



EXPEDITION DIARY Namibia 2002

By Matthias Hammer

22 October

We've been here for five days but our feet have not touched the ground. First there was the rush to get (more or less) everything in place for the team's arrival and then the expedition team itself a couple of days ago. Harald & Birgit, our scientists, have made a great effort to get everything ready. The farm is newly painted, posters are produced, talks arranged, box traps ready etc etc. It's been absolutely lots of work, but it's also nice to see it all come together now. Harald & Birgit have assembled an illustrious team of helpers. There is another Harald, the cook, Steffi, Susanne, Carola and Elli, all students who will be leading research groups, there is Werner, a conservationist, a couple of bushman trackers and quite a few more support staff. Expedition base is ready and set up, complete with our own little library, barbecue outside and Harald (the cook's) den, where he has been producing great food over the last few days. Fruit salads, pasta bake, real banana milk shakes – you name it – all true to his slightly adapted motto that "an expedition team marches on its stomach".

The team arrived on Sunday and by 16.00 we had made it to base. Dinner, introductions, an African sunset and then bed for most of them. Monday we had introductory talks about Namibia, cheetahs and the research we will be doing, a driver brief for those who are going to help out driving the Land Rovers and a drive round the study site in the afternoon.

Today we erected thorn circles around the eight box traps we have distributed around the site. The point being to restrict access to cheetah play trees (trees where they like to congregate) to one point (the box trap). The theory is that a (usually) male cheetah who wants to get to his favourite tree will be stupid enough to walk through the box trap to get there, and then, bang, we have another cheetah ready for radio-collaring. In practice it works quite well too, as H&B have already caught quite a few that way. From tomorrow onwards one team will check the traps each morning and whilst they drive around the study site doing that, will also look for cheetah tracks. So a couple of lucky (!) team members will get to sit on the bonnet looking for tracks.

Iodine was in high demand after our thorn circle fest and all the other teams will be glad to hear that they will not have to do another eight circles again (though it might still be a good idea to bring strong gardening gloves if we have to shift a trap!).

23 October

Our radio telemetry group saw two honey badgers and three cheetahs (!) in the field today. How lucky can you get on your first full day! None of our local staff had ever seen two honey badgers together and seeing a group of three cheetahs in the field is almost as rare. We are now asking them to pay triple.

My group spent several hours on the back of the pick-up zig-zagging through the study site and spotting game. Once you have spotted an individual or a group, you have to note down the angle to the car and the distance from the car. We usually get distance estimates from anything between 50 to 300 metres for an animal that is, say, 150 m away, but luckily we have laser rangefinders. Developed for the military they look like binoculars - you look through them and put an animal or object in the crosshairs, press a button, and, hey pronto, it gives you the exact distance. Quite good fun to let everyone estimate distance and then get a reading through the rangefinder.

We spot jackal, steenbok, hartebeest, oryx, warthog and lots of birds and a few more small mammals. We also free a calf which was stupid enough to walk into a box trap!

In the afternoon we have a thunderstorm and for the first time have to have dinner inside, rather than on the balcony.

27 October

No more cheetahs, but lots of other wildlife. The water hole surveys are proving very popular. Sit by a watering place in comfy chairs for a few hours, record birds, warthogs, kudu, oryx coming by to drink... not bad for a day's work. The radio telemetry groups, on the other hand, have not been so lucky with very few signals from the cheetah radio collars despite quite a lot of driving around in the heat. No so popular, that one. Game counts is more fun with people standing on the back of the pick-up, trying to spot game and recording all sightings. It's nice and breezy up there and there's always lots to do. We see oryx, harebeest, kudu, warthog, meerkats, jackals, but no cats so far. We also come across thirty or so vultures sitting in the trees and on inspection find a dead oryx. Gideon, our Owambo tracker, thinks it's died of old age, rather than anything else, although the jackals, vultures and other animals have already had their fill.

The box trap checking group also find a dead oryx which has been killed only fewer than two hours earlier by a leopard. Perhaps they even disturbed the cat whilst approaching – there were lots of fresh tracks around, the blood had not yet clotted and the body was still warm. Matthias, our bushman tracker, cuts himself a few spare ribs and then the head is left in the box trap as bait, but in the next couple of days nothing takes to it and the box trap is left undisturbed, much to the disappointment of everyone. The other traps are also mostly empty and so far we only have a porcupine and a calf to show for our efforts. But we live in hope and every time you approach one of the eight box traps, you cannot help but being excited. Sometimes you can see from afar that the trap is shut. Then two people approach and look what (if anything) is inside, but so far either the strong winds or a hare or a bird have released the traps and slipped out again between the bars.

