



EXPEDITION DIARY Namibia 2005 spring

By David Moore

24 September

Here's your first instalment of the Namibian "tales from the bush", not from your esteemed expedition leader David, but from me, Matthias Hammer, founder and Field Operations Director of Biosphere. David is still busy in Paris and I have arrived a few days ahead of him to set things up at the new study site.

This morning Harald, one of the lead scientists, and I went for a drive around the new study site. No prizes for guessing the weather (blue skies, bright sunshine and heat) and animals we came across (kudu, oryx, steenbock, ostrich), but the new site certainly is spectacular with rocky outcrops, acacia savannah and the odd mountain thrown in for good measure. The highest one is the "Kuduberg" (kudu mountain), with a hair-raising offroad drive to the top (and worse, down), and dramatic views over the study site and beyond.

At the moment base at Okomitundu is a hive of activity with supplies being shipped in, Land Rovers taken for a service, equipment inventoried and unpacked and all the many small bits that need to be organised before you all arrive.

The next diary entry will probably be David's, so I look forward to seeing the first team here in a few days and wish you all safe travels to Windhoek.

4 October

David, your expedition leader, here now: we have quite an international mix here for slot one and everyone is settled in to the farm. With the introduction talks and presentations now completed we're all split in to teams and ready to begin activities in the field from tomorrow morning.

Yesterday afternoon Matthias led the driving team out in to the field for their 4-wheel drive course whilst Hendrik took the non-drivers out for a recce of the study site. Following the training course out in to the bush, along the sandy river bed and up through some stony terrain, we weren't back at base until past Dagmar's dinnertime. Whilst we had been in the vehicles getting to grips with the gear changes, Hendrik's team had spotted springbok, zebra, steinbok, kudu and hornbills.

This morning we covered the whole box trap route together, learning how to arm the traps and check for spoor. James had a nasty encounter with one of the many thorn bushes, but survived with all body parts intact. With the traps all in open position, we didn't have to practise any release techniques, but we did get a chance to familiarise ourselves with some different spoor we found on the way. Brown hyaena spoor were identified close to the box trap, which surrounds a tempting (at least for hyaena!) kudu carcass, and we also found really clear spoor from two (maybe three) cheetahs walking along the sand track, crossing the farm. Our route included the Apostelberge where the hyenas have their den. In general we'll leave these secretive creatures alone, not wanting to disturb them and cause them to leave the farm, but for today we stood for a few moments among their collection of baboon and jackal skulls just above their sleeping quarters.

Daniela will be leading the telemetry team this week, so I'll write the next instalment soon to let you know if we receive signals from any of our three already-collared cheetahs. If not I'm sure we'll content ourselves with the hornless oryx who hangs out near the swimming pool...

8 October

This afternoon completes the four-day cycle of activities, so by now all team members have had a chance to try their hand at all the activities and in the process uncover ample evidence of cheetah activity on the farm.

The most excitement was probably from Hendrik's game count team, which yesterday was lucky enough to observe a mother cheetah and her three cubs about 40 metres from the Land Rover on their afternoon route. This morning's telemetry team was then well rewarded for their climb up the rocky hill as they were able to pick up clear signals from the three collared male cheetahs that live and hunt together in a brother coalition and are currently on the neighbouring farm. In addition to this, every day throws up fresh reports of new cheetah, leopard and hyena spoor. Indeed today's spoor count team were able to follow a leopard track for 2 km, with the help of our local trackers, Alfred and Springhahn.

Yesterday some of the farm workers reported seeing a hyaena dragging a kill across the bush, though our afternoon follow-up failed to uncover any of the tracks. We did find plenty of donkey and dog tracks, however, a sign that poachers enter the farm at night (harmless for us, but not for the oryx).

Perhaps this disruptive poaching activity together with all the carnivore activity can explain the lack of springbok groupings for the springbok observation teams. The animals are present in small, distant numbers but never conveniently located for Stefan's observation programme!

On Wednesday we released a typically ferocious honey badger down by the dried-up dam who was more interested in clawing his liberator's shoes than making a hasty escape. Apart from that, traps have been empty, though fresh leopard and brown hyena tracks were found yesterday next to the river bed trap. Doubtless the animals are lured by the scent of rotting carcass, but are perhaps wary of passing through the box traps. We've undertaken some carefully thought-out box trap repositioning work, building up the thorn-bush kraals, which surround them and making them as enticing as possible for the local carnivore population!

11 October

With a large aardvark in the trap yesterday and a porcupine today (he was very reluctant to leave), there remains only the baboon and then we will have covered most of the non-study animals who are most likely to wander in to the traps during their night time foragings.

