



EXPEDITION DIARY Namibia 2011 (rotation 2)

By Jenny Kraushaar & Matthias Hammer

20 July

Welcome to the first entry of our Namibia rotation 2 diary. I am Matthias Hammer, founder & executive director of Biosphere Expeditions, and I will be with you for the first week of the expedition (7-14 August), handing over to the very capable hands of Jenny Kraushaar, who will be your expedition leader from then on. Our expedition scientist Kristina Killian is already in Namibia, conducting her research and getting things ready for us.

Kristina has been very successful with camera trapping (see video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gva8J-IsI0M>; ignore the dates on some photos as the traps were not set up correctly) and has captured leopard, hyaena, cheetah and all sorts of other species on camera, so they are around! A word of warning though: you are joining an expedition working with truly wild animals who are very good at avoiding their biggest threat - humans. You are not joining a safari to a national park where animals are habituated and you can tell where they are by following the other tour buses! On our study site animals are wild and elusive, and as a result they are bloody hard to catch and/or see. If you are hoping to see and photograph the cats in a safari-style operation, then you will be disappointed. If you are coming to help Kristina with her work and obtain an insight into how conservation works on the ground; warts, successes, failures and all, and if you are prepared to put lots in to get lots out, then you will have a great time.

As you can see from the team list, rotation 2 will be relatively small teams throughout. Namibia is an expensive expedition, because we need expensive logistics to run the project properly (a research base, four Land Rovers, equipment, food, local helpers, etc.) and we've taken a hit during these times of economic hardship for many people. So you coming out to help with the project is doubly appreciated, your contribution is doubly important and we'll work you twice as hard ;)

Jenny's mobile number in Namibia is +264 (816) 164407 and Kristina is on +264 (81) 4549827. Remember that these phone numbers are for emergency communication only (such as being late for assembly). We're packing up as we write this and Jenny, just back from our snow leopard expedition to the Altai, is off to join Kristina in a few days. I'll follow a few days later and we all look forward to seeing you at Casa Piccolo sooner or later.

Safe travels

Matthias

29 July

One week to go until the start of the expedition. Kristina tells me that they are busy getting base camp ready for us. She also tells me that it is still VERY COLD at night with temperatures around zero. If you have been to Africa before, you'll know the pattern: it's bloody freezing when you get up in the morning but it soon warms up to a pleasant temperature when the sun rises. Make sure you bring warm clothes and make sure this includes a hat (you lose much of your body heat through your head so a hat at night really helps to keep warm). If you get cold easily, you may want to consider bringing a sleeping bag to supplement the bed sheets and blankets we have.

This I recommend for the group starting 7 August at least - for the other groups we'll keep you informed about how temperatures develop via this diary. See you in a week!

9 August

Team one has arrived and been put through its training paces - animal ID, datasheets, GPS, compass, Land Rovers; you name it, it's been covered. The nights are still very cold (single figures above freezing), but the days are warm & sunny, as expected. Today was our first day of activities and we spent it putting box traps into place (see the video on www.facebook.com/biosphere-expeditions1 - remember you do not need a Facebook account, just click the link and go to the "Wall"; there's also a video of our research base on there now). Wish us luck in that they will capture the ever-illusive cats.

Admin: will everybody please bring a plastic box for the lunch packs you will be making at breakfast.

11 August

After all the training and putting the box trap into place, our plan was to conduct the educational half-day on Thursday morning and then split into activity teams. The morning worked according to plan (well, as much as herding two dozen primary school children can go according to plan ;). Just as the children were leaving we received a message from our local helper Emmanuel that there was a leopard in the box trap we had only put up the day before!

Needless to say that this changed everything and that the place had a certain buzz about it, as we were getting ready to put the (male) leopard under and put a GPS collar on him. When we arrived in the remote part of the mountains where we had placed the trap the day before, he was in a foul mood, but looked a fine and healthy specimen. He was quickly put under by Ulf, the farm owner who - very conveniently - is also an expert wildlife vet, and then Kristina, Jenny and Ulf were busy around him, whilst the rest, including the very luck ZDF film team, put their cameras into overdrive at a respectful distance. The GPS collar was put on, he was weighed (over 60 kg), given a health check (and found to be in excellent shape). Blood samples and facial recognition photos were taken and we then decided to let him sleep the drug off and release him in the morning.

Back at base, sparkling wine flowed and the film team set up a little bush cinema and shared the day's events. We also decided on "Ongwe" as the name. This was suggested by our local staff and simply means "leopard" in their language.