Today, on Sunday rest day, everyone's gone to a game park to look at some of the other animals that do not occur naturally around here, like giraffe, buffalo et al.

31 October

Over the last few days we've had plenty of game, but no luck with the baited leopard traps. We also had a few porcupines in the trap and an aardvark. A couple of days ago we counted the tracks of seven cheetahs coming onto the study site, so expectations were high. A day later they were dashed twice when we had tracks around one trap that was already occupied by a porcupine, and also tracks around an empty trap with one paw print INSIDE the trap but not enough to trigger the closing mechanism (damn!).

Spirits were still high amongst the team, though. Then today – success! A cheetah in a trap. It was a male which our scientists had already collared a while back, but it was still really exciting. The whole team gathered and drove in convoy up to the trap. Harald explained how we had to approach (against the wind, in one tight group, no talking etc) to minimise stress. When we were within 5 metres of the trap, he started growling and trying to escape. Everyone took their pictures and then Harald jumped onto the box trap with the cheetah protesting and trying to get out. Harald opened the door and after a second or two of hesitation, he was off at incredible, elegant speed. What an experience! – there were tears. And to top it all off I had more luck than sense and took a half decent picture of him escaping from the trap.

4 November

We had an almighty thunderstorm on the last day of the outgoing team. It rained about 50 mm in half an hour or so! Some of us got a thorough soaking, but most just enjoyed the experience (inside) and the rainbows afterwards. Everyone seemed sad to leave – the new team now seems glad to be here, especially since some of them had some epic travelling to get here (flights delayed, flights cancelled etc.).

6 November

The weather has gone decidedly cold, with an icy wind blowing (very unusually for this time of year) from the Pacific. Last night we measured 5 degrees at night (!), so lots of extra blankets at night and jumpers for groups exposed on the back of the pick-up or sitting in the open for the observations. Spirits are still high though.

Harald, our scientists, took one of his regular fly-overs in a little fixed wing aircraft today and found quite a few cheetah signals with his aircraft-mounted telemetry equipment. He dropped some coordinates out of the plane down to a waiting research team, but they failed to pick up the signal in the morning. In the afternoon they had more luck and came within a few metres of a cheetah, only for it to escape from view through the bushes! Still very exciting for those lucky enough to have been on telemetry duty today.

10 November

Lots of activity at the water holes these days. We've had groups seeing large hartebeest herds, warthog, oryx, kudu, all within a few hours. The German film team have also arrived. We've found another play tree and have moved one of the box traps there. Not much happening in terms of cats at the box traps, although we are catching plenty of porcupines, aardvarks and the like!

Today is rest day. Some people went to a nearby bat cave, which went down pretty well, others are chilling at base, and Harald, Birgit and I have shown the film team around, done the driving course and the briefings. Tomorrow it's back to the usual routine. Wish us luck for the week coming. Another cheetah would be nice!

14 November

Lots of activity over the last four days and a time-consuming film team. Quite a view porcupines, aardvarks and other small mammals in the traps, but unfortunately no cheetah for this slot. However, Harald went flying yesterday and picked up six radio signals from the collars of various cheetahs. He saw six from the air and then dropped off coordinates to telemetry groups waiting on the ground. They chased the signals all day and late into the evening and were rewarded with a fleeting look at a cheetah in full flight. On their way back after nightfall the two telemetry groups saw lots of game by the roadside and finally three cheetahs standing right on the gravel road! All three of them without a radio collar.

Two more groups chased them the next day, but were unlucky in not picking up any more signals. Another group went box trap checking with the film team and had one trap with an aardvark, one with a porcupine and the last one with a porcupine mother and young. Must be a new occupancy record.

24 November

Team two has been and gone, and team three arrived and settled in quickly. We had quite an eventful week with lots of action at the box traps (loads of porcupines, one honey badger, the odd aardvark, warthog and calf). We also conducted an 18 hour observation stint covering three watering places simultaneously from sunrise to sunset. In that period we saw 44 kudu, 36 oryx, 24 hartebeest, 17 jackals, 36 baboons and 165 (!) warthogs.

We also have a journalist and photographer for GEO Saison, a German travel magazine who turn out to be a credit to their profession, integrating themselves effortlessly into the team.

Then finally, on Saturday, another cheetah in the same trap as last time. It turns out it's the very same cheetah again we trapped in the first slot and his two friends are around. The group checking the box traps even see one of them lazing around in a tree nearby! Harald decides to put our regular customer in a holding trap by the playtree and set the box trap anew in an effort of capturing a second one of the three. This means transferring the cheetah from the box trap to the holding trap and carrying the holding trap, complete with cheetah inside, a few metres away inside the ring of thorns we have constructed around the playtree with the box trap as the only access point. Four lucky volunteers get to carry our cheetah around, which means you are only about 20 cm away from this wild animal issuing low growls but being otherwise quite calm. What an experience!