Though Sunday was our rest day, it didn't stop Liz and Jean-Luc from spotting themselves three cheetahs whilst out on their morning box trap round. Whilst some of the team chose to spend the rest of the day trying their hand at horse riding or resting at the farm, others were keen to be out in the bush so we took a drive down to a couple of waterhole observation points. Steenbok seemed to be order of the day, along with a cory bustard who demonstrated his impressive take-off technique. From her rocky lookout, Dagmar radioed in with news of a possible cheetah resting under a tree, but we were unsuccessful in uncovering tracks.

Yesterday afternoon we drove in convoy up to the top of Kuduberg, the closest mountain to the farm. Although we didn't receive telemetry signals from our three collared boys on this occasion, everybody enjoyed the stunning views across the African savannah with the farm buildings of Okomitundu the only signs of civilisation in sight (along with the small bushman drawings under the rocky outcrop on top of the mountain).

Today has thrown up yet more leopard and cheetah tracks, and by now many of the team members are getting familiar with the farm roads and the drivers are putting their off-road skills to the test!

It seems that the activity on the farm has also been successful in discouraging the poachers who have been active for the last two years from entering the property. Last Saturday's day time poachers were freaked by our responsive Land Rover, radio and binocular action and haven't been seen since.

I can hear the sound of chatter and laughter just outside as everybody is descending upon the patio fire area for dinner, so I'm going to join the team to hear the new tales from this afternoon...

16 October

The last week of slot one showed up countless spoor signs indicating a high cheetah presence on the farm. In fact a total of 13 different spoor were counted over the fortnight, some of which we were able to follow for kilometres down the river beds or across the bush. For those team members already familiar with the more common creatures, it was also an opportunity to add eland, dik-diks, jackals and caracal (caught in the river-bed trap on Thursday) to their sightings.

Several records have been set with Bob holding the 65s-and-over "ascent of telemetry hill" record and Jean-Luc being the presumed record holder for the largest amount of video footage ever taken on a Biosphere Expeditions study.

One of the most significant results from this slot for our scientists has been the spoor data indicating another coalition of three adult cheetahs on the farm. No telemetry signals were received this week from our existing collared coalition, but fresh spoor were picked up and followed across the site. It remains yet to be seen whether one of these animals will choose to visit a marking tree with a box trap and provide us with the opportunity to investigate them more closely. Perhaps the fact that the neighbouring farm is currently empty and therefore without water holes is encouraging movement on to our site and attracting the large carnivores.

The afternoon game counts have also shown great variation in results with some teams filling sheets of game on one afternoon and other teams barely seeing more than a smattering of steenbok.

Best wishes to our slot one team members off pursuing their own activities or back to their native countries and I'm looking forward to meeting the next team tomorrow morning...

22 October

A very active couple of days with our coalition of collared cheetahs currently on the farm.

Thursday's telemetry team picked up their strong signals from the top of Eulenkuppe, indicating that they were slightly to the south of the farm. The spoor and telemetry teams were out in force in the afternoon, though by the time their signals were picked up near Zebraposten it was too late to pull the teams together to attempt a closer follow-up. This opportunity presented itself on Friday afternoon as the morning activities showed that the cheetahs were still on the farm. In fact spoor showed that all three of them had been directly up to the Zebraposten box trap - unfortunately the trap had already been closed thanks to the night time activities of a curious mongoose whose offending spoor were also discovered entering the trap, triggering the mechanism and exiting through the bars.

Signals showed that the animals had moved 20 km or so during the night and were over in the Apostelberge by late Friday morning. We were also able to follow the spoor away from the Zebraposten trap and down to the fence line and off in the direction of these hills. With all teams pulling together in the afternoon the loud signals from the telemetry equipment indicated that we were within 500 metres or so of the cheetahs, but alas we had no success in spotting them or tracking them sufficiently to discover a new marking tree.

Our porcupine friend has however been back in the Alter Damm box trap and the meerkats seem to be more at ease with the passing Land Rover and are hence cooperating in providing photo opportunities. Most days also provide evidence of leopard spoor, yesterday's group finding fresh spoor just a few metres from one of the western traps. Infact the databentry team, having finished their computer work, were busy preparing the bait when their bloody work was interrupted by the cheetah follow-up. Slot one's art-deco/minimalist box-trap design and positioning has (inexplicably) so far been unsuccessful in trapping any of the large carnivores, so we'll see if the slot two baiting technique will prove an opportunity to study one of these creatures more closely.

