



EXPEDITION DIARY Caprivi 2009

**By Malika Fettak, Kathy Wilden,
Peter Schuette & Ronald Seipold**

28 July

For your first message from the field, Malika (expedition leader) and Kathy (Biosphere Expeditions Director) want to let you know how things are shaping up over at our Caprivi study site.

It has been a very interesting and challenging set-up period this year as the conditions on the ground are a lot wetter than they have been in the past, with flooding in the Caprivi area at levels that have not been seen for at least 50 years. Our expedition base is not flooded as it sits on a piece of high ground above the water level, but it has meant that we've had to get creative about how we get in and out of base camp as the area around our island has become a beautiful, if slightly inconvenient, network of lakes and rivers, where there would usually be dry ground! This means that over the next couple of days we will be bringing in a large boat for you to cruise on for part of the journey into base camp. And for the other part of the journey we are acquiring a big Unimog truck, which is a vehicle with a very high wheel base and big tyres.

As you can see from all this, things are very different this year and we need you to arrive in high spirits and ready to take on anything, ready to muck in and be flexible, ready to be true expeditioners, just as the "reality check" we sent you a while back said ;) The situation on the ground is a challenge and an opportunity at the same time, and you'll certainly see the delta as no one has seen it for the last half century!

Before you all start to worry about your kit and changes to the plan, let us add that the kit list as per the dossier and the meeting point and times are still valid and the same. It still cools down quickly after sunset and is cold in the mornings, so make sure you bring at least one warm layer of clothing with you. And make sure you also pack a mask and snorkel....only joking! ;)

As far as the research work goes, Mamili National Park is flooded and pretty much inaccessible. But as you can see from last year's expedition report, our work has shown that hyaenas are the biggest problem, so we were intending to concentrate on hyaenas this year in an area north of base anyway. Fortunately the floods have stayed away from this area, so our research will be largely unaffected and most of your time on transport will still be spent in our trusty expedition Land Rovers.

We also have a local number that you can use to contact your expedition leader should you need to. This is +264 81 4619646 and is for emergency purposes only (such as missing assembly, for example).

At assembly at the Chrismar Hotel, you will be met by Kennedy Chale from Floating Skies and his bus. Kennedy will make sure that everyone is there and then bring you to the Zambezi border crossing to Namibia (a 2-3 hours drive from the Chrismar). We'll be waiting for you on the Namibian side and all being well, will see the first lot there very soon. Kennedy's mobile is +260 977 431427 and we are looking forward to seeing you all in due course.

30 July

Some more info, reminders and tips from the field:

1. You need to remember to bring US dollars in cash for your visa to enter Zambia – they will not accept any other currency and you cannot use a card. If you are really stuck without US dollars when you arrive they will take you to a bank where you will have to wait (sometimes for ages) to get your money changed into dollars, so it's worth making sure you've got it before you get there. The visas have changed slightly (yet again!) in that they now only offer either a single entry or a double entry visa, no multiple entry visas are offered any more. You will need to buy the double entry visa for the expedition, and this currently costs US\$ 80.

2. As this expedition runs over four months, there will be some changes in the weather. At the moment the weather is pleasantly warm to hot during the day, but the evenings have been very cold. For those of you coming at the beginning of August, I would recommend that you bring some additional warm clothing so that you are comfortable when sitting round the camp fire and warm in bed – I'm wishing that I'd brought my thermals and a woolly hat, so you might like to put these things in your kit, or simply a thick pair of trousers and an extra warm fleece. As the expedition progresses and moves into the southern hemisphere summer, it will get progressively hotter and we'll keep you updated.

3. We've been going through the activities and as detailed in the dossier there will be an opportunity for you all to spend a night in tents out in the bush with our scientist, working to capture our study animals for radio collaring. To join in with this you must have a sleeping bag and mat, so don't leave them behind when you're packing (see page 17 of your dossier for details). And lastly, most of the time you will be leaving the base and spending all day out in the field, taking your packed lunch with you, so please remember to bring lunch boxes with you to avoid having squashed sandwiches!

We have already had sightings of some interesting animals, with a collared lion from last year returning to the area after an absence in Botswana and a young leopard from around the camp last year has reappeared, this time without its mother. We are also seeing/hearing hippo and water buffalo quite a lot. This only adds to the menagerie that live in and around the camp, including some wild cats and some very inquisitive yellow-billed hornbills who will almost eat your dinner if you look the wrong way. We also have a chicken here who has decided to live in the kitchen on the shelf where the food is kept, which either shows great practicality as she is laying her eggs exactly where we need them or she is a little suicidal and has decided to reclassify herself as a foodstuff ;)

See you all sooner or later.

2 August

We met the first team at the Namibian border today, everyone with their luggage! ;). When we left, both of our Double Cab Land Rovers were packed high with food supplies, luggage and some of the team members on the back enjoying their first true expedition-style ride to base camp. It was late in the afternoon when we arrived at the Hanyini Research Station, an island in the middle of the bush. As we sat around the table in the main area for our first briefings and introductions, a herd of 300-400 water buffalos grazed around camp – what an amazing background for getting ready.

4 August

After a full day of introductions, training on the research equipment, going through datasheets and research work, as well as theoretical and practical driving lessons everyone was well prepared for heading out into the field.

We split into four groups: team 1 set off to the Mudumu conservancy with social scientist Julia for the community survey. The plan was to do a workshop with the locals, but they were promptly faced with a case of HPC (human-predator conflict), as a cow had been killed by hyaenas the night before and was still lying in pieces in the middle of the village. They ended up monitoring the scene and talking to the locals, getting a very real taste of the conflict situation throughout the study area!

Team 2, the capture team led by zoologist Francois, promptly joined in and bought some of the cow left-overs to be used as bait (and mitigating some of the loss for the local herder). Almost the whole day was spent in discussions and talks with local people trying persuade them not to go out and take shots at the animals – one of the main aims of our project here.

Ranger Neil and one of the PMU (Predator Monitoring Unit) went with team 3 to the Balyerwa conservancy for a foot game count in the morning and – after a lunch break in the field – a vehicle game count in the afternoon.

We all met back at the boat landing place in the afternoon, crossed the water on the pontoon boat and went back to camp with the Unimog. The day was rounded up with a review whilst sitting around the camp fire, everyone tired from the first long but successful day of research.

6 August

Breakfast at 6.30, Unimog & boat trip to our Land Rovers, where we met the night capture team all looking pretty tired but happy. During the night they had fixed the bait with a rope to a tree trunk, then split into pairs and kept watch in 3-hour shifts throughout the night. Those not on shift duty, slept around the fire in the open instead of using the tents, which was an amazing experience but none of them got more than 2 or 3 hours of sleep! The big cats as well as the hyaenas are around and their movements could be seen and heard throughout the night, but unfortunately none took the bait!

In the evening, the community team reported that the locals were busy with building a hut, so no chance of holding a workshop. Very few people in the two villages they visited were available that day; many people were not at home and/or busy with their daily work. A few interview appointments for next week were made, so hopefully we will have more luck the next time. Life follows a different rhythm out here and patience is needed.

The foot game count team walked a 6 km transect in the Balyerwa conservancy, accompanied by Neil and a local guide. They came across a group of eleven zebras as well as some impala and reedbuck and spotted a couple of hyaena and leopard tracks.