12 August

We returned this morning to set up the pulley system to release Ongwe (no jumping on the trap and pulling up the door with cranky leopards!). You can see just how cranky he was when I approached him on www.facebook.com/biosphere-expeditions1. The pulley system worked fine and everyone was there in the Land Rovers with doors and windows firmly shut and roasting in the sun as Ongwe took almost an hour to come out of the trap. In the end Jenny and her team did some extreme off-road driving in their Land Rover to approach the trap from the back, which brought Ongwe shooting out and running full tilt up the hill. What an awesome sight - and in time too; three minutes before the tape on the video recorder we had set up on a tripod outside his trap ran out.

His collar is working and we now have another leopard to follow around and collect important data on. Well done everyone. We should all consider ourselves very, very lucky!

14 August

Day off for almost everyone. Matthias and the film crew were busy packing and all of us felt a bit weird not to have a camera following us wherever we go anymore. All the team members volunteered in the morning to check the box traps and then spent the afternoon relaxing.

15 August

Matthias and the film crew left us yesterday and I am pleased to take over as expedition leader now. The group spirit is fantastic. A big thanks to Ulf and Ilka who bought us champagne to celebrate on Sunday evening that everything went so well the first week. The teams are now working hard. We guessed that Lucy might be around during the morning, so Ilka, Bill and Katie went out on telemetry work and found her signal next to the river. Our "lucky" Box trap was surrounded by fresh leopard tracks again but unfortunately the mongooses had played their "closing the trap" game and closed the gates before any another animal could get in.

16 August

Foot game count in the morning... we started off early in the morning and both teams did well walking up and down the hills counting prey animals. We already received some data sent from the GSM collar on our leopard "Ongwe" and due to the GPS points we obtain, we are now able to get an idea of his movements. In the afternoon Ilka, Ulf and Emmanuel followed him with the telemetry equipment and got a signal not far from the trap where we caught him. We are happy to report he is still around where we expected him to be. The evenings and mornings are still very cold and after dinner we all stand around the indoor fireplace sharing the adventures of the day.

17 August

Today we went to Katutura to interview locals and to gain more information about pets and their health status. Telemetry was again very successful. We found signals from Ongwe and Lucy at Ongos and we are looking forward to getting more information about their home ranges next week. The tracks & scats group ran out of Ziploc bags as they had found so many predator scats along their way. In the evening we could hardly understand each other due to the noise of frogs croaking, so we decided to play "Jenga".

18 August

Thursday we spent hours scrubbing the cars and cleaning the equipment and team members were rewarded with a beautiful "farewell" sundowner at Elephant mountain. Kristina and I want to thank the whole group for having been so patient and so good humoured. It was a pleasure to have you. You did a great job and we really hope to see you again soon.

19 August

Just dropped off everyone at Casa piccolo where we will pick up our next group at 8.30am on Sunday and looking forward continuing our work at Ongos next week.

20 August

We've now uploaded a "Namibia impressions" video to www.youtube.com/watch?v=GD_VF1Y_wNQ and www.facebook.com/biosphere.expeditions1.

And for anyone who's interested, there's now also a video FAQ playlist (shot in Namibia) on www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL5C68C53828C8E744. Thank you for the idea Claudia, the help with editing Ludger, and the input into the questions all of group 1.

21 August

The second slot arrived safely and after a long day listening to talks, practising telemetry and refining their skills on GPS use, the team members experienced a cold evening in the bush. Thanks to all the hot water bottles no one froze during the night.

22 August

A day of learning all the bits and pieces of the Land Rovers. 90% of the group are women so we weren't surprised that the driver lessons went so well and we finally have 7 drivers in this group. The night was freezing and in the morning the windows on the cars were frozen.

23 August

After defrosting by the fire in the morning, we started all together to remove one of our box traps. We checked the surroundings of our waterholes for tracks and scats and were successful finding leopard and hyaena scats. Discovering new areas and spotting lots of animals while having our lunch in the mountains brought smiles and sunburnt faces in the evening. We were happy with the new spot we found for the trap and we will be back tomorrow to set up the kraal and activate the trap.

24 August

After checking the box traps in the morning, Ann, Joanna, Torsten and Marianna helped us build a big Kraal around the newly set up box trap in the mountains. Group 2 went to Katutura to gain more information about the pets out there. They found the animals in good conditions and were very welcomed by the locals.

25 August

After the sun rose from behind the mountains, we started off with three groups and the first foot game count. But after one hour the teams were collected by Kristina and Jenny, as they had found a female leopard in the box trap just behind the camp! It seems that Thursdays are leopard days! Second leopard within two weeks! WOW. So the plans were changed and we sedated her and got all the samples and measurements we needed. As she was only 30 kg we decided to release her after lunch with a lighter VHF collar. The evening we spent celebrating the success and named her "Shandy".