25 October

On Saturday afternoon we placed a large lump of kudu meat as leopard bait in a tree down near the driver training river bed. We had several buckets full of blood diluted with water which we trailed in several directions towards the bait. The idea is to allow the leopard to come and claim the bait and then follow its tracks to see where it takes it. Once the leopard then feels comfortable with his possession of the meat we could place a trap around his meal. Hence we're checking the festering steak everyday to make sure it is still there!

There have been no more telemetry signals as the coalition we tracked last week must be a long way from the farm by now (perhaps we can expect them back in another ten days). There have been a couple of hyaena spoor located during morning spoor count and news has just come in of fresh leopard spoor this afternoon.

The game counts and observations show quite a lot of variety. This morning's springbok observation team saw one hundred animals from the hide at Alter Damm (41 kudu, 20 oryx, 20 springbok, 14 warthog, 2 steenbok, a jackal, a baboon and an ostrich) whereas Sunday's afternoon observation at the same place only threw up two timorous steenbok and a cory bustard!

Lots of animals in the traps, with baboons released from the Alter Damm trap three times since Saturday. Lorna is proving to be very able and willing when it comes to cleaning out the traps after the baboons. Yesterday's box trap team liberated an aardvark and two porcupines - the porcupines seem calmer now, perhaps they are getting used to it!

29 October

More carnivore spoor were uncovered in the course of slot two's second week here at Okomitundu with leopard spoor discovered on Wednesday morning leading directly up to the bait we had placed in the tree (the bait was left untouched, however). Also more cheetah and hyaena spoor on Wednesday as well as donkey and dog tracks from the poachers. Wednesday's box-trap team was also able to follow the spoor of a cheetah chase and see where the animal dug its claws in to the ground when gaining force.

Wednesday morning's Alter Damm observation again revealed a wide variety of animals with two fighting jackals and two copulating lizards stealing the morning show. We also had a porcupine in the trap down there on Thursday who refused outright to leave the trap and was still sitting there when we returned to rearm the trap in the afternoon. Some friendly prodding and he eventually made his escape and disappeared in a fury.

Thursday and Friday were quieter days with nothing from the telemetry and an absence of fresh spoor. There had been some rain about 20 km away, so it may be that the game moved away in search of water and pasture and that the carnivores have followed them. That's one theory. But the lack of activity in the field was compensated by extra action around the camp-fire and an opportunity for slot 2 to dazzle Harald and Birgit with their musical talents.

We also solved the 'Easter bunny mystery', with the identity of the unknown animals spotted by Alfred on the afternoon game count now established as a pair of pangolin.

With slot two now departed, I'm also off together with Stefan, Daniella, Hendrik and Sylvana to check out Swakopmund and Etosha during our one week break before the next team's arrival on 7 November. Looking forward to seeing you all then...

30 October

An exciting turn of events this morning, meaning we've delayed our departure for a few hours, so here's a quick diary entry to fill you in on the news:

Shortly after slot two's departure yesterday (as luck would have it ;-), Harald received a call from the farmer on the neighbouring farm who had discovered two freshly killed young oryx, one of which had been partly eaten by a leopard. Harald, Hendrik, Silke and Meike, our new intern, drove over and placed one of our box traps around this kill (about 500 metres off our farm on the other side of the Apostelberge) in the belief that the leopard would come back to feed again. Such was the case - one leopard in the trap this morning!

Whilst Harald and Birgit have a lot of experience darting and collaring cheetahs, they preferred to have a fully qualified vet present for handling a large male leopard so a vet was called in to take charge of the intervention, flying down from Otjiwarongo and landing on the strip early afternoon. The leopard being a fully grown adult of 61 kg, we were able to dart and sedate him, take all the necessary swabs, measurements and blood samples and fit a radio collar. It was also discovered that the leopard had one leg which had been previously broken (perhaps from a snare) but that this had healed very well. Unfortunately he also chipped one of his front teeth in the trap. He was sedated for about half an hour before he was driven out into the bush where we were able to observe him through binoculars first moving his tail and then slowly waking up.

Over this next week those remaining on the farm will be able to monitor his movements through the telemetry signals to check that he has recovered from today's sedation. It should also make for interesting telemetry work over the weeks to come...

It's Murphy's law, I am afraid, that this has happened just as we are changing slots, but such is work out in the field with wild animals! I hope you won't be too disappointed.

10 November

We're back in the swing here on Okomitundu farm with the twelve new team members now on their second full day out in the field. Yesterday proved quite a busy first day of activities with the morning throwing up tracks from three male cheetahs, tracks from a young leopard in the baited river bed and a baboon in one of the eastern traps.