Mamili National Park may be flooded and inaccessible, but having investigated Mudumu National Park instead for three days now, the results look promising. Very fresh tracks of lion, leopard and hyaena show that they are all present, so we are hopeful that we will be able to capture and collar these species over the next few months. Cheetahs remain elusive, which is no surprise as lions and hyaenas are their biggest enemies and where they occur, cheetahs tend to keep a low profile (which is why there are more cheetahs on cattle and game farms in central Namibia, where farmers have shot and killed most lions and hyaenas).

7 August

The last research day before our day off. The community group held a workshop with lots of people in the Balyerwa conservancy, getting a lot of valuable data out of it. The workshop plan is starting to work now and everyone is looking forward to next week.

We tracked a new foot transect route around our camp in the Dzoti area, as we constantly hear two leopards calling around camp at night, a female and a male. One of them was seen a couple of days ago only a few metres away from the camp fence and we find fresh tracks almost every morning. Also, a male lion is back again in the Mamili National Park, which borders our camp. We hear his territorial calls every few days and expect him to be only a few kilometres away in the park. Another option for capture activities, depending on where in the park he goes, as most of it is inaccessible. Lions here are known to be good swimmers!

The northern part of the Mudumu National Park is still the most promising area for capturing the big cats. The driving tracks we followed with our Land Rover over the last four days aren't used frequently as the track is often blocked by elephants knocking over trees and branches. We are probably the only human beings entering this very wild area of the park. Fresh lion, leopard and hyaena tracks are seen each day as well as a large range of prey species such as springbok, kudu, roan antelope, wildebeest and kudu. Although very rare up here, one of the teams even came across a group of giraffes. Cheetahs remain elusive, however.

8 August

Day off! We drove to a lovely river lodge called "Camp Kwando" after a very late breakfast at 8.00 ;) and went for a boat cruise on the Kwando river. Having Botswana on one side and Namibia on the other side, we passed elephants bathing and were very lucky to see three huge hippos on land. As we crossed their territory, they jumped into the water with a big splash – amazing! Back at the lodge everyone took the chance to relax and enjoy this beautiful place whilst having coffee, before we drove back to base camp.

After dinner Neha & Charitra, both of them students from Jacobs University in Bremen and currently doing an internship with WCDF told us about their mapping project. Aside from lots of technical information about GIS, how to use and work with geographical data, we now all have a better understanding of what can be done with the data we keep storing on our GPS gadgets ;)

9 August

Two teams went out today for the community workshop and the foot & vehicle game count. Having monitored the Dzoti area around camp on a daily basis for a week we can confirm that two leopards, a male and a female, as well as hyaenas are present. Their callings are heard almost every night, so the capture activity will concentrate on the area north of base camp from now on. There is a pretty good chance for capturing one of them. Wish us luck!

11 August

Unfortunately no capture so far. A team went out this morning to check for tracks and again found tracks of the male leopard passing by the bait! Perhaps he wasn't hungry or – more likely – the only thing he has in mind is getting to the female. While the capture team stayed in camp for further attempts, Neil, Anja, Neha and I went out for a vehicle game count in the Wuparu conservancy in the late afternoon. The chance of seeing game is best before it gets dark as well as in the early morning. So we will stay out, setting up a fly camp and return back to base after a foot game count in the same area tomorrow morning.

12 August

Having driven the Wuparu transect yesterday afternoon and walked the transect in the morning, only few game was seen as there is high human disturbance in this area. Aside from hyaena tracks, we only came across a couple of zebras and one springbok. Nevertheless a night in the bush is always exciting. We heard elephants breaking branches when we sat around the fire, but couldn't see them. The tracks we found in the morning were only a couple metres away.

Some of us picked up a stomach bug from one of the locals, so gastro is currently making the rounds, nice!

Accompanied by Neil, Jess, Jacqui and Marco went for a survey walk south of camp in the late afternoon. There are some interesting lion spots, waterholes with numerous hippos and buffalos. The lion calling we hear from time to time is not too far from camp - that might be an option for another capture in due course. Aside from that everyone in camp is now focusing on the capture activities tonight, in between running to the loo, so keep your fingers crossed.

13 August

A capture, a capture! An exciting night for all of us. Francois & the night capture team got their leopard on their first round of checks yesterday late in the evening. Darted & sedated, the young male cat was brought to camp. Everyone jumped out of bed to witness the collaring, measuring, weighing and photographing of the beautiful 3 – 3 1/2 year old and 49 kg animal. We stood by quietly to watch the procedure, being aware that the leopard could hear and smell us without being able to move. His eyes were well covered with a cloth to protect him from the light of the torches. No more than 30 minutes later and still asleep, we left him to wake up 30 metres from the camp entrance. A group of four people was posted on a car to watch him wake up and if necessary protect him from other animals that could come by such as elephants, buffalos or hippos. Two hours later we saw his first moves and attempts to stand up. Still unstable on his feet, but obviously fine he disappeared around into the tall grass at around 02:30.

Smiling faces all around this morning. While the Unimog underwent a service, everyone was busy packing up until midday before nine of us left camp to do a final detailed check & cleaning of the cars parked on the other side of the river. With us was Peter who arrived yesterday and will be the expedition leader for the next three slots. Crossing the river two times, Jacqui and Christa marked boat route by knotting white markers on branches of thorny bushes still half way out of the water.

When back in camp we found the main area decorated with flowers & candles and music was playing from Charitra's computer. Georgie, Jess & Sandra did a wonderful job also helping to prepare a huge birthday cake for Ronel and Peter. Both of them were born on 14 August and we decided to celebrate a day in advance as this was our last night in camp. We had traditional cooked beef for dinner and "tombo", the local people's beer brewed in the villages. The Happy Birthday song must have been heard far and wide in the bush as no animals came to visit us that night after we went to bed much later than during the last two weeks.

15 August

Time to say good bye to the first slot. We left camp at 07.30 and arrived at the border around noon where Kennedy & his team were already waiting to pick us up. After getting our stamps at the border posts, the bus brought us back to Livingstone. Most of us stayed at the Chrismar hotel where we met at the hotel bar for a drink everyone looking clean and fresh with clean clothes – welcome back in civilisation ;).

Before I hand over officially to Peter let me say thank you again to everyone. The last two weeks were packed with challenges, new experiences and exciting moments but also with obstacles and difficult situations we had to overcome. You did a great job and thank you for your patience. We all know it's been very difficult and chaotic at times as we tried to set up new systems in the face of the floods and other challenges. Thank you for being trailblazers and for your patience and perseverance in what I know has been frustrating and downright infuriating at times.

It's Peters turn now as I am heading back to Europe. Good luck to him and the next team & hope to see some of you again sometime.

Malika

17 August

Hello, Peter here, expedition leader for the next three slots. Thanks Malika for all your work and it's good to be back in Caprivi.

So I had some days to get used to the nocturnal noises of the African bush again. Not only a baby hippo with her mother decided the grass next to my hut tastes the best (have you ever heard two hippos grazing three metres from your bed?), also an old buffalo bull loves the proximity of hut no 11 (from outside the fence), maybe he misses Malika :-).

One night everybody in camp almost fell out of bed because of a very strange noise. I thought, the hippos had walked in to the kitchen area, our four little cats (half wild) found a new playground or leopards are fighting in the bathroom. Guess what? Elephants shook the camel thorn tree next to the main area and all the fruits rattled down, what a crash in the middle of a peaceful night's sleep! All the fruits outside the camp fence had been eaten, inside they are still there. Good to know the fence is working!