26 August

Finally a normal day of activities. Everyone now knows how it feels to be a field biologist. The groups were out all day counting prey animals and looking for tracks and scats in the mountains. With three leopards collared we are struggling to decide each morning which one we will look for first. Today we decided Lucy was the first one and we were lucky to find her still on Ongos. The bed times seem to get earlier each day... what's wrong:-)

27 August

A beautiful day to take off. The temperature rose to 28 degrees during the day and we had breakfast in T-shirts for the first time. Ever keen, everyone volunteered to check box traps all the same and the girls did a fantastic job looking through almost 5000 pictures taken by our camera traps. Finding nothing but baboons.

28 August

Marianna, Joanne, Torsten and Ann went out for a 7 km walk to find tracks and scats and came back with the bags full of leopard and hyaena scats.

Today Rafael (our facility manager) decided that summer has begun so there won't be any more hot water bottles in the evening ;(

29 August

It's school holidays, but the Katutura kids still wanted to come to Ongos, which is a sure indicator that they are enjoying their time with us. We had a great time watching the rhinos and lots of antelopes. After a long lunch break to avoid the heat, we started off with the vehicle game count and were able to count lots of animals.

30 August

Foot game count early in the morning to escape the heat. In the afternoon, Anne, Joanna, Marianna and Torsten had a big go at typing in all the data we have collected so far. They did a great job and Anne said she felt like being back in her office already (just the ringing phone was missing). After that exciting "office afternoon" they decided to go on a night drive and it seemed worth it: they came across a rabbit and a mouse!

31 August

Telemetry and community interviews went very well and we collected lots of useful data about the pet health status on the west side of Katutura. The last afternoon of activities was spent looking for more tracks, scats and signals of our leopards and enjoying the beautiful sunrise behind the mountains.

degrees during the day and we could have breakfast in t-shirts. J Checking box traps was still a task even on our day off, so everyone volunteered in the morning to have a quick look if the traps are empty and still activated. The afternoon was mainly spent around the camp site. The girls did a fantastic job looking through almost 5000 pictures taken by our camera traps. Finding nothing but baboons.

1 September

The two weeks went far too quickly and everyone was surprised that this was already our last morning of activities. We spent the afternoon car washing, and packing before we headed up to our favourite spot for a sundowner. We shared all the impressions of the last weeks around the campfire with marshmallows and red wine. A big thanks for the great help and the success of catching another leopard.

Kristina and I are now busy getting prepared to follow up three collard leopards and to gain as much data as possible with the help of the upcoming groups. The next one arriving on the 11th. We wish you all a safe trip whichever way you are travelling and we are looking forward chasing Slot 3 through the African bush :-) see you next weekend.

11 September

Sunday morning 8.30: two Biosphere Land Rovers are driving through the gates of Casa Piccolo, collecting 7 very excited research volunteers from Switzerland, Germany, UK and the US. Kristina and I are delighted to have a masseuse amongst the group. We guess Brigitte will have some extra work to do here. As all the team members had all travelled within the same time zone, everyone was awake and listening to the lectures, talks and training.

12 September

The second day of training went by fast and in the evening team members learnt how to catch flies for the chameleon. ;-) After dinner Brigitte conducted a yoga lesson and did stretching and everyone now feels ready to set up a new box trap tomorrow.

13 September

We were very surprised this morning that almost everyone had already made their lunchboxes by 7.00 am, so we could leave on time! The yoga and stretching course was very helpful as everyone had lots of energy out in the bush. The group cut bushes, set up the trap and built a kraal within a record time and so we are all excited about what we are going to catch in it.

14 September

We are back to cold mornings. We only had 5 degrees in the tents in the morning so everyone was waiting for the sun to come up before we started with our foot game counts. The groups were quite successful spotting wildebeest, springboks, hartebeest, oryx, kudu and lots of warthogs on foot!

The afternoon was spent searching for predators on the camera trap pictures... and we found leopard, caracal and brown hyaena.

20 September

Following a quiet day off on Saturday, we checked the camera traps on Sunday and noted another "not yet collared" leopard is in the area.

Plans to visit the school on Monday changed quickly as Group 1 found a male leopard in the box trap, which had only been set up last Tuesday. We immobilised the young male in the afternoon, measured his body, tail, face, and took blood. Because this youngster leopard is still growing, we released him without a collar in the morning. And as current team member, John, has been with Biosphere in Namibia five times now, we decided to name our young leopard "Johnny" in his honour.

24 September

On the last day of this group we discovered that you can capture a nocturnal termite-eater in a box trap baited with meat! Team 1 found an aardvark in the box trap this morning and we released this animal, which we just had a presentation about the night before.

Kristina, Jenny and all the staff want to say good-bye to everyone from group 3 and thank you for your help and for catching yet another leopard for us. And hey, John, see you next year on your sixth Biosphere expedition to Namibia.

Thanks to everyone who has supported our school kids in Katutura with pens and pencils and lots of papers. We still have plenty of pencils to distribute and we would love to add some other little give aways, such as balloons, stickers or posters.

