



Operation Twiga III

Translocating Giraffe to Kidepo Valley National Park, Uganda

August 2018

With two highly successful Nubian giraffe translocations under the belt, the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) and the Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF) joined forces again for Operation Twiga III in August 2018 (*twiga* is Swahili for *giraffe*). In its third consecutive year, the bar was raised to help secure a future for Nubian giraffe in the country with the most ambitious translocation to date for Uganda. While both Operation Twiga I (January 2016) and Operation Twiga II (August 2017) focused on moving a total of 37 Nubian giraffe from the north side of Murchison Falls National Park (NP) across the Nile River by ferry to the southern sector of the Park (no small feat by any means!), Operation Twiga III involved the translocation of 14 Nubian giraffe from Murchison Falls NP to Kidepo Valley NP – a journey of no less than 600 kilometres!



As with the previous operations, the translocation of these giraffe was driven by the imminent drilling for oil and placement of a pipeline within Murchison Falls NP, anticipated to begin before the end of the year. The Nubian giraffe, a subspecies of the Northern giraffe, is listed as 'Endangered' on the IUCN Red List (as Rothschild's giraffe) with only an estimated 2,645 individuals in the wild. Murchison Falls NP currently holds more than 50% of the wild population of Nubian giraffe. To aid in their conservation and protection, additional founder populations of these giraffe continue to be established within other

parts of Murchison Falls NP as well as other Parks in Uganda. As one of the first countries in Africa to develop a draft National Giraffe Conservation Strategy and Action Plan, UWA is on the frontlines of giraffe conservation and fully committed to the protection of Nubian giraffe.



Over the past two years and with the valuable support of GCF, UWA has gained great knowledge and experience in giraffe capture and translocation. It was with this experience, a year of extensive planning, more than a little bit of courage and great collaboration of partners that the challenge of moving 14 giraffe a distance of 600km was accomplished without any losses. The decision to move giraffe north to Kidepo Valley NP was taken not only to shift giraffe away from the pressures of oil drilling, but also to augment the Nubian giraffe population in that Park. In the late 1980s the local giraffe population had dropped to three individuals at its lowest due to poaching pressure. In 1997, three giraffe were flown into Kidepo Valley NP from Kenya to give the population a boost; the two females fared well, while the male was unfortunately predated on by lion after a few months. In April 2018, a survey estimated the giraffe population of the Park at 36 individuals. The small giraffe population is expected to benefit from the new genetics that come with the new additions from Murchison Falls NP resulting in a more stable and fortified population.

Operation Twiga III was completed over the course of three weeks and the initial plan was to move ten giraffe to the new location. The UWA team, together with staff from the Ugandan Wildlife Education Centre (UWEC), GCF, and multiple international members from various zoological institutions including Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, Cleveland Metroparks Zoo and Colorado State University, spent the first two weeks individually capturing ten female subadult giraffe and transporting them to a temporary boma (corral) built by UWA rangers at Tangi Gate/ranger station in Murchison Falls NP. The giraffe were kept in the boma to calm down and become accustomed to the transport crate prior to their long journey north. This was done to try and minimise stress on the giraffe and facilitate a successful translocation. Their behaviour was closely monitored and recorded by UWA rangers working with a zoo keeper from



Cleveland Metroparks Zoo as part of an ongoing study to improve future translocation efforts. After a few days of acclimation, in batches of five, the giraffe were loaded onto the transport truck and the ten hour drive was commenced. During capture, two of the females were also fitted with solar powered GPS satellite units to monitor their movements within the new Park and contribute to ongoing spatial ecology studies.

The giraffe were closely monitored throughout the journey; care was taken to avoid low hanging electrical wires and tree branches, bumps in the road, and a slightly harrowing mountain pass. The entire team was blown away by how calm the giraffe remained during the long trip. Nothing seemed to phase these amazing animals from traveling through city centres to the gales of laughter, singing and excited shouts from bystanders along the way. It was truly wonderful to see the reactions of the Ugandan people when they turned and saw giraffe heads poking above a cluster of shrubbery on the truck. As if this were not enough, the first five giraffe were released into Kidepo Valley NP under a brilliant rainbow – no better welcome could be imagined. The trip was repeated in the following days with the remaining five giraffe, and within 48 hours ten new females were introduced to the Park.



Riding the high feelings from success, UWA elected to continue giraffe capture and move an additional five giraffe to Kidepo Valley NP (aiming now for a total of 15 giraffe translocated). The team returned to Murchison Falls NP and another week of giraffe capture and boma acclimation commenced. Four more females and one lone young bull were brought to the boma and allowed to adjust. Due to one of the females being a little stressed, the team lead by UWA veterinarians decided to release her back into the Park to ensure her wellbeing – which worked a treat as she ran off! The remaining four giraffe remained calm and made the journey north without incident to join their counterparts in their new beautiful home. The team was not only excited about the successful release of their final load, but also to see some of the female giraffe that had been introduced only a week earlier in the company of a few of the old Kidepo giraffe bulls close to the release site.



In addition to the successful translocation (very aptly described as the highlight of his career by Dr Robert Aruho, UWA's lead organising veterinarian), the team also de-snare three giraffe spotted during captures with wire snare traps. Poaching is an increasing threat to wildlife within Murchison Falls NP. While giraffe are not usually the target species, they are often the unintentional victims getting limbs caught inadvertently in snare traps set for smaller mammals. They consequently suffer from debilitating wounds as evidenced by scarring around the lower limbs (and sometimes even limb amputation) of multiple giraffe in the Park if the snares are not removed and treated in a timely manner. Locating and treating these three individuals during the operation only strengthened the enormous impact on giraffe conservation these three weeks brought, along with the broader GCF-UWA efforts in country.

Similar to Operation Twiga I & II, this translocation was made even more incredible through the effective collaboration of multiple international institutions. Once again, the legendary Dr Pete Morkel joined the team to share his extensive expertise in megaherbivore game capture and transport with the Ugandan team. Veterinary staff from Cleveland Metroparks Zoo, Colorado State University College of Veterinary Medicine and Cheyenne Mountain Zoo continued the work set forth previously on monitoring anaesthesia and wild giraffe health in the field through collection of numerous biological samples including blood, hair, faeces and skin biopsies. Blood gas values were collected in real time and run on an iStat analyser to assess how giraffe were doing physiologically throughout the capture. Blood was also collected for later processing in a mobile lab, evaluating blood cell counts, electrolyte values and complex serum assays which will provide invaluable information on wild giraffe that can be used to better the health of giraffe in zoos worldwide. Skin samples were collected to contribute to an ongoing collaborative study on giraffe skin disease – thought to be caused by a worm like parasite in the skin— and a trial long-acting anti-parasitic drug was administered to all captured giraffe to aid in supporting their overall health. Passionate individuals in giraffe conservation from Australia, Namibia and Sweden rounded out the team brought together by GCF to support UWA in all their efforts.

Operation Twiga III is a shining example of just how much can be accomplished when passionate people come together – and not only referring to the team in action. Operation Twiga III would not have been possible without the generous funding support from around the world, a majority of which was raised during World Giraffe Day 2018.

We would like to use this opportunity to thank all our supporters for their generous funding and for helping us to educate a wider audience on the plight of giraffe. A truly amazing conservation effort all round for the entire team lead by UWA, and especially for veterinarians Drs Robert Aruho, Margaret Driciru, and Patrick Atimnedi.

Asante sana!

Images: Michael B. Brown and Simon Retief

