



The cheetah trail

Ferocious-looking baboons bare their teeth. A mother warthog zig-zags over the street, tail up high, her young trotting behind her. Large kudu antelopes with spiral horns jump gracefully over a meadow fence. Unique holidays with a wildlife project in Namibia.

On the drive from the airport to the farm, the guests inside the Land Rover hardly notice the various animals as they pass by. This is no ordinary safari shoot or outdoor adventure. Tomorrow the group is heading out to scientifically observe cheetahs – the fastest mammals in the world. Some 3,000 cheetahs live in Namibia, more than in any other country in the world. Nobody knows exactly how many there really are.

This former German colony in southwest Africa is twice as large as Germany and, with under two million inhabitants, is one of the least populated countries in the world. German scientists Birgit and Harald Förster came here eight years ago and established the Okatumba Wildlife Research Project. Their goal is to study the behaviour of wild animals on farmland, and to improve the interaction between humans and the remaining large predatory animals which have not been relocated to national parks. Forty per cent of Namibian territory is now commercial farmland, but that's where 80 per cent of the wild animals live. Over the past decades, farmers have killed

off many of the large predators such as lions or spotted hyenas, or have had them relocated. It's no wonder the cheetahs enjoy the farmland – there's always lots of water, lots of game, and hardly any rivals when it comes to survival or finding prey. With the exception of the farmers, of course, who want to protect their livestock. Harald Förster estimates 300 to 400 cheetahs are shot every year. We want to find out how big the cheetah population really is. The two scientists have anaesthetized 180 cheetahs in the last seven years. They examine them,

mark them with ear tags, micro-chips, and in some cases even with transmitters. The Försters meticulously count game populations, interview farmers and track the cheetahs to see whether they really do attack significant numbers of livestock. Any so-called "problem animals" are then removed. Since 2002, the Okatumba Project has been

supported by participants from Biosphere Expeditions. Hobby naturalists from all over the world spend several weeks a year performing time-consuming and otherwise expensive basic research: monitoring traps, locating marked cheetahs and leopards, reading animal tracks, counting wild animals and recording data.

After three days of rain in the savannah, the air is crystal clear. In the afternoon, the Land Rover radio crackles to life: "Cheetah sighted!" One of the groups surprised the

cheetah while it was attacking a springbok. The bushmen Piet and Josef have put the half-eaten animal in a cage to bait the cheetah. Cheetahs may be the fastest hunters in the world, but their stamina is very limited and 90 per cent of their hunting attempts fail, leaving them hungry. The next morning the cheetah is inside the cage: dinner was obviously too tempting. Later in the day the animal hisses and bares its teeth as Harald approaches the trap, carefully aiming his blowgun. It's a perfect shot, and the anaesthetic dart buries itself in the cheetah's rump.

Everything now has to proceed quickly: Birgit has only an hour to take blood, saliva, dung and hair samples and to establish any diseases and parasite afflictions. This cheetah is in good condition, says Birgit after she and Harald have heaved the motionless animal onto an examination table. Birgit expertly measures the teeth, legs and girth. The cheetah's new name is OWR Nr. 105, as marked on the ear tag.

The expedition participants gingerly approach the sleeping animal. The cheetah begins to blink, the anaesthetic is wearing off. The cheetah is carried to a shady tree and given an antidote. Her ears twitching, she awkwardly tries to stand up, totters and falls over. It takes a few more minutes before she disappears into the bush. Perhaps she'll meet up with some of the 20 other cheetahs who roam this huge tract of farmland measuring 100 square kilometres. And perhaps she'll show up again – inside a trap, waiting for another rendezvous with the Försters. ■

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