Lots of other activities kept the new team members of the new slot awake during the first nights, FL11 (female leopard 1, collared in September 2008) obviously came into heat and is calling for a mate. The decision will be made between last week's capture MLI1 and another male leopard that is roaming around camp. Hyaena laughter, jackal howling, lots of bird singing in the early morning make the 'bush feeling' complete. Not to forget, the elephants and herds of buffaloes that are coming back into our area!

So our second team did well on the long first day. Fetching a new team at the Namibian/Zambian border work well with our partner, the shuttle service from Livingstone. The customs procedure is followed by a two hours drive with our Land Rover Defenders to our boat. Ferry over all the foodstuff, luggage and the whole team takes four rides, so we used the time to train people up on the Land Rovers with all the recovery equipment such as winches, high lift jacks, etc. and a first introduction for the team members wanting to drive. Another half an hour later riding our Unimog ('The Monster') we finally reached camp and after a walk around camp, everybody settled into the huts followed by the risk assessment and another lovely dinner cooked by Ronel and Moses.

The first Monday is always the training day, starting with explaining the daily schedule, the research activities, the datasheets, the equipment (GPS, compass, telemetry and capture gear etc) followed by a first bushwalk to familiarise everybody with how to move in the bush, getting closer to animals and looking for useful data as well as an introduction on what to expect in the local communities when working there.

In the afternoon we had several driving lessons. First one: Peter has to learn how to drive the Unimog. Great fun, at least for the driver. No - everybody survived it ;-)! Second one: Peter has to learn driving the boat. Survived with a few evasive manoeuvres. Third one: Team members driving the Land Rovers. Excellent! :-)

18 August

The first day of full research activities started with our new rotation plan. Everybody will rotate through all the activities with overnight stays outside base camp to minimise unnecessary boat and Unimog driving/waiting! The morning started with the Dzoti Foot Transect group for a game count and the search for tracks of our study animals. They got very close to a huge herd of buffaloes, but Neil our ranger and PMU (Predator Monitoring Unit) instructor got them safely back into the bush. Following a detour they found two hyena tracks from the night and finally they spotted our FLI1 in a dense bush! So they've had quite an exciting morning with much variety.

In the afternoon Andre, Mariola and John entered the data into the expedition computer quickly, so there was some time left to help Frans collect firewood. This year we have a new activity - the camp activity – that entails work all about maintaining the camp and the access road - the water pushes hard in some areas, so we have to keep an eye on the bridges we built. In one spot the water level rose so fast that we had to change the detour two times in two days. But with a construction troop from the village, our team members and Frans' experience in construction, we keep on fighting the floods!

Julia took out the Community Survey group to a village that had an HPC (Human-Predator-Conflict) incident the night before. They found out that a hyaena killed a calf (first it was reported that it had been a leopard, but they have found the tracks and they could clearly identify the culprits as hyaenas), so obviously that threw the locals into turmoil. So our group took the chance to interview the owner of the killed cattle and that incident is perfect for the capture team to acquire a target they can chase by putting a bait out that will be checked all night long. We'll see tomorrow morning what the night brings.

Finally, the Vehicle Game Count team (Helen, Clare and Andrew) went out with Neil and Ernest in the afternoon. They will stay out overnight together with the capture team in a fly camp. And we, who stayed behind in base camp will be waiting for that SMS telling us about a capture!

19 August

There was no SMS during the night. The capture team checked the traps every hour, but there was nothing. The Foot Transect team went out for the Balyerwa route, finding a fresh hyaena track and chatting to a farmer who was on the one hand very interested in what we are doing and on the other hand he told our team a lot about farming methods in this area and showed his well constructed new kraal.

Julia went into a village to an appointment with pensioners, but as they arrived everybody was out, as they were told, to collect the pension. Yes, those pensioners are very busy, always and everywhere :) But finally all of them came back, so our team was able to conduct the workshop/interviews which were prepared to identify the main aspects of HPC in that particular village.

Ronel and I had to go to Katima for a shopping trip, getting new diesel and stuff for the road maintenance team, which always takes a while, because they might be out of stock, the machine is broken or the only person able to help is out. It is Africa, you know ;-).

In the afternoon Frans called and told me – very proudly – that the new wooden bridge is just finished and would work perfectly! This will help us to drive over a swamp area where the water level is rising very fast.

The Vehicle Game Count team in Wuparo detected roan antelopes and, after they had finished the transect and made their way to the overnight camp, they spotted a pangolin! This endangered animal is very rare, it is still poached, because one can get a good price for it in Asia. The population is so low that it is very hard for pangolins to find mates.

20 August

Today Julia took her team out to a school in the Balyerwa Conservancy. The aim was to investigate how much the kids now about wildlife, predators and HPC. They visited a class of 12-14 years old kids and found out that they are all very interested and keen to learn more. None of them had seen a predator so far but, of course they know the stories and dangers about lions, hyaenas and leopards. One example of their knowledge might be that some of them really would like to see a giraffe, but they don't have the chance to drive out into the National Parks to see the animals. So we are now trying to work out a plan to take school kids out for a drive at some stage.

The Foot Game Count team reported the detection of three (!) hyaena tracks and one leopard track in Balyerwa. The movement of a whole bunch of hyaenas in that area is quite usual, but it is the first time we found evidence of leopards in that area.

Another HPC incident was reported in the late morning. A lion killed a one year old cow just 30 metres from the main gravel road in a Mutabalezi village of the Dzoti Conservancy. The fact that they stopped us to report this incident shows that the locals are aware of what we are doing here in this area. They did not ask us to kill the lion, they asked us to put a collar on the lion, so that they know where it is moving. This is a great success of our work here in the past, supported by our teams. So because of that Francois' and Neil's team went out in the afternoon to assess the situation. The tracks were identified as a female lion and the capture team put out a bait and a trap to be monitored the whole night. After the Vehicle Game Count in the late afternoon Neil's team will monitor the bait and trap from yesterday's night. I think the plan to have two team out is a very good one, as it increases our chances of being successful. So, another evening waiting for "that" SMS.

21 August

Last night's capture team went out for checks on the six set traps at 21:00, 24:00, 03:00 and 06:00. During the night two traps were found snapped but nothing was in. Instead the bait was gone! And lots of hyaena tracks around, so obviously these clever beasts managed to get the bait out without getting captured! Additionally a lot of jackal tracks could be identified all around, so those have also been interested in the bait. Meeting the team in the morning after a night of capture activity is always great, they are all tired but happy as the night was exciting as sleeping on the ground in the middle of the African bush around the fire can be. So Francois and his team deserve a rest until the afternoon after a late breakfast served by Ronel and Moses!

Neil's team joined the capture team again in the fly camp, in the early morning they helped check the traps. So there was little time to conduct a Foot Transect; instead they did a morning Vehicle Game Count in the Wuparo Conservancy together with PMU Ernest from that area. They spotted some male roan antelopes, steenbok and 11 zebras. Not to forget the leopard turtle! After coming back to camp and a little rest, this team's s afternoon job is Data Entry of all datasheets in the expedition computer. But, don't worry, it normally takes no longer than one or two hours and it is a very important contribution as possible mistakes or subjectiveness can be clarified now and not weeks after the data collection when you've all gone home again!

