountered a large family flock of almost 50 ostrich. Most were almost full grown and we wondered when they would "leave home". Not only did we see ostrich, but also oryx, springbok and we had our first glimpse of Hartmann's mountain zebra. It was impressive to see so much wildlife thriving in these harsh conditions.



We made camp but skipped the tents, opting instead to sleep under the stars. We sat up two go-pros by the waterhole and captured some great night lapse of the stars and plenty of wildlife coming for a late-night drink. We had the faint hope to see a rhino at this location but had to make do with seeing lots of rhino tracks and a lone male Kudu instead who was getting stuck into a euphorbia plant. The giraffe herds in this



area were fewer and farther apart. We did however manage to find Oracle who is the last giraffe with the old-style head harness GPS unit. We continued to have success with collecting DNA samples and enjoyed the amazing scenery everywhere.

Heading down to the Hoanib River, we were surprised to find the remnants of water in the riverbed. Much of the river was wet and muddy and required us to walk a few sections to make sure it was safe to drive across. The river had flowed only a couple of days before our arrival and rumour had it that three vehicles were caught in the waters and washed down river. All vehicles had to be written off, but thankfully, everyone was safe. It was a good reminder of the dangers of these surveys and the high level of driving skill and nerve required to navigate the area.

Making our way to the second to last camp, we stopped at Natural Selection's Hoanib Valley Camp, where GCF is the conservation partner. We met up with the guides to pick up the data they had collected over the last few weeks and to update the ID books for the guests. One of the goals of the lodge is to increase awareness for giraffe conservation and raise much needed funding. It was great



to see the information and ID books at camp sparking their guests' interest in giraffe.

Our campsite for the next few nights was in a beautiful, secluded canyon – we felt like bandits camping in the old wild west! Once night our go-pros, set up to capture the camp at night, recorded an incredible lightning storm – what a bonus!

We had heard of the carcass of another dead giraffe in the area, so we set out to locate it to collect a DNA sample and possibly ID the animal. The guides made it sound easy to find (just around the corner from the big rock!) but it took us quite a while and a couple of trips up and down the river find it. Unfortunately, we didn't see many giraffe in the Hoanib – they might have moved out of the area due to the recent flooding of the river.



Our last campstop out in the field was near Elephant Song Campsite. The days had gotten significantly warmer but our spirits remained high as we searched for any signs of giraffe in the area. We spent a long last survey day in the vehicle looking everywhere – without finding a single giraffe. It is all good data but we definitely missed seeing our tall friends. We spent a fun last evening around the campfire and chatted about some of the experiences we had over the last couple of weeks. Nick won the



flossing contest, Katie got the creativity prize for personalised mad libs, and Nat and Emma were the best teachers and hosts tolerant of all our hijinks. The ride back to Windhoek was long, but we did see a bunch of giraffe along the way which brought a smile to everyone's face. Once we were back in Windhoek everyone separated to wash away the layers of dirt that had built up over the past couple of days. This was an amazing trip and one that we will remember for many years to come. We couldn't have asked for better guides and parted ways as great friends hoping to meet again someday – maybe for another trip together. We are both so honoured to be a part of the GCF conservation team and are looking forward to taking our newly gained knowledge and inspiration back to our zoos to help increase conservation awareness at home.

