

# Northwest Namibia – Field Report

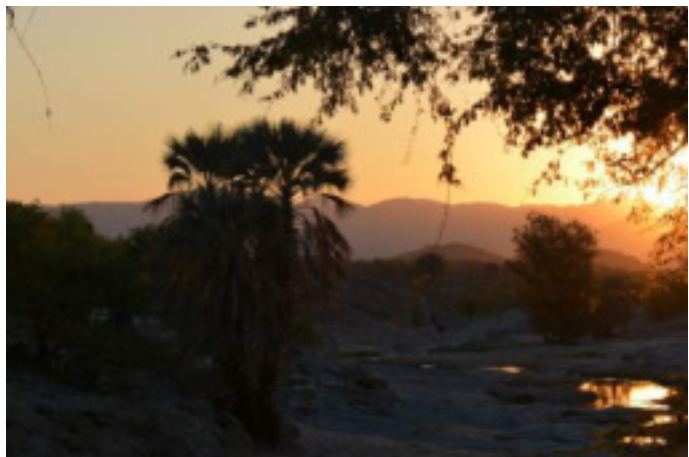
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*Becca Schneyer and Scarlett Stromer.*

After several long flights from the USA, we found each other on the last leg from Johannesburg to Windhoek, Namibia. After a short introduction and discussing our previous flights, we boarded the last plane to our destination. Once landed, we went through passport security, gathered our baggage, and found Emma waiting for us on the other side of the gate. Aside from the jetlag we were so excited to finally be in Africa. We hopped into Emma’s trusted truck ‘KT’ for the first time and drove forty minutes to the city, passing our first sightings of warthogs, guinea fowl, and two baboons. We arrived at our accommodation and rested up for the night. Waking up the next morning we explored the city and helped Emma with the final bit of shopping before packing the truck back at the brand new GCF office where we were honoured to meet Stephanie, Maria, and the team of the Khomas Environmental Education Programme (KEEP) who were just returning from a day in the field with elementary school students.

The next morning, waking up with a feeling of butterflies in our tummies, we embarked on our exciting adventure! We turned on the speaker and drove nine hours to our first campsite listening to Spotify playlists that couldn’t have been more perfect. Along the way we got to know one another, and Emma shared with us a lot of information she knew about the animals, landscape, and the people of Namibia. We were able to spot eight species of bird, and a few antelope species on our way to the first camp at Onganga. The campsite was beautiful! It was in the centre of an oasis, surrounded by palm trees, overlooking the Hoarusib River flowing into the sunset. We didn’t know this at the time, but that would be the first and last time we would see water in a river. We soaked in the beauty while it lasted.



After packing up camp in the morning, we drove for another four hours before reaching the survey area – how is that for a long commute to work?! Nearing the latter half of the day we spot our first giraffe! With this example Emma introduced us to the data collection process and also taught us how to sex a giraffe



from the ossicones. Male ossicones are bald on top while females normally has hair on top. This is because male giraffe use their ossicones when necking and wear off the hair. We spotted two adult males and one sub adult male. After arriving into camp, we set up our tents and looked through the ID catalogues to identify the three giraffe. Turns out that two of the giraffe we saw were new to the survey!



We celebrated our first giraffe sighting by each naming one. It took a few days to think of meaningful names, but we settled on 'Chadwick' and 'Elliot'.

On our first full day of surveying, we drove a long way through the Kunene Region. Not too many giraffe, which was perfect for allowing time for Emma to show us how we needed to line up our photos and how to record on the data sheet. We crossed over some dunes to

reach the dry riverbed of the Nadas River where we found a female giraffe. Despite her being rather nervous of our truck, we still managed to get some photos for identification. On our way back to camp we saw our first Lappet-faced vulture and some Ludwig bustards.

The next three nights were spent in the Hoarusib River. On the way there we continued down the Khumib River, passed our turn to go to the Hoarusib River because Emma was in search for a herd of giraffe she knew was there. Not long thereafter we saw a giraffe poking his head out of a tree. When we got closer, giraffe started walking out of the shrubs, 14 in total. We were amazed at how many there were. We immediately started data collection. It was our first true test in keeping track of which giraffe we had taken photos of and which ones we had not. It wasn't easy for us newbies, but Emma knew them pretty well, and was able to keep track. We were impressed. We camped at Purros Community Campsite for the next three nights, surrounded by camelthorn trees and huge salvadora bushes that the showers were built into. Most nights after dinner, Emma showed us the different southern hemisphere constellations, including the Milky Way. It was fun to learn about the night sky and how it differed from our Northern Hemisphere sky that we are so used to. We fell asleep to the sounds of jackals howling and an occasional elephant coming through the camp to feed on the trees.

