

## Northwest Namibia – Field Report

November 2018



*Megan Cline and Christine Dear.*

Our exciting journey with the Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF) began with a couple of long plane trips from the US into Windhoek, Namibia. We rested up for the big adventure upon arrival, then met the following morning to finish our shopping and pack up KT, our home/vehicle for the next two weeks. Once our food was finalised and KT ready to roll, we embarked on what was sure to be a wild trip!



The first day of travel was light, seeing us six hours north through some lovely country side. We really enjoyed getting to know one another as well as information about the area itself; Emma is so knowledgeable and excited to share everything to do with the surrounding landscape, animals and people. It was only a few minutes out of town that we spotted some of our first glimpses of wildlife just off the side of the road – baboon, springbok, guinea fowl, ostrich and warthogs just to name a few! Shortly after we said goodbye to paved roads, we came upon our first campsite at Hoada. Once Emma expertly taught us how to make and break camp, we spoiled ourselves by taking a dip in the campsite’s rock swimming pool!

Early the next morning, we embarked on the second leg of our drive towards the Hoarusib River. Shortly after leaving Hoada, we spotted our first giraffe – a group of three not far from the road! We stopped to take lots of photos and do a happy dance before continuing up the road to Sesfontein, our last spot to fuel up KT. We were officially in the survey area then, where we could start



documenting giraffe and it wasn't long afterwards that we sighted our first official study participant hiding under a tree. We spotted eight giraffe in total before making camp in Puros, our beautiful home with lots of bird activity for the next three nights. Scorpions can also be found in this area, and Emma had brought along a black light to spot them as a fun activity – were able to find several small ones hiding in the trees and seeing them light up was amazing.

Our first full day of surveying was upon us and as we set out down the Hoarusib River spotting our first group of giraffe for the day fairly early on. Emma was a very patient teacher, demonstrating how best to photograph, GPS, and identify them, keeping her cool with us newbies even when we had to do a couple of repeat photographs after frustratingly losing track of an individual. We also managed to successfully collect skin biopsy samples from a couple of animals that still needed logging. The second and final day in the Hoarusib riverbed began with an elephant sighting, before we came upon our first challenging group of 20 plus giraffe. It was exhilarating to put our new-found skills to the test as we tried to figure them all out. As we continued driving through the dry riverbed, we saw lots of wildlife thriving and it amazed us how well adapted they all are given the lack of water in the environment. Towards the end of the day we spotted the large herd of giraffe again making their way up onto the gravel plains. What a stunning backdrop to just sit and watch them for a while.



After a good night's sleep, we set off towards the Khumib River further north. Along the beautiful drive, the landscape changed drastically, and we encountered one of the mysterious "lone stone men" artworks placed atop some rocks by the road. We also had our first flat tire due to the rougher than usual road, but it was quickly changed and we were back on our way. In the Khumib River we sighted several smaller groups of giraffe and successfully collected another skin dart biopsy. Near the end of the day we spotted a larger group of about ten giraffe and as we moved closer to document them, they all clustered around one small tree – heads and hind ends everywhere, which



gave us a good laugh! We made a short trip back to our Puros camp and relaxed with a well-earned “sundowner” after the long day.



Having successfully scoured the Hoarusib and Khumib Rivers, we left for new adventures the following morning. We made a pit stop for more diesel and to get our flat tire repaired at the local village of Puros. It was a very special treat to meet some of the people who live in the area before heading on to our next camp site in the remote Okongwe. All along the road, we were very excited to see evidence of rhino including tracks and scrapings throughout the region. We made camp that afternoon and decided to forego our tents and set up sleeping bags under the stars, which provided an incredible view. With a few hours of light left, we went back out for the afternoon to look for more giraffe, but as we came upon fresh tracks of rhino we decided to rather follow them ... our search was rewarded when found a rhino having an afternoon nap under a tree in a small valley.

The next day gave us a glimpse into the infamous Hoanib River and it was unlike anything we had seen before. There are lots of large Ana trees spread out in and along the river providing areas of shade and seed pods that we saw giraffe, and many other animal residents, enjoy. In the late afternoon, we drove to a man-made waterhole for a sundowner and were excited to find a small group of four giraffe that eventually drank water right in front of us – joining us for a sundowner, so to speak. That night, we fell asleep to noises of hooves walking over rocks, jackals digging around and unforgettable echoes of lion calls across the hills. It was quite a thrill the next morning to find fresh lion tracks down the road from our campsite!

We continued monitoring the nearby area the following day, finding quite a few giraffe. Driving up a mountainside, we were very lucky to spot a caracal hiding under a bush not far off the road. After a relatively short loop around the area, we climbed up a small cliff to overlook the surrounding area and get a good view of the fairy circles. What an astounding view! During our waterhole sundowner that evening, we noticed several jackals that appeared to feed on something. After closer



inspection, we realised it was the remains of a juvenile giraffe that had been killed by lion. While it was not possible to ID the animal, we collected a DNA sample for the study.

The next morning, we broke camp and drove down to the Hoanib River where we set up camp in a canyon with incredible views. The nearby Natural Selection Hoanib Valley Camp is the world's first giraffe camp, made possible through a partnership between GCF, NS and the local communities. We had the opportunity to stop in and learn about the incredible work they are doing there. It was awesome to see how they encourage their guests to participate in the giraffe study by collecting photos and GPS coordinates of the giraffe they encounter while on safari. The guides also help with the study and provide lots of information about giraffe and the silent extinction they are facing. We felt so warmly welcomed by their amazing staff! The following morning, we made our way down the Mudorib River, a tributary of the Hoanib River. We had a "slow" day as far as giraffe go, but that being said, we still saw over ten! Instead we stopped to watch a baboon family for a while – the youngsters were having a blast playing in the trees. We ended the night by IDing some of the giraffe we had seen and a delicious dinner cooked over the fire.

For our last full day of surveying, we went drove down the Hoanib River all the way into the Skeleton Coast National Park. We saw lots of giraffe and several elephant, including a very young calf and a large bull sliding down a sand dune to join his companion. We also spotted "Coffee Girl", a giraffe that had previously had a run in with a pride of lion and lost the lower part of her tail. What an exciting last day in the field!

Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end and the next morning we broke camp to start the long drive back, waving goodbye to the giraffe we passed along the way. Since it was such a long drive back, we stopped and camped in Kamanjab before heading back to Windhoek the next morning. While the hot showers were nice, we definitely missed our giraffe friends! This trip was the most incredible trip either of us have ever been on and the memories and photos will last us both a lifetime. Emma was the best guide and leader we could have ever imagined. We cannot truly thank her and the rest of GCF enough for such a wonderful two weeks. We are so excited to take our experience back to our home zoos, trying to spread the knowledge we have gained of the amazing and important work GCF is doing to as many people as possible!