With the cheetah safely in the holding trap, in the shade with some water, we leave the whole setup over night. Next morning the whole group is back at the traps. Overnight the German VOX film team have returned to film the release, so we have quite a sizeable group driving up in excitement to the traps. We make a detailed plan on who does what and how to minimise stress. The box trap is empty, but our regular customer is still safely inside his holding trap. We approach in one tight group and line up cameras ready. Four volunteers carry the holding trap to the box trap again, we transfer the animal, step away and Birgit climbs on the box trap. The cheetah growls quite a lot but otherwise is beautifully calm – as he should be since by now he should know the procedure! Birgit opens the trap with everyone standing by about 10 metres away. In a second he's gone in leaping strides to the sound of a multitude of camera shutters clicking away. Until next time!

26 November

Cheetahs galore! Believe it or not, but today we had TWO cheetahs in the traps, both without collars. One a single adult male, and the other a juvenile male, part of a completely uncollared group of three male juveniles and their adult mother. We are now trying to catch the entire group of four, so today we transferred the juvenile into a holding cage and set two box traps either side of it. The single male we tranquillised and collared today. The whole team was there when we darted him, watched him go under, carried him to a lab table and measured, collared, weighed him etc. The whole procedure takes about an hour with four of us working on the animal and the rest of the team standing around the table watching and taking pictures (no pressure to get everything right!). Right at the end, when he was still sound asleep, everyone was allowed to touch him before we carried him into the bush, injected the anti-sedative and watched him wake up slowly and stagger into the distance. It all went without a hitch and there were quite a few tears. Wish us luck for the next couple of days when we try to catch the group – if we are lucky we may have four more collars walking around the bush soon.

27 November

Cheetah update: two males in the traps, one male, one female to go.

29 November

Two males, one female. One to go.

30 November

It stayed at two males and one female (and a porcupine, which, believe it or not, walked into the trap wedged between two cheetahs). It is probably three siblings from the same litter. The female was in heat, so we also had tracks of the "Three Musketeers" (a group of three males) around the traps, but none inside. The adult mother, unfortunately, was too clever to be captured.

We sedated all three, one after the other, and took blood samples, measurements etc. All three were too young to have radio collars fitted, as growing into them might suffocate them. All sedations went well, although one male woke up in Harald's arms as he was carrying him to a shaded "waking up" spot, and the female in mine. Nothing much to worry about, really, as there is only some growling and body twisting involved. In his drowsy state and effort to get away from us and to his siblings, one of the males also walked straight back into the trap that was set next to his sister.

Four captured cheetahs in this slot. And some people saw three cheetahs in the wild on top! Must be the luckiest people on the planet. There'll probably be zero again in the next...

6 December

It's been pretty quiet for the last few days. No cheetahs (apart from their tracks), empty box traps (apart from a few porcupines and a warthog), weird weather (clouds and lightning moving in from Angola) and few telemetry signals. A good team, though, and an entertaining French film crew.

10 December

Still pretty quiet around here. We had an aardvark in the trap just as a Motorola film crew arrived for a day or two, but no cheetahs anywhere near the traps. We also had a flying termite invasion at camp and proceeded to roast them in a pan with some salt and oil. Almost everyone had a try, but amidst much laughter and screwed up faces it soon deteriorated from roasted termites to picking them up and eating them raw to licking them off the floor! Anyone would have thought we don't provide enough food!

13 December

Some cheetah sightings, but only for a few lucky ones. We had planned another day of constant water point observations and Franz decided to sit on a wind pump that overlooks a water point. From there he saw three cheetahs about 100 m away who were completely unaware of him, behaved naturally and trotted together through the bush. All three of them uncollared. Werner and Corinne saw one female coming to their water point to drink. She also had no collar and spent about 10 minutes there. Most other observers also had a really busy day with all sorts of game arriving at the water point (it's been hot and dry for the last few days). One group saw 47 warthogs over a period of three hours!

14 December

Our objects of desire had one last trick up their sleeves. When we went to collect all the box traps yesterday, a group of them had left their tracks all around the trap, including one animal which went through the trap, deftly jumping over the trap door, then doing his/her bit on the play tree and coming back the same way again, again jumping over the trap door! All this we could clearly see by the tracks. Still, it's been a great expedition, thank you to everyone (you know who you are), goodbye Namibia, see you again next year.