The hill-top observation team didn't come across any springbok, but they did see just about everything else and they sprung in to crime scene investigation mode upon locating a two week old kudu carcass. Jackal and leopard tracks were found nearby, but cause of death unestablished.

Faint signals were picked up from the leopard on Tuesday with more success from the collared cheetah coalition by yesterday's telemetry team. The three brothers were moving around and the team were able to triangulate their movements and come up with a position on the neighbouring farm for the afternoon follow-up (they also found leopard tracks on the top of Eulenkuppe). The afternoon team approached close enough to get a strong all-round signal, but no sighting!

The afternoon spoor team also did well following a cheetah track off the road and in to the bush, leading to a marking tree with scat and cheetah hair about two kilometres away.

The Apostelberge trap set by slot one has now found a new position at a different water point (after it was removed to capture the leopard on the neighbouring farm), so we're waiting to see if its new position shows any favour.

So far all team members doing well, getting to grips with the driving and eager to see what other news the first week out in the field brings (no night-time gaming activity yet, but I think tonight might be the night).

12 November

Leopard encounters galore! First an exciting chance encounter with a leopard for yesterday's springbok observation team, giving Alan a chance to fill out a carnivore sighting sheet: 'Leopard resting under shade of dry tree. Animal moved to grass in front of vehicle when vehicle stopped. Behind grass for about a minute before walking away'. It seems the leopard was not too fazed by the vehicle, giving the team a chance to view him/her about 15 metres from the vehicle!

The afternoon provided yet another fleeting sighting when Harald led a group out in the field to follow up on the tracks where the sighting had taken place (a few hundred metres on the road past the driving practice riverbed). They were able to uncover tracks at several different locations, providing evidence of one male, one female and one juvenile leopard. These tracks were followed along the road before a big cat was spotted moving fast along the riverbed ahead. Today's spoor tracking team were able to reveal that this was a female leopard.

Alongside this exciting news, we've had almost daily baboon captures, new cheetah and leopard spoor and some good close-up sightings of the eland and their young. We've also moved a box trap to the new marking tree discovered last Wednesday. The cheetah coalition could still be picked up yesterday by the telemetry team on Eulenkuppe, though the collared leopard was quiet today despite extensive efforts around the Apostelberge.

17 November

A busy week with lots of action, highs and lows, mixed emotions. Our big news came on Tuesday. Harald and I were down near Windhoek meeting Trevor Nelson and his MTV camera crew, here to document Trevor's first trip to Africa, his 4 wheel drive experience and his time spent with us here on the expedition. Within an hour of meeting the film crew, we received a phone call from Birgit: news had just come in from the morning team, reporting a leopard capture in the eastern river bed box trap with the wildebeest bait.

The euphoria turned to disappointment when it was discovered that the particular individual captured was very old and in a very bad condition, thin and with many injuries from fighting with other leopards. He was clearly unsuitable for a radio collar and unlikely to survive the trauma of any darting / tranquilisation procedure. We decided to follow the advice of vets to simply release the animal. There are numerous reports of very sickly animals making unexpected recoveries and of course this way, nature would take its course.

This presented us with the challenging task of releasing a leopard from the cage. It cannot simply be released like any other animal, which would just run away, as the risk of a leopard turning and attacking is too high. So we used a kind of pulley system by which the door of the cage was raised by the force of a Land Rover driving away from behind the trap, thus giving the leopard, who was very reluctant to leave the trap, a chance to run free.

The rest of this week's trap activity would have been called a great success, if we were trying to capture baboons, who turned up daily inside the traps! The new vogue amongst them seems to be to dive back inside the kraal and up the tree upon release, meaning we need to leave the trap unarmed for a while so that the animal does not trap itself for a second time upon descent! We also had an unbelievable honey badger capture in which the crazed beast in the trap squeezed itself through the bars of the cage and made off whilst its liberator was on top of the trap and about to open the door!

Alongside all this we've been making night trips to the Alter Damm hide where visibility is good due to a full moon (aaaahh.full moon...this may explain lots of things.), but those left at base camp last night were not short of excitement as Trevor and his team were confronted by the largest-spider-in-the-history-of-Biosphere-Expeditions (at least in Namibia) whilst taking their turn in the dish washing room. Even the arachnophilic members of the team were impressed by its fangs and I wouldn't be surprised if it features prominently in their final programme!

20 November

More leopard news from the end of slot three with Thursday afternoon's follow-up team getting close enough to our collared leopard to be able to identify on which Apostelberge outcrop it was sitting. Meanwhile we placed fresh leopard bait in both the riverbed location as well as at the spot where last week's leopards had been spotted.

