

Twiga Tracker Initiative: Giraffe Tagging Report

Akagera National Park, Rwanda

24-30 October 2023

Background

Masai giraffe (*Giraffa tippelskirchi*), with two subspecies (Masai *G. t. tippelskirchi* and Luangwa giraffe *G. t. thornicrofti*), are listed as Endangered on the IUCN Red List. While it is unclear whether Masai giraffe occurred naturally in Rwanda historically, an extralimital population was established in Akagera National Park (NP) and it remains the only giraffe population in the country.

In 1986, six Masai giraffe (four female, two male) were translocated from Kenya as a donation by the Kenyan government. The giraffe population has increased steadily since and is currently estimated at 113 individuals.

Since 2010, Akagera NP is successfully managed by African Parks and the Rwanda Development Board. As part of the park's wildlife management strategy several wildlife species are tracked remotely through VHF and GPS satellite units to monitor their movements and gain a better understanding of habitat use in the park.

Prior to the operation, only African savannah elephant (*Loxodonta africana*), African lion (*Panthera leo*) and Eastern black rhino (*Diceros bicornis michaeli*) were monitored remotely and this operation was the first time GPS satellite units were deployed on Masai giraffe in Akagera NP.

Objective

The Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF) provided both Ceres Trace and GSatSolar GPS satellite ear tags, both linking to the GlobalStar satellite network, for deployment on Masai giraffe in Akagera NP. The aim of this tagging is to gain a better understanding of their seasonal movements in the park and at the same time evaluate the

performance of both tags under field conditions. The initial target was to immobilise ten giraffe and concurrently collect tissue samples for analysis on their genetic health.

Results

During this operation, seven Masai giraffe (five female, two male) were fitted with GPS ear tags. Five individuals (three female, two male) were tagged with both a Ceres Trace and a GSatSolar ear tag, one tag was fitted to each ear. The remaining two female giraffe were tagged with Ceres Trace ear tags only. Tissue samples were collected from all giraffe, and once all relevant permits have been obtained, these samples will be sent for analysis to assess the animals' current genetic health.

The terrain in Akagera NP predominately consists of semi-open scrub land, which makes it very difficult (to almost impossible) to capture giraffe from a vehicle and still posed a lot of challenges from a helicopter. Giraffe and personnel safety remained the highest priority during the operation, and the team was highly selective with regards to the area and the giraffe for darting. Ultimately, only seven giraffe were tagged during this operation as giraffe were mostly found in largely inaccessible and/or unsafe areas for darting. The rainy season arrived early, impacting giraffe movements, and confining them to less ideal habitat than where giraffe were observed during the recent survey in June 2023.

Acknowledgements

We thank the Rwanda Development Board, African Parks and Dr Richard Harvey for their collaboration and permission to undertake this valuable conservation effort for Masai giraffe in the country.