Julia went out for another workshop in the Balyerwa Conservancy where the main focus of her activities is with this slot. In the village selected everybody forgot about the appointment with us, because a "Lebola" took place. This is the negotiation and discussion of the potential new husband with the bride's family, which can take ten minutes or several days! Unluckily it took longer than ten minutes, and it is certainly more important to the locals than talking to "Muzungwe" (white people). So Julia decided to try a spontaneous workshop/interview in the neighbouring village. Surprisingly this village was not on our map we created last year. Who was responsible for that again - I forgot :-[! No, but seriously, for all of you who have been here already, all of you know how scattered those settlements are in this area and how unclear borders and belongings to settlements sometimes are. So, at least we had something new to record with our GPS :-)! The unplanned workshop went very well, more than twenty villagers sat with our team and it was a fruitful discussion about conservation, wildlife and problems in this particular settlement. Everybody was keen to have a look at the booklet with animal pictures and our maps of the study site and a lot of questions around wildlife were asked such as "What shall we do, if a lion jumps into the cattle kraal?". Another big issue is the performance of herd boys who are very often not really interested in taking care of the cattle. Other problems could be identified such as the distance between the village and pasture grounds and water/the river. But the village community was also aware that predators can be a benefit for them, e.g. visitors bringing income into the conservancies. Eventually Julia found out that fifteen giraffes from Etosha National Park will be released in the Mashi Conservancy (which is north of the Mudumu Nationalpark, outside of our study site) tomorrow.

Frans and Ronel keep the teams who stay in camp busy with maintaining the camp, the veggie garden, collecting firewood and there is lots of work to do on our access road. After we leave the Land Rovers on the Malengalenga side of the flooded area, we have to take a ride on our little pontoon boat and then finally our Unimog needs a good road on which we drive up to six times a day. So, to secure the bridges over flooded areas we need to cut poles, tie them with wire (African saying: "Gimme some wires and a pair of pliers, and I'll fix everything"), fill sandbags, etc., etc. Plenty to do all round!

By the way, there is still a big herd of buffaloes, some hippos and a few groups of elephants around base camp. We found out that the elephants like to use our bridges, obviously they don't like the mud!

24 August

Friday night Neil's team set one trap close to Mutabalezi village where a lion killed a cow two days ago without any luck. Also no luck for Francois' team who set seven traps to catch the hyaenas! On Saturday morning we all met at Camp Kwando for our "day off" boat ride on the Kwando river and later a stop at Lianshulu Lodge for a drink, but unfortunately for cake-addicted Mariola there was no cake available! As I was on my way to Kongola, a bigger settlement not too far away from Camp Kwando, I had a look in the Mashi Conservancies' Boma (enclosure to release wild animals), but I was too late! The giraffes had already been released.

All groups went back to work yesterday. The Foot Game Count team was again blocked by a huge herd of buffaloes, then elephants came along and finally a troop of baboons crossed their way. But they also found a male leopard track and could count some warthogs, kudu and a male lechwe! After coming back, the main attraction in camp was a chameleon in the tree next to the office hut. This guy really can hide, after a few moments it's really hard to find him again!

Another highlight of the Sunday was Ilka's and Ulf's sandbag filling session of seventy 50kg bags!!!! Well done guys! Julia's team had to jump start a giant tractor and was quite disappointed as the villagers they visited today couldn't find a reason to save predators. Mariola still wants to eat cake and I've never had a team who did laundry so often :-)

Last night Francois and Neil set eight traps, four were checked by the capture team, four by the other overnighter team. Earl in the morning, Francois found one the traps snapped but empty. The tracks showed that a hyaena was captured, but could get out somehow. We are soooo close!

Over the past few days Frans collected lots and lots of poles from villages and forest areas which were cut by locals for us to build and stabilise the bridges! My job today was to ferry them over with our little boat, thirty at a time, so I spent 8 hours on the boat, twelve rides later more than 380 poles reached the "Unimog side" of the flooded area to be used for the construction work.

In the evening Ronel surprised us with a freshly baked chocolate cake and Mariola was completely over the moon!

28 August

Over the last three nights Francois put everything into capturing this hyaena. All eight traps were out, Neil's team joined in, so that all traps could be checked. But only tracks, tracks, tracks of the beast, no show in the trap! Instead one team almost stumbled into elephants in the pitch-black night, jackals and wildcat were spotted. The noises of the night included lions roaring, jackals howling and elephants stamping through the bush, breaking branches and whole trees. Not to forget the hippos, especially audible in base camp "aoinkaoinkaoinkaoink".

Thursday morning we surprised the overnighthers with fresh toast and coffee at the Land Rovers. The foldable table (with table cloth!) with all the good stuff reduced the waiting time for the boat to ferry everybody over. After checking and cleaning the Land Rovers everybody was back in base camp to pack up and clean up. Just before dinner our scientists gave a short summary report of the last 12 days of data collection and activity. We conducted eight Foot Game Counts and Sign Transects, eight Vehicle Game Counts and 15 workshops in and with the local communities! Unfortunately we did not manage to capture an animal, but there was the possibility to capture fifteen (!) hyaenas (if we count all the snapped traps and baits gone), but they seem to be very clever! Not to forget the support for maintaining camp and road, this is a prerequisite for our work here.

Now, after we dropped the team at the Namibia/Zambian border, I just want to say THANK YOU to our second slot - you were great! I enjoyed working with you, I am still impressed with how you took it all in your stride, including the special logistical/flood circumstances and how much enthusiasm you all brought with you! I am sure nobody will forget things such as Neil's constant battle with our boat and his starter, scooping out water out of the pontoons, Ronel's muffins on the last day and some might not forget a night on the Land Rover's pick up under the African stars! ;-)

Hope to see you again some day!

Peter

P.S.: Do not forget to share your photos via www.biosphere-expeditions.org/pictureshare.

30 August

On the first day we collected the new team at the Zambian/Namibian border. This team consists of more than 50% of the Gent family. Paul convinced his wife, daughter, son, brother with wife and a friend of the family to come with them!

So the Gent clan and the other "non-Gent" team members learned their first lesson after the drive from Katima to our boat where Neil and myself taught them how to use the 4x4 equipment with the Land Rovers. After getting to camp and settling in, we went through the risk assessment and just before dinner we had the first point of excitement: Neil on his way to his tent came across a leopard!

The cat was hiding in the carport, probably pushed into camp by a herd of buffaloes. First thing we did was to check with the telemetry antenna, if it's one of our already collared study animals. It was not, so Francois and Neil prepared the dart gun to take the opportunity. They went out in Neil's car to try to get close enough for a shot. As this was just outside camp everybody could observe the search with the spotlight, partly in a herd of buffaloes, from the camp fire. Unfortunately those cats are very good at hiding, and obviously flew away somehow. But what a start for the new team, just in camp for a few hours!

Needless to say that everybody is now fully aware that this is a place out in the wild!

31 August

Today started with the usual talks, explaining the scientific background of the project, a first bushwalk to get everybody familiar with the bush, its thorns, roots, holes, etc. After a short break, we continued explaining capture, telemetry and the rest of the gear, followed by training on the datasheets for all the research activities. This is actually the most important part as the data recorded are our legacy for what we do here.