Success also on the brown hyaena front with Hervé, Laurence and Gill being our first to spot this species whilst on their evening observation at Alter Damm. Some of the team braved the cold to spend the night out on top of the hide.

Other good news has come in the form of a further two cheetah marking trees identified, Stefan and Lynne's breaking of the 'telemetry hill' record (6 mins 40 seconds), not to mention Alan and Janet's delight at their 25 cm millipede. This slot we've had seven baboons, one honey badger and a leopard in the traps. Axel and his team are accepting their zero capture rate with grace (and the large beetle trapped on Friday evening in Axel's trousers has been some compensation for his empty cages) – at least he is leading the way in the tortoise spotting department with two leopard tortoises among his surprise encounters.

On Friday afternoon it was discovered that the fresh bait placed in the location of last week's capture had already been taken and dragged up the riverbed by a female leopard. So more fresh meat has been placed there in a bid to familiarise the leopard with this place and allow her to take the meat before placing a trap there. With some important ground work covered over the past weeks, we're all feeling positive about more than just a baboon in the traps for the arrival of our fourth and final team tomorrow...

30 November

Sunday morning's blossoming so-called 'Queen of the Night' was the annual sure-sign of rains on the way and this was soon to be proved true by the afternoon's hail storm and thunder. Perhaps it forced the warthogs drinking at Alter Damm to take shelter as by mid-afternoon there was a large male awaiting release from the box trap under the tree there.

On Saturday afternoon we placed another bait in the trap, confident that a leopard or hyaena would return over the coming days. Each day the box trap team were disappointed by the empty cages, but at least encouraged by the fact that there was no spoor at all (meaning that at least the animal had not been put off by the presence of the trap round the bait). Today's box trap team had more excitement (and frustration) upon finding fresh hyaena spoor right up to the baited trap on both sides, even putting one of its paws inside the cage, before digging a hole under the cage. Still the trap was open. Spoor marks were then also found going directly up to the gate of the other baited trap.

Monday's drive up Kuduberg (or 49 minute walk in the case of Linda and Tim) was rewarded by signals from the cheetahs as well as numerous kudu sightings and a herd of mountain zebra. Although night vision was bad for Monday's Alter Damm sleep-out team, those who woke up early were able to see a scavenging jackal and a steenbok. The telemetry teams have also had success from the collared leopard, sometimes pursuing him on to the neighbouring farm. They have also been developing their new 'telemetry drive' method from the roof of the Land Rover. Observations vary from Monday's measly Egyptian goose and sand grouse offering to Tuesday's 23 sightings (with bonus Eland). The slot three chameleon has not reappeared, but we've discovered a mini pearl-spotted owl who sometimes hangs out in front of the lodge.

Meanwhile group 4 continue to increase their knowledge of the farm's rotting carcasses and are now specialised in analysing which parts are missing and which are still there. Quite a few tracks to follow-up this afternoon and fresh bait to place.

5 December

With the hyaena showing interest in the baited cages, we placed fresh bait in both western cages on Wednesday afternoon. No results on Thursday, so by Friday morning the pressure on Dita and Karen to find an animal in one of the traps was enormous! They did find quite a mixture of traps: one closed with a porcupine and one closed, but empty with no spoor (perhaps due to wind or another alien abduction), but the same situation had occurred by the river bed bait – the hyaena had walked up to the trap, sniffed the blood, dug another hole despite the branches placed by the trap and left again.

Certain team members have decided that the animal is so smart, it must be a female of the species...

Exciting times also for the leopard trackers. Thursday morning's telemetry team received a strong signal, meaning they could locate the animal to a specific outcrop of the Apostelberge. At one moment there were outraged cries from baboons running away as well as warhogs scattering in to the bush – perhaps they were scared by the leopard on the move. The afternoon team were a little scared as well, as they found themselves stalked by the leopard. With the 360° signal getting stronger even when pointing the antenna away from the animal, they judged this a good moment to retreat to the Land Rover.

The 2005 expedition now at end, I'm sending our last diary entry from the chillier climes of Europe. Many of the students are also heading off on vacation or on to their next projects. I think Okomitndu will be a much quieter place over the Christmas period! (probably also a chance for Leica to take a rest from all the stick-throwing action, they've been feeding her double during the expedition). Alongside the two leopard captures (one collared, one released), two leopard sightings (thanks Alan), two cheetah group sightings (lucky slot 1) and two hyaena sightings (sorry you were asleep, Louise), it's been a great two months of discovery for everybody involved. Thanks to everyone who has contributed to this project and participated in the highs and lows of the expedition work. Happy Christmas and see you next time!