Surveying giraffe along the Hoarusib River for the next few days was very exciting. Almost around every corner there were giraffe. We came across two females who sported ossi-units, GCF's new solar powered GPS satellite tracking units. We enjoyed learning about how the units have evolved throughout the years, and how the current units are deployed. We also came across a male giraffe named 'Goober', who has skin disease on his back leg. Emma had told us that he dragged his leg due to the severity of the disease, but when we saw him it looked as if he was getting better.

Each night Emma would take us to an unforgettable sundowner spot that overlooked the Hoarusib River. On the second night we passed four young female giraffe on our



way to a beautiful overlook. As the sun began to set, a bull elephant walked down the riverbed snacking on tree branches. It was an incredibly special evening with a gorgeous sunset and an elephant view!

Sadly, the day came to leave the Hoarusib River and continue our journey to Okangwe, which is located in the mountainous area between the Hoarusib and the Hoanib Rivers. This is black rhino country, so we were excited. Giraffe sightings were few and far between but the mountain zebra were everywhere. As we got closer to our camp, we spotted some signs of black rhino. Something we both did not expect seeing, but sure enough Becca spotted one in the bushes. We sat in amazement and enjoyed the moment thoroughly. Later after setting up camp we drove up the waterhole to view the sunset and all the birds that flock to the water. There we encountered some trackers from Save the Rhino Trust who told us that we had seen Tinky earlier, a female rhino. It was nice to have a name to the face now. That night was a full moon and the zebra were out and about, calling to one another, probably alarming each other that we were camping in their area. It sounded like they were right outside our tents. Definitely an experience we will never forget.



On the way to our last campsite we drove through picturesque sand dunes before reaching the Hoanib River. Immediately we saw a large herd of giraffe browsing along the riverbed. This herd included Cliff, the giraffe with a cleft palate, as well as Coffee Girl who has a short tail and scars due to a lion attack. Our next stop was for a family of elephant including two young calves. Continuing along the dry riverbed in search of giraffe we encountered a truck that was stuck in the sand. All of KT's attempts to pull the truck out failed, so we quickly drove off to the Natural Selection Lodge to get assistance. The lodge is associated with GCF, and their guides assist in data collection and guests are encouraged to help with identifying giraffe. It is a great way for the public to be educated on the conservation of giraffe in Africa. We spent



some time enjoying the comforts of the beautiful Hoanib Valley Camp before heading out to set up camp.

While in the Hoanib River we encountered a total of 31 giraffe and 23 elephant, as well as multiple white-backed vultures which are critically endangered, all in one day! It was the most successful day we had yet. At the lodge Emma got some insight information on recent female lion sightings and she surprised us with a visit for a very special sundowner. What a fantastic surprise! Seeing lion in the wild was truly breath-taking.





The next day was World Giraffe Day! We woke up early to check out the lion again. When we got there, we found the two cubs playing with a stick after feeding on a zebra throughout the night. We watched them for over an hour as their mothers kept watch on the riverbed.

We spent our last full day of surveying a long a small tributary of the Haonib River – the Mudorib River. We were fortunate enough to find a giraffe cow and a juvenile. It was a perfect opportunity to get a DNA sample of the

juvenile. That evening we had dinner with the guests at Hoanib Valley Camp. Emma gave a captivating talk about GCF and the work she does, which gave all of us lots to talk about over dinner. As one of the guests also celebrated his birthday, we were all treated to a special dance and song performance by the camp staff. The music was absolutely beautiful. What a wonderful way to celebrate World Giraffe Day!

Unfortunately, we had to start our long drive back to Windhoek the next morning. We stopped overnight in Kamanjab, a small town, where we visited a cultural Himba Village to immerse ourselves in a completely different culture. It was a great experience seeing how other cultures live and puts life into perspective. The next day was the last day of our adventurous trip into the desert of Namibia. We turned on the speaker, quietly took in the views as we had to come to terms with our trip coming to a close.



Playing car games, we called out the animals we spotted to create a ‘farm’ – e Emma won by a landslide as we approached Windhoek.

This experience was a trip of a lifetime for both of us. So many happy memories, entertaining stories, and new friends made along the way. We are both so grateful we were able to join this opportunity provided by GCF. Emma was the perfect guide in teaching us all there is to know about giraffe, local wildlife, flora, and cultures. We are both excited to bring back all the new knowledge we gained to our lives back home.



As Becca returns to Franklin Park Zoo in Boston and Scarlett to Humboldt State University in California, we both plan to present and spread awareness of giraffe conservation. The trip with the GCF was an unforgettable experience. It will always be held close to our hearts and fuel our future giraffe conservation efforts and we will dream of joining GCF again in the field one day in the future!

