

# Northwest Namibia – Field Report

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We recently had the pleasure of joining the Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF) on their monthly giraffe surveying trip to northwest Namibia. Our small team consisted of four people: the conservation researchers Emma and Katie, and volunteers Christiana from Lehigh Zoo, Pennsylvania, USA and Mareike, a giraffe enthusiast and aspiring author from Germany. We had an amazing experience to say the least! We learnt a lot about giraffe, their conservation and got to experience the full range of the work that GCF does in northwest Namibia.

On Tuesday, 12 November 2019 we started the long road trip north and set up our camp in Opuwo, the main town in the northwestern region of Kunene. The next day we continued our journey into the survey area and were treated to our first night of wild camping in the Ensengo River, which marked the most northerly point of our trip. The survey area is predominantly located south of the Ensengo River and includes the Khumib, Hoanib, and Hoarusib Rivers, all ephemeral rivers in the northwest Namib Desert.



During these conservation research trips, GCF researchers Katie and Emma collect data on giraffe and their distribution – and we were eager to assist. With each giraffe sighting, photos are taken from both sides of the animal. We then used ID books to determine if the individual giraffe was already known or new to the data set. It was interesting work to pick out a special spot of an individual giraffe for comparison with the ID photos – a little bit like a puzzle trying to identify which giraffe is which. We even spotted some new juveniles during the trip that could be added to the ID books. Additional data that is collected for each giraffe that is spotted includes time, date, the area where the giraffe is seen, GPS coordinates, herd size, photo numbers for later identification and once identified, the ID number of the giraffe. We also recorded whether the individual had an ossi-unit (a solar power GPS tracker specially designed for giraffe), as well as specific behaviour like mating, pregnant, or nursing. We observed several pregnant females which is great news for the future of the Angolan giraffe, and one that was nursing. An amazing sight! We were lucky enough to spot two giraffe ‘in the act’, namely *Coffee Bean* and *Kim*.

During our trip, we also collected DNA (tissue samples) from five giraffe using a biopsy gun, as well as a sample from a dead giraffe we found in the Hoarusib River – unfortunately it was not possible to identify it by its coat pattern.

We saw a wide variation in herd sizes: from lone giraffe to herds of eight giraffe up to as many as 20 individuals. Some herds included only males or females, but we also saw many juveniles (up to 1 year) and sub-adults (up to the age of 5 years) and we could recognise the fission-fusion system of giraffe herds in action.



We camped in several different camp sites during the trip, some of them were official community camp sites and other times we camped out in the bush with no facilities. A special camp was the Purros Community Campsite in the Hoarusib River with a nice shower and toilet below a big tree – a special treat after several days of bush camping. We were told that elephants sometimes walked through the camp at night but during our stay we had no elephant visitors. Each evening we cooked a delicious dinner on an open fire in beautiful surroundings and we saw incredible sunsets and sunrises. At the end of a busy day in the field we all pitched in and help make the fire, prepare dinner, and wash dishes.

Other than giraffe, we saw incredible sightings of many other animals such as a herd of elephant with a cute baby, many ostrich, springbok and oryx (Namibia's national animal), as well as lots of Hartmann's Mountain Zebra, which were always running away and it was astonishing to see how fast and easily they can run over



the hills. We spotted many different birds, vervet monkeys, baboons, a few kudu, and jackals. In addition to all the living animals we also spotted a couple of giraffe skulls and even a large elephant skull. We practiced identifying different animal tracks including giraffe, elephant, lion and rhino tracks. Whilst sadly we did not see a rhino on the trip, on our last day of wild camping we did find some lion tracks and heard from the staff at the Hoanib Valley Camp that this lion had killed two cows the day before, a reminder of the challenges faced by the local farmers who share their space with wildlife.

We also learnt about the local Himba and Herero people and saw many Himba in their unique dress and traditional villages. Himba villages have a large kraal for their important livestock, mostly cattle and goats, to protect them from predators such as lion. Himba women use many different plant products as cosmetics and perfume as water is scarce in this part of Namibia – bathing has never been part of the Himba way of life.





In addition to the abundance of wildlife and the diverse cultures, we also saw many different types of plants native to northwest Namibia. For example, *Euphorbia* is a big cactus-like plant in the milkweed family that contains toxins that are harmful to humans and most animals, but some animals like rhino and kudu can eat it without any negative effects. The *Welwitschia* is the oldest plant and is the national plant of Namibia; whilst they may not be the fastest growing plant in the Namib Desert, they can survive for over 2000 years, which is pretty impressive. We learnt about some plants that giraffe eat such as *Salvadora* (mustard bush), *Vachellia* spp, *Senegalia* spp and *Faidherbia albida* (Ana tree), which is sought after by giraffe and elephant as the reddish-brown pods are highly nutritious.

We also crossed large plains of so-called *fairy circles*: circles of bare ground surrounded grass. There are multiple theories about how they are formed; one is that geothermal gasses are emitted in the area that

prevent any growth; another theory is that *Euphorbia* used to grow in the centre of the circles and its toxins are still present in the ground, preventing plant growth; however all these are still theories and the exact cause is still a mystery and it might just be the breath of a dragon as believed by some local people.

During the trip we also encountered some challenges, and if you could see the terrain we travelled through you would understand: the northwest is one of the roughest and most remote parts of Namibia. With at least five tyre punctures throughout our journey and once getting stuck in the sand, we put this down to being part of the adventure and Emma and Katie did a great job handling everything like experienced professionals and had us back on the road again without much delay.

We learnt and experienced a lot on this trip, and one of the highlights was towards the end when we got the amazing opportunity to name two giraffe we had seen – looks out for the sub-adult male giraffe called “Milo” and the sub-adult female called “Lea”.

On our last day we stopped at Twyfelfontein, a UNESCO World Heritage site for one of the largest collections of rock engravings in world. It was really impressive to see these old pictures and learn about their ancient history. These engravings were carved by the San people over two thousand years ago. Giraffe were very important to the San and we saw more giraffe engravings than any other animal. Since giraffe are so tall, they viewed them as the bringers of rain by communicating with the clouds and their spots represented the raindrops. A carving of a





lion with a human hand at the end of its tail symbolises the shaman transforming into an animal. We learned from our guide that permanent water holes were symbolised as a circle with a dot in the middle while seasonal water holes were simple circles. These carvings were also used to teach men how to track and hunt animals. It was amazing to see them and think of their history.

Overall, these two weeks were amazing and a wonderful experience. It gave us the chance to learn so much about giraffe, northwest Namibia, the work done by GCF. We loved being part of GCF's vital work to secure a future for giraffe in Africa.