In the afternoon Andy, Paul, Nick, Nicky, Erica (and finally I could convince also Pam that her driving skills should be good enough to get an offroad driving lesson) came out with Neil and myself. I took the opportunity to check out last year's road during the driving course, but we could only drive it for two kilometres and then we ended up in, no, just in front of, another flood area, impossible to cross.

The non-drivers went out for another bush walk and came close to elephants, a herd of buffaloes and lots of birdlife not least the five sea eagles! With everybody back in camp, we did the last lesson, learning how to use the GPS.

After this long day we cooled the full brains down with a nice cold one, enjoying a lovely dinner in the sunset of the African bush.

1 September

Today was the first day of full research activities for slot no 2. Don't be confused, the first slot was slot no "0"!

Philip, Kirsty, Pam and Luke joined Julia and Makando for the Community Survey. As you already know we are conducting workshops in the countless villages to identify the problems with cattle and predators. We also want to create awareness. We always bring photos of animals, activities and maps of the area (produced last year) and those are always a good start for discussions.

The Foot Game Count and Sign Transect group followed Neil on the Dzoti transect. They came across elephants with young and buffaloes, but no signs of our study animals. Instead they spotted lots of birds such as fish eagle, Cory bustard, plover, roller, heron, etc. The birdlife here around the flooded areas is amazing!

The day its challenges too. First the boat battery gave up, but we have a spare in camp which could do the job and finally the Unimog's left wheel bearing decided to quit, so our monster truck is out of order for the moment. I'll try my best to get the spares, we'll see how long this will take in the bush!

We were still able to follow parts of our working schedule, so I took the Vehicle Game Count team out to the Dzoti transect. We couldn't spot any game, but fish eagle and two secretary birds. Around dinner time a herd of buffaloes decided the grass next to the fence tastes best - amazing watching hundreds of buffaloes grazing so close!

4 September

Everybody is in the routine of our rotation plan now, the change-overs at the boat and vehicles are also working (more or less – this is Africa, you know ;) Everybody enjoys the shift between being out in the bush, sleeping on the ground around the fire and coming back to camp for a nice shower and a bed in the hut.

Frans and Ronel keep the camp activity teams busy, with constant work on the road (cutting branches, clearing the road of branches the ellies broke off, removing stumps, grading the road, filling sandbags, tightening poles with wire etc), in the veggie garden, collecting firewood, etc. Can't tell how important this support is for a permanent station in the middle of the bush. And some of us found a new calling, e.g. gardening!

Another task to reorganise and pack the food boxes for the overnighter teams with pre-cooked food, so that our overnighthers have a decent dinner and breakfast in the bush. Especially Ashley and Portia helped a lot with this, Ashley is now famous for his Indian-style curry with beef or chicken (and always also a veggie version ;-)! The Foot Game Count and Sign Transect as well as the Vehicle Game Count teams rotate through the different Conservancies and the Mamili NP.

The undoubted highlight was Wednesday's walk through the National Park. Crossing some deep (up to the belly) channels, Neil's team spotted hippos very close, warthogs, buffaloes, lechwe, side-striped jackal and a croc just disappearing into the water! Other animals recorded were duiker, kudu, zebra, roan, giraffe and heaps of impala.

The Community Survey moves from village to village in the Wuparo Conservancy, always supported by PMUs Makando and Ernest from that area. The highlight regarding this activity was the meeting with a medicine man and traditional healer who is also the induna (chief) of his village and the area the village is in. So, a very respected & important person. Our team learnt a lot - about traditional healing methods, herbs and plants as well as that a boy becomes a man between 14 and 16 years when he has killed an animal, which is a sign that he can feed his family. Also impressive is the medicine man's knowledge about wildlife, predators and conservation, which is interesting and useful for our project.

During the last few days, Francois put some effort into finding the Mamili lions. He found a shallow crossing to access a part of the Mamili NP and spent his nights with the teams there. Driving all night, searching with the spotlight, coming across hippos, elephants and buffaloes in the dark night. This effort has unfortunately not been rewarded, so far.

And memories of last year come back. The elephants are back! First we could spot little groups, sometimes a few bulls, sometimes young in between the groups. On Wednesday I came back with Frans from the boat and we found the sandbags on bridge no 2 (of 5) all over the place. Two options: No 1, elephants played football or No 2, they warned us to stay away from their little ones! However we ended up putting the 50 kg bags back in place!

Everybody is looking forward to tomorrow's day off and the boat ride and R&R at Lianshulu Lodge, an amazing place on the Kwando river!

One word about the weather for the upcoming teams. It's getting warmer now. It can still be quite chilly during the night, especially out in the bush during the overnighthers. But spring is coming and for example today it is quite hot, 33 degrees centigrade at noon.

9 September

Great boat ride on Saturday on the Kwando river where elephants, hippos, crocs and hundreds of birds could be seen. Then cake, tea and coffee as well as some cool drinks next to the pool to make a perfect day off. On Sunday we started a new round of rotation through the research activities for each group.

Neil's search for signs, tracks and sightings was conducted in Mamili, Wuparo and Balyerwa and was quite eventful. On the Mamili walk Erica, Nick and Matthew spotted seven hippos, six warthogs and a duiker as well as a leopard track of our FLE 2 with the funny toe. On yesterday's walk in Balyerwa they found two lion tracks moving between the Mudumu national park and the conservancy. Additionally they detected two hyaena tracks of a male and a female and another one of a single female. So, as usual in that area, lots of activity. They also saw two professional hunter cars, probably looking for elephants. The conservancies sell permits to those hunters to generate income for the community.

Francois went out on Sunday morning to set up traps in the northern Dzoti area close to the Mudumu cutline, meeting his and Neil's team later in the afternoon. The campsite he chose is beautiful, under a baobab tree in the sunset. The nocturnal checks showed lots of activity (tracks) of lion, hyaena, jackal, but nothing touched the bait!

After another quiet night, the next overnigher team found a fresh leopard track around one trap, but the cat was too clever to step in!

Some more news about the gardening. Finally Ronel convinced her husband and a few team members to collect some buffalo and hippo dung to fertilize the veggie garden. And, of course, what we do, we do in a very professional manner, so we have now the DCU ("Dung Collection Unit"), the DPU ("Dung Processing Unit") and the DAT ("Dung Application Team") :-D.

Yesterday we moved our car port from its provisional to the designated spot, so all the Land Rovers, the diesel tank and Albius and John, our security guards had to move. We have to pass a shallow channel now with the boat, which can cause some trouble, if the boat is heavily loaded, so two of our local workers have to work hard to dig it deeper.

We also had a nocturnal visitor in camp. A young elephant loves to play the bells on the fence or at least runs along the fence without noticing the noise disturbance in the middle of the night :-)!

10 September

Today we took everybody to the Bwabwata National Park close to Kongola, a one hour drive from us. The de Wet's organised a meeting there with the local chief. The local chief is the like a king of a big part of the area and for the people of one local tribe. He is one of four local chiefs here in the eastern Caprivi, who also sits in parliament in Windhoek from time to time. Everybody in our group got a taste of a very feudal greeting ceremony with going down on our knees, clapping the hands, taking hats off, etc. After a short meeting, Madala, Francois and I went to see the chief in his house and then we took him into Bwabwata National Park, which is a completely different habitat from our study site. High trees, high sandy river terraces of the Kwando river. So we enjoyed our game drive and we spotted kudu, impala and lots of elephants!