See you soon

28 September

Slot four training sessions commenced without a few team members because our poor Aussie couple was delayed by almost 24 hours. But brave as the people are downunder, they still managed to keep their eyes and ears open until we finished our last "prey animal" lecture late in the evening. Surprisingly we have had a huge change in weather and have already experienced the first rain on Ongos. We are happy to see that the team is well prepared and even in the rain we were able to remove and set up our Box trap 1 in the East. After a day of cutting thorny bushes, the team really deserved a sundowner in the bush.

1 October

The rain lasted a few more days and unfortunately we had to break up our telemetry session due to thunder and lightning. But the overcast conditions were nice and cool for our foot game count on Thursday morning.

Saturday was meant to be our day off but it was interrupted in the early morning by another LEOPARD in the trap. She is a 40 kg female and is now equipped with a GPS collar. We are very excited to be receiving her data via satellite and we are especially interested about her home range as she was caught in the same spot as our big male "Ongwe". This is the 4th Leopard we have caught within 8 weeks and we can't believe are so lucky trapping a leopard in each Slot. We are glad to announce that all our 30 volunteers so far were able to participate in the experience of catching this amazing big cat.

Take a look at http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=eOmbU3BzgLQ to see our third female leopard "Ondundu" (meaning mountains in Oshivambo) being carried back to the box by Linda, Matt, Simen and Ronny where she was to stay overnight to recover.

5 October

On our foot game count we split into a "girls" and a "boys" group as we wanted to find out who are the better animal spotters. Of course the girls won by spotting more than 60 animals on foot! But our guys came back very excited cause they found a "dead foal" and they guessed it was a fresh leopard kill. Well done guys! But unfortunately our tracker Jesaja checked on it later in the afternoon and by finding lots of car tracks around he discovered that this must have been the sick foal which was euthanized and placed in the bush for the predators. ;-)

The "Katutura Kids Day" on Wednesday morning went very well. Everyone ended up playing soccer and the kids loved getting so much attention from our team members. The movie shows our team members playing soccer with our kids from the "family of hope services" http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UG2QrwODnPs&feature=player_embedded

8 October

After another 12 days of collecting scat, tracks and data, Slot 4 departed on Friday. Unfortunately we received some bad news about our male leopard Ongwe on Thursday morning. He was shot Wednesday night by our neighbour as he was reputedly killing the farmers calves. So we faced reality and discovered even more how important it is to gain and provide data about big cats behaviour on game farms. Thanks again to everyone who supported us so far with collecting data and catching leopards. Take care and all the best.

3 November

Welcome Slot 6. Rizard, is either very lucky or unlucky being the only man amongst a group of nine women. But he is coping very well so far. After two days of training everyone is very competent at changing tyres, reading maps and identifying prey animals. During this Slot we are also involved in a secondary research project about giraffes, where we have to identify the individuals to record their behaviour and gain more knowledge about giraffe ecology. The first two surveying days have already been very successful. On the camera trap pictures we found three more sightings of, as yet, uncollared leopards hanging around the camp. In one of our box traps we caught a warthog and on the pictures we found a leopard trying to get to it at night. We released the warthog in the morning. The telemetry group obtained some good signals from Lucy and Katrin, Chantalle and Christine already found some leopard tracks in the south.

7 November

During the last few days we have been really busy getting all the research jobs done. After we captured two warthogs and a jackal in the first week, we found ourselves in luck with this group and another leopard (one leopard capture per group this year!). We captured our fifth leopard since August on Monday morning at Oxenpost dam: a 2 year old male leopard who had already been sniffing around the box trap the night before. Unfortunately we couldn't collar him due to his age as he is still growing. We took blood samples and measurements and after that exciting day celebrated at dinner time and decided to call him "Elago", which means "lucky" in Oshivambo, one of the local languages. When we pulled the gate open to release him on Tuesday morning he couldn't wait to get out and run up the hill back into freedom (see www.facebook.com/biosphere.expeditions1)

9 November

On Wednesday morning we had a great time in Katutura interviewing the local people. When we passed a local hair dresser, Erica decided to support the local economy and get a new haircut (not the Greek kind).and came back in tears and almost no hair left ;) Watch the video of the momentous event on www.facebook.com/biosphere.expeditions1.

14 November

Hello to everyone who joined our big cats project with us in Namibia over the past four months. I am on my way to the airport leaving Namibia this evening. Kristina and I want to say thank you very much to everyone for your great help out here and for the big success we had capturing 5 leopards within 6 Slots. I especially want to thank all the team members from Slot 6 for your support, patience and understanding. I hope to see you again in Namibia or on another expedition. Have a safe journey wherever you are going.

All the best from Jenny