

Northwest Namibia – Field Report

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After 40 hours of long but uneventful travel, we finally arrived in Namibia! Katie Ahl and Emma Wells of the Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF) met us at the airport and took us to Chameleon Backpackers Lodge, a quaint place with the most welcoming staff. It was here we were able to get some rest and recover from our jetlag. The next day, however, not so bright and early, we were off to meet the team at the GCF office in Windhoek and get prepared for our time out in the field. This included a visit to a local grocery store for our fresh foods and other “essentials” for the trip. After sorting through all the equipment to make sure we had everything and double checking the vehicle fondly named ‘Betty’, we returned back to the Chameleon Backpackers for a restful night. The next day we loaded up Betty with our food, tents, fuel and other supplies and then it was time to head out! As we pulled through the gates at the GCF office, we weren’t sure what the next thirteen days had in store for us but we were certain of two things: with Emma and Katie we were in capable hands and we had the honor of taking Betty on her inaugural journey to the remote desert areas of Northwest Namibia.



The eight-hour drive took us from Windhoek to Opuwo and along the way we said goodbye to paved roads and hello to wide open spaces. It had rained several days prior to our arrival, a welcomed occurrence as Namibia is in the middle of a severe drought, changing the normal dry scenery to a blanket of green. Many of the animals typically seen along the road such as warthogs had moved further into the trees and bushes to take advantage of the new vegetation. We did, however, see herds of goats and cows grazing on the fresh grass, often very close to the road’s edge. Occasionally, we would catch a glimpse of

Springbok in the distance. We were also able to see the iconic termite mounds that occasionally engulfed entire trees.

Although giraffe were the reason we came to Africa, giraffe share the landscape and their conservation success is intertwined with people. Emma and Katie gave us a brief overview of the history and changes of Namibia since 21 March 1990 when Namibia became an independent country. They also spoke of the various cultural groups in the country including the Himba and Herero tribes. As we drove through small towns and villages, we could see the vibrancy of the culture but also the hardship of the people especially brought on by the drought.

When we reached Opuwo Country Lodge we were given a lesson on how to set up camp and were treated to our first one pot wonder campfire meal. The next morning, we awoke early, ate breakfast under the morning sun, packed up camp and were back on the road.

We drove west to Marble Camp in Onjuva. During our journey we learned to appreciate the skills it takes to navigate these roads, the necessity of Dramamine for one of us and just how tough Betty really is. Another benefit of the recent rains, we found flowing water in the riverbed, not a common sight in the desert environment. However, this also posed a challenge to find a safe area to cross.



Emma and Katie continued our education in horticulture and geology. An essential lesson was what plants not to touch (very important!) as we would be wild camping, and also local uses for the other plants spotted along the way. As time passed, we saw many bird species and several species of ungulates, but still no giraffe. On the third day, we spotted giraffe droppings and branches above which had been stripped clean. This was one of the most exciting days for us. We were close, the signs were all there.

The Ensengo River was our first survey site and here the effects of the drought could really be seen. There were several emaciated Oryx, each huddled under a tree in a small patch of shade to get out of the midday sun. As we scanned the area for giraffe, we spotted a cheetah on top of a hill! No one was fast enough with their camera to get a picture, but it was a memorable moment. Without any sightings of giraffe, we headed to the Nadas River. Again, no giraffe, but we spotted three more cheetah. What are the chances – four cheetah in one day! It was definitely a treat. However, we were still waiting for our first giraffe sighting. As the third day was coming to an end and we were about ten minutes from camp, we spotted some fresh tracks – giraffe tracks to be exact.



Looking straight ahead into the shimmering mirage of the hot desert floor, an image became clear. Our first wild giraffe! It took a moment for the awe and excitement to settle to get to a place where we could be productive and get to work. Out came the camera equipment, the GPS unit, and the data sheet. As we attempted to photograph the adult female, a young giraffe walked over and began nursing. Then another juvenile giraffe appeared. The two young giraffe looked too close in age to both be her calves. We hypothesised this may be a nursery group; a behavior that is frequently talked about during our keeper chats. In the same exact area, the

next morning, we identified the same two young giraffe but with a different adult female. This female was nursing the other calf. Seeing giraffe in the wild was a dream come true. In particular, seeing them display natural behaviours we talk about was amazing.





We continued on to survey the Khumib River and the giraffe sightings increased! In total we saw 26 individuals and felt like we were getting into the rhythm for photographing and recording data. Our identification skills also improved.

After surveying the river, we were on a mission to find a solar-powered GPS satellite unit used in the Twiga Tracker programme that had recently fallen off a female giraffe. Armed with the last known coordinates, we ventured into the field to find it with high expectations. Easier said than done. The small black unit blended nicely into the rocky terrain of the area. A great example of camouflage! As we were wrapping up looking, a

last-ditch effort using binoculars finally yielded the intended results.

Feeling good about our GPS find, we headed on our way to Puros but were sidelined once again with a flat tyre. Since this was the second time, the team's efficiency and speed increased but it still put us behind schedule, and we would arrive at our next stop after dark. The decision was made to set up camp just inland from the Skeleton Coast – our first wild camping experience of the trip. It was here we were able to set up the computer and compare the coat pattern of the giraffe in our recent photographs with known individuals and identify the giraffe we had seen. There is certainly something to be said for a field office!



Heading towards Puros, we were not sure what we would find. Reports were coming in that the Hoarusib River had flowed all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. We were not sure if we would be able to cross the river or even survey depending on the conditions of the riverbed. As luck would have it, we were able to cross the river and go to Puros to restock on fuel and get the tyres repaired. However, our survey area was reduced as the riverbed was too wet to allow us to safely navigate Betty to all parts. We stayed at the Omenye campsite where we saw evidence of a male elephant in the area, but we did not see him. As a side note, Puros had some of the best drinking water – it was delicious! This was one of our favorite camping spots and as the morning sun was rising, we saw three giraffe eating from nearby Ana trees in the riverbed from our tents. What a way to start your day!



Although we could not safely survey the entire area, we still were able to collect data on 28 individuals in the Hoarusib and Gomatum Rivers and collect DNA samples from two individuals. It was exciting to be able to be a part of DNA sampling, since it has led to the discovery of four distinct giraffe species; a momentous discovery and a key component to the conservation of each giraffe species.

The next few days were spent wild camping in the mountains near Okongwe waterhole. We searched for giraffe in rocky and hilly terrain, a habitat most would not picture when thinking of giraffe. We found giraffe on top of the peaks, as they traversed the hills and navigated the slopes. Although there are some resident giraffe, most use it as a passage from one ephemeral/seasonal river to another. The importance of travel routes was evident in this desert environment. At the waterhole we set up GoPro cameras and were lucky enough to capture video of an adult male and female giraffe coming in for a drink.

We then drove through the Giribis Plains, which is dotted with 'fairy circles', which can only be described as a horticultural anomaly. These fairy circles have baffled scientists for years, and the debate continues as how they have formed. They can be seen on Google Earth if you want to take a look. The other very apparent issue on the plains was the drought through obvious loss of vegetation and several dead cattle. In past years, the



plains would have been filled with cattle grazing but with nothing to eat, the people had to move their cattle North leaving numerous abandoned bomas and empty villages. A stark reminder of the interaction between people and wildlife conservation.

Next, we were off to the Hoanib River and the President's waterhole. We stayed in this area for three nights and saw our first elephant! The advantage of the giraffe's height became more evident as we watched an elephant go through some amazing Yoga poses trying to reach the higher parts of the trees.



The browse line on the trees made it evident which were the giraffe's and elephant's favourite: the Ana tree is definitely high on that list. During our survey towards the Skeleton Coast we saw larger groups of giraffe but also found a lone female with a newborn calf tucked away in the bushes.

We observed more giraffe laying down within these groups, and more examples of nursery group behaviour. The giraffe had already demonstrated their ability to cross rocky and steep terrain but watching them navigate sand dunes near the cliffs was both terrifying and fascinating.

By this point we had seen about 140 giraffe! We were also fortunate enough to see other mammals including Hartmann's Mountain Zebra, Black Rhino, Chacma Baboon, Jackal, African Wild Cat, Greater Kudu and Steenbok and a variety of birds including vultures. We also tried our hands at tracking in the morning and learned the three sets of glowing eyes in our headlamps the night before had most likely been an adult female lion with her older cubs that were known residents in the area.



We drove up the Giribis Plains and down the Ganamub River to the Hoanib River and camped at Elephant Song Campsite, where we surveyed the plains. This was another example of the giraffe's amazing ability to survive in...well...conditions you just would not expect to find a giraffe in. Here, amongst the blue rocks with not many trees, strong winds and blowing sand, we found a herd of giraffe. Opening the windows to get photographs required us to use scarves or buffs as a mask. The long protective eyelashes of the giraffe definitely had a job to do out here.





As we cooked our last camp meal and prepared for our early morning departure, there was a feeling of mixed emotions: sad to be leaving the field but excited to learn more about how GCF uses the data we had collected for giraffe conservation throughout Africa.

During the drive back to Windhoek, we were fortunate enough to spot several more giraffe, mostly single males. It was honestly as exciting as our first day. After an evening to rest, it was back to the GCF office. Here we spent time finishing up identification of a few individuals with the assistance of the computer programme HotSpotter and learned a bit more about how the data collected is used. One of our most memorable times at the CGF office was our conversation with Steph Fennessy, where we chatted about her role at GCF and how GCF collaborates with different countries and organisations to assist in the conservation of giraffe throughout Africa.

The field experience was life changing. Being able to work with an organisation with such integrity and drive to conserve giraffe was incredibly rewarding. Giraffe are truly special animals and this experience only solidified our determination to do our part to help save them.