After a refreshment stop at Susuwe Lodge, we made our way back to camp to pack and clean up for tomorrow's departure. Unbelievable, but again two weeks have gone and we will lose another fantastic team.

The Gent clan as well as the "non-Gent" team members did really well, I am impressed with how much enthusiasm and fun you guys brought with you, enjoying just everything we threw at you.

We have a week without a new team now, which gives us time for re-org. We will also close the traps for this week. Slot no 3 will be collected on 20 September and we look forward to seeing all of you.

22 September

This year's fourth slot arrived two days ago with two delays and Maggie had to wait for two days for her luggage. "No-luggage-Maggie" was outfitted by her fellow team members with the most important stuff! With the new group also Ronald arrived - he will take over the leadership from the next team on.

After our usual "Training Day" everybody was used to the facilities in camp, well trained on equipment and datasheets and well informed about the research in our study area. So, well prepared, we could head out today splitting up into the four teams again following our rotation plan of research activities.

On the way out to the boat and then to the Land Rovers, the Community Survey team, led by Julia, was accompanied by Neil and Francois (who went out to set the traps) and Ronald and myself (going to town). As you might remember, I mentioned that the elephants are moving into this area now and so it took us some time to make our way. Several groups blocked our way, quite a few trees have been knocked over blocking the road, so we spent almost two hours for what should take 50 minutes, but we could observe and count 59 elephants. What a great excuse! And finally the community survey team made its way to the village for today's workshop. It's interesting to see how the team members bring in their own knowledge and interest into the workshops, e.g. new ideas on how to involve villagers into the workshops. Interesting to observe and to compare is also the opinion leadership in the villages. In today's village for example two young women answered the questions not the "Induna", who is usually the leader.

The overnigher teams went out in the afternoon for a Vehicle Game Count, spotting kudu and buffalo and during the night they had to check 6 traps on a 10k m line placed there with fresh bait, but no luck so far!

23 September

Just to add the results from last night, two hyaenas have been around a trap, the capture team could spot two tracks on top of each other.

The Foot Game Count team found two hyaena tracks in Wuparo. On this transect we find those very often, so they are resident there quite close to a village, but there has never been an incident reported from that village. The Game Count at the same time unfortunately could only count one duiker!

The Community Survey, today led by Makando, had a very good day, all team members reported a visit to a courtyard and a kraal with very open and interested people. After that they started the normal workshop "procedure" with six villagers. The "procedure" is firstly introductions, then the presentation of the aim and background of the project and then questionnaire interviews. There are always new aspects coming up or interesting or surprising new answers. Today the new thing was that dogs are the early warning system against predators and if the puppies got eaten that would be a major problem to preserve this early warning system. After the workshop, there was still time for two more things. First to have look at a craft shop in one of the villages where one can buy baskets and carvings. And then Makando took the team to a school where they were introduced by the head teacher and the team members talked about the project to a class.

Ronel and Madala are happy about more help around the camp, especially also for the team member's input in cooking and sharing their recipes. Especially cooking and packing for the overnighers needs some help. The road is still in good condition, just the elephant activity requires some work of clearing, taking trees and branches out.

The self-named "Puff-Otters" Pelly, Buzz and especially Monika keep us laughing with updates about Monika's new word creations, a new language is born - Moninglish!

24 September

Last night there was incredible traffic around camp. Trumpeting elephants, running elephants, mating elephants, grumbling elephants, eating elephants, elephants breaking branches and knocking over whole trees! You can imagine there was not much sleep for us in camp as the noise kept us awake!

After breakfast I took the "Puff-Otters" out to do some telemetry around the research station where our three collared leopards roam around. First we investigated the dead buffalo, which we found three weeks ago, and he was completely gone! Maybe a croc has dragged him into deeper water, we couldn't find any tracks. On our way to different telemetry locations we spotted a lot (maybe the expedition leader bonus :-)). Two huge hippos in a pool, several groups of elephants, three warthogs, a black-backed jackal, fish eagles, hawks, six ground hornbills, a group of buffaloes and finally we could get a signal of FLE2, this year's collared female leopard! Unfortunately she was quite far away, we would have had to cross a deep channel, so we couldn't follow her, but at least we now know where she is!

In the late afternoon I went out again for telemetry, this time with Carole, Neil, Maggie and Ronald to find out, whether FLE2 is still there. But we couldn't receive a signal, but instead we got MLE1! Unluckily also behind the deep channel, so I will find out where we can cross that channel to access that area!

Today's Foot Game Count was conducted in Balyerwa, quite successfully, one leopard and two hyaena tracks could be spotted. Additionally they came close to a hippo, following his track, found an ant lion. The bird of the day was Bratfield's hornbill.

The clouds we could see last week didn't promise very good news, and today in the evening it came true! The first rain got us! It was only a few minutes and only a few drops, but we will see, how it will develop!

27 September

Francois increased the effort and has placed seven traps now. During the night to Friday checking the traps, the capture team saw a hyaena having a look for the bait. In the spotlight everybody could see him, a huge one, but he didn't step into the trap! More excitement around one of the other traps. A leopard (we found the tracks) stole the bait entering the set-up from the back. Clever beasts!

Dark clouds around caused heavy thunderstorms during the last two nights, with some heavy rain, luckily only at camp and not in the overnight camp where the guys sleep on the ground around the fireplace! Last nights thunder woke everybody up, I sat upright in my bed!!!

After Saturday's day off, another lovely day at Lianshulu Lodge, today all the team members went to Chinchimane, which is about one hour from us, to join the celebrations for chief George Mamili's birthday. Last year's team members might remember, we have also been there to see all the dances, speeches etc, a huge event for the region!

Later today we'll go back to normal research work, the overnights will be out and we hope and are keen to finally get something in the traps! We'll keep you updated.

29 September

Yesterday morning Makando led the Community Survey out to a village (still in the Wuparo Conservancy) of forty people. During the workshop it turned out that they have fifteen cattle in that village, five died last year due to disease, two due to draught and one was killed by a predator. But still the biggest concern for the villagers is a predator attack, because they don't have any control of that! Out of the fifteen cattle there are two new-born per year, so they are not replacing the losses. Furthermore we learned that the main crops are maize, sorghum as well as pumpkins and beans and that the cattle is more important than everything else.

Today in the morning on the way out we saw three male buffaloes for the first time, 10 m from the road, rushing through the bush, when they discovered us and then we had to remove some trees knocked down by elephants, and then we almost sank the boat, let me call it "unlucky combination of circumstances", but - no worries - we managed!

But still after all this, Julia's team had enough time today to add some more GPS points (kraals and two small villages) to the map, which we did not record during last year's mapping campaign, so also on this we are updated now.

The overnights were lucky as there was no rain in the area they camped. Instead we had a little downpour at base camp and thunder and lightning all around! Last night the capture team saw two spotted hyaenas sneaking around one of the nine traps, eyeing up the bait. In the spotlight our team could follow their movements, but were very sceptical and disappeared after a while. In addition we found some hyaena tracks around some of the traps as well as on the Wuparo Foot and Sign Transect.

Neil's team came very close to a group of elephants and the big ones turned off, so the team's way was free and led them to a honey badger crossing their way. Another great encounter! They also saw steenbok, duiker, lesser bushbaby and kudu.

I should not forget to mention Murray's cooking for those of us who stayed behind in base camp and then he took everything to the fly camp to cook and spice it up there on the fire, a great kudu stir fry, even the vegetarians tried it :-)!

Neil's bird of the day: The violet-eared waxbill.

1 October

On the last day of full research activity the overnights (no activity around the traps) reported being observed by "eyes" the whole night - so some couldn't sleep :-) - and on the way back they saw blue wildebeest, zebra, roan antelope and kudu as well as fresh tracks of warthog, hippo and a nice clear track of a huge leopard on the road leading to base camp.

In the afternoon Ronald and myself took Murray, Susie and Di out for some telemetry into the Mamili NP to find the collared leopards. It took us quite a while to cover the ground as the area is still flooded, so we had to go around large areas. In the very beautiful park (open grassland, acacia trees, water pools) we got a weak signal of FLE2, so we tried to follow the signal. We came across, warthogs, two large herds of buffaloes, hippos, jackals and a bushbuck! And finally, after driving around for a while, we received a very clear strong signal of her and could locate her in a thick bush area, where we also saw her last year. So that seems to be her favourite spot with some nice trees, termite mounds and bushes. As we were in an open car, we did not get too close.

Today we picked up the overnights at the Land Rovers with a nice breakfast (toast and tea/coffee), everybody helped with cleaning and checking the cars before we headed back to camp to clean up and pack up! Unfortunately also in the last night of capture for slot 3 we did not manage to capture something, all in all it was a very quiet night anyway.

So, tomorrow we will drop off this team and also my time as leader of the expedition will end. From Sunday on Ronald will take over and I hope you will have more luck with captures during his leadership.

Thank you slot 3 for being slot 3!

And thank you WCDF staff for being out here with us, I will definitely miss the hippo noises during the night and Ronel's kitchen!

Take care!

Peter
Expedition leader

P.S.: For the upcoming teams: It turns out that you do NOT have to bring your cutlery, crockery and mug as suggested in the dossier's kit list. We now have enough here in camp to take to the overnights! But do not forget to bring your lunch box, otherwise you'll end up with squashed sandwiches!

4 October

Hello, I am Ronald, the new Expedition Leader, who has taken over from Peter. I will support the next three slots until the end of the expedition of this year.

First of all I would like to thank Peter for his great efforts. His rotation plan works well so that I just have to continue this tried-and-tested set-up.

The latest slot has been collected at the border and transferred to camp. Even Rasha, coming from Australia and missing a connecting flight, made it to camp late evening Sunday to join our risk assessment on time. And I am happy to welcome Khalid, our "special guest". He works for the Diwan of Royal Court in Oman and for many years has been one of our most important persons in the field for our Oman Arabian leopard expedition. As part of our capacity-building and training programme, we invited him to join this expedition in Caprivi. As he is an expert on Arabian leopards and we are looking forward to an interesting interchange of knowledge between him and the local rangers/scientists in Caprivi. It's his first time abroad anywhere, so he's on a big learning curve!

5 October

The first day after arrival is packed with loads of information about the project and training sessions about equipment, procedures, data sheets, explaining our different activities as well as an off-road driving lesson.

Even when really tired at the end of the day, everybody took the chance to watch after dinner a video (produced by Roger) of this year's Oman expedition in our bush cinema.

Good memories for those team members who joined the expedition in the beginning of this year (seven (!) of them are within this slot in Caprivi) and an interesting insight for all the others.

6 October

After we have had several nights with rain (unexpectedly early this year) and quite "cold" days until Saturday, the sun and heat are back. After a pleasant night, we started our first full day of research.

Even before leaving together with Jane and Roger for a Foot Game Count close to camp, Khalid had already identified a leopard track at the far end of our camp. As we saw several different tracks over the last week close to camp, we know that leopards are definitely around.

Rob, Rasha and Martyn (congratulations - it's his 10th BE expedition!) went out with Julia and Makando for the Community Survey.

11 October

The hot weather continued until the end of last week. For several days in a row, there was an abundance of wildlife during our surveys, both around camp and on our way from camp to the boat. The animals now seem to have moved closer to the flooded areas.

Two nights in a row, around dinner time, we were visited by elephants. Some were only meters away from the dining table. They even stayed close to the overnight camp. Those in the community survey team comprising Karin, Nicole and Axinja, seemed to attract the wildlife. Last Friday, on their way to the boat, they almost ran into a group of baboons, closely followed by water buffaloes, warthogs and fish eagles. They even got stuck in a traffic jam with a big herd of elephants. On their way back from the survey they had to pass a big black spitting cobra crossing the road.

The Capture teams are keeping their spirits up. Fresh tracks around the capture area have us to believe we will be successful one day. One team found a hyena track leading directly to the entrance to a trap. It probably came to get a closer sniff at the bait, but finally decided not to go for it. Was the bait the wrong smell?

On thursday the President of Namibia, Hifikepunge Pohamba, visited this district as part of his campaigning for elections that are to take place in December. As almost every one of the villagers around us joined in the event, the community survey couldn't take place. So, Amy and Christian, accompanied by Jane and Roger who were on rest that morning, took the chance to visit this spectacular event. As Biosphere Expeditions and WCDF are on very friendly terms, the team members were offered VIP seats to watch several dancing groups. Unfortunately they had to leave for the afternoon activities before the president flew in by helicopter. But again, this was a great opportunity to get a better insight into some of the more cultural aspects of Namibia.

Our experience gained from both the community surveys and the visits to many different villages has led us to set up a new project with the local community. The aim is to create a better cattle kraal (enclosure). The first step we have taken is a brainstorming session about the advantages and disadvantages of different types of kraals, including questions about materials, construction, effort and protection. Next step will be to get some feed back from locals, followed by a practical learning session in how to build the parts in camp. I am looking forward to seeing what the final set up looks like and how this will be implemented in the communities.

Yesterday, every team member had a day off. The boat trip at the Kwando River and a very relaxing afternoon around the pool at the Lianshulu Lodge were a rewarding and pleasant change to the daily research work.

14 October

On sunday the team doing the 'Foot Game Count' was able to report more leopard and hyaena tracks close to camp, as well as sightings of reedbuck, kudus, baboons and a small croc.

The team's telemetry efforts over the last few days have shown a very indeterminate result: on one hand there were no signs of two of our collared leopards, on the other hand our female leopard no. 2 was detected several times at different places in Mamili National Park, south of base camp. She is covering a large territory as we found her tracks, together with those of a non-collared male leopard, on the road to the boat in the early morning. This was after we had detected her several kilometers south in the NP, the evening before. This reveals to us that she had to cross little streams in the flooded area.

Two nights of heavy thunder, lightning and rain helped to cool temperatures down a bit, which are still pretty high. Luckily it rained only one night on the overnigher camp, as rain reduces any chance of track identification. One afternoon Francois got a message from a ranger of Mudumu NP about a lion kill of a buffalo, not very far from where our camp is located. The capture team decided to leave earlier to see if they could find the lion tracks, but unfortunately the wet weather inhibited their success.

On tuesday the overnight teams came across a group of professional hunters. Based on "historical" figures obtained by the conservancies, there is some government permission to hunt a number of animals. Permits are sold to professional hunters and are part of an important income for the community. WCDF and BE rely on good relations with these communities so we have had to overcome our emotional feelings about this largely trophy-based hunting.

During that night a hippo and a hyaena passed by the camp. Next morning the tracks showed that they were just several meters away from us. Skills in reading tracks can sometimes give you the whole story of what happened. In this case the hyaena track pointed directly towards our camp, but the animal must have suddenly recognized the fire and stopped. Trying to avoid the fire and the team lying around it, she decided to step away from this place - the tracks continue in a 90 degree angle, leading away from us.

And, believe it or not, we almost captured a hippo ! A curious individual (even they sometimes eat meat) stepped in and out again of one of our double traps, leaving it all messed up. Of course the foot of a hippo is far too big for the foot snails we are using.

17 October

The last few days of a slot always seem to fly by. It is hard to believe that time has come around again and that slot number 4 was dropped at the border on friday.

So, what happened during the last few days? After some creative and interesting discussions about different types of kraals, the final outcome was a chart which includes a grading on several benchmarks, comparing advantages/disadvantages of the different construction types. We are now looking forward to actually building a pilot kraal at camp. Afterwards we plan to set up three more prototype walls to enable us to study the level of effort required for each type. Several members of slot 4 already helped in cutting and collecting poles, so the next slot may start soon.

Khalid installed a video-camera next to his hut in the hope of obtaining some pictures of a leopard that had been around from time to time during this slot. Because it wasn't a modern digital camera he had to get up every hour to rewind the recording tape. Regrettably, his efforts were in vain. It seems that if you prepare for this kind of monitoring, the wildlife somehow seem to know and stay a step ahead.

On thursday everybody was so well organized that we were able to get our car check, cleaning and packing up done really quickly. This gave us time to visit a natural swimming pool in a stream not far away from camp. In this heat everybody enjoyed staying out in the cool water, playing frisbee or just relaxing.

I would like to thank everybody for their constructive inputs, patience and hard work in the heat. Please don't forget to exchange your photos via www.biosphere-expeditions.org/pictureshare.

Hope to see you again some day.

Ronald

27 October

I'm definitely not just copying the diaries of the last slots, but unfortunately, yet again one team member had to bewail the loss of their luggage - Claudia's rucksack is very likely still in Jo'burg.

Apart from this incident, all the team members arrived safely at the Namibian boarder. There was a bit of a delay, caused by an overheated bus motor, but they finally made it to the research station. During dinner the team were visited by an elephant saying 'hello' to everybody from just over the other side of the camp fence.

While suffering a bit from the heat (>38 C) we still managed to get all our training done on Monday. A short visit to the near by natural pool just before dinner helped us to cool down a bit. On our way back we spotted some buffalos, kudus and baboons just 100 to 200 meters away from us.

On the Dzoti Foot Game Count and Sign Transect, Klaus almost stepped on a snake that fast as lightning took off between his legs to hide way up in a tree. We are not sure but it might have been a Olive Grass Snake.

The Mamili NP Team with Pat, Linda and Andrew inadvertently had an extended walk, by not finding the most direct way back in this swampy and flooded area. Andrew, our journalist, stepped into a hole crossing a stream and almost disappeared for a second in the water. Will this experience make it into his report about this expedition? Thirsty and tired but in good mood, the team finally returned about an hour later than expected. We certainly have to keep practising the GPS 'track back'-function.

31 October

This week has flown by. During our game counts and transects we spotted more kudus, buffaloes, baboons, warthogs, reedbucks, steenboks and roan antelope than ever before. One team was lucky enough to observe from a short distance, a group of zebras for a while. Conversely, the elephants seemed to stay away from the research station.

As we detected no signals from our collared leopards they must now be staying further south in Mamili National Park - an area we can't reach because of the flood.

Having seen hyaena tracks again and again I can't report any capture. There were some odd incidents though. One time a genet (not Janet, a team member of this slot!) stole a big piece of bait from a trap and got away with it, without being captured itself. Also, a porcupine track right next to a trap was identified during the week.

At the beginning of the week we heard lions calling. So, Francois led a group to scout around for tracks but unfortunately none could be found.

I must mention the enormous effort of Claus in helping to set up a reed fence around our dining area. Taught by a local camp team member in how to wattle reed the traditional way, he eventually took over to finish the fence unassisted. The result is perfect. Well done Claus and many thanks. I guess you have worked your way into a new job.

Saturday was our day off and most of the team members followed the call of the river Kwando, taking a safari boat trip along the Botswana boarder. We had endured the heat the entire week, culminating in a heavy storm the night before.

The temperature dropped markedly and we enjoyed a pleasant, kind of cool day in the Mudumu NP.

3 November

The second week of this slot started auspiciously. Team members of the Dzoti Foot Game Count observed four elephants on their transect and actually walked along with them for a while. On the same transect, 14 buffaloes showed up as well, confronting them almost "face to face".

Team members of the Mamili Game Count spotted a track of a young leopard and a track of a hyaena right next to each other on the side of a water stream. Besides warthogs and reedbucks that had to be noted on the data sheets, they saw a hippo changing from one pool to another.

Even the Community Survey was different. As the survey was planned in the neighborhood, it was decided to walk to this village. Although this meeting had been announced, unfortunately the iduna (chief of the village) had no time for the workshop. So the team had to continue their walk to the next village.

The camp kraal keeps improveing. In the last few days the poles rammed into the ground and team members started to cut down thorny bushes in the heat. It's starting to look like a real kraal. Well done and thank you for your hard work!

6 November

CAPTURE !

Tuesday all team members of the overnigher teams (Stacy, Janet, Alan, Klaus) witnessed the first capture of a hyaena. The trapped spotted hyaena was found just about 1 km away from the overnight camp on the first round of checks. The capture team quickly came back to camp to wake up everybody else and Francois prepared his darting equipment.

Soon afterwards the hyaena was darted and sedated with a perfect hit into one of her flanks. After about 30 minutes, all team members helped to lift her up onto the back of the Pickup to bring her to a village nearby. The local people were amazed and scared at the same time. Some of them have never seen a hyaena that close before or have been able to even touch it – an exceptional encounter for them too.

It was big female, age 12 or 13. We examined, measured, collared and at the end photographed her. She had a lot of scratches and wounds, all healed, over her body and she was pregnant. Overall she was healthy and in a good condition.

Next day we had to change our activities for the last night as all traps were brought in the night before. We decided to have a night within Mamili NP as several people had heard lions calling throughout the last few nights close to our research station.

Francois prepared his equipment and left the station after dinner with all team members that hadn't been on the overnight the day before. As they passed the first river crossings two hyaenas ran into the spotlight. And believe it or not, Francois was able to free-dart one hyaena from a pretty far distance – CAPTURE AGAIN !

This time Pat, Ian, Claudia and Linda witnessed almost the same procedure that happened the night before. It was a big, strong, young male hyaena of about 7 years. His neck couldn't even take a hyaena collar, so he received a lion collar.

Now we have two collared hyaenas north and south of the research station. This will help a lot in finding out where they stay, how they move and it will hopefully give the early warning system, that is part of the Human Predator Conflict Project, a boost.

Last but not least I would like to mention that buffaloes seem to move more and more into the area. We have seen them recently even close to the road to our boat (one day over a hundred).

During the last few days we had to face some serious thunderstorms and rain. A change that was mostly welcomed after the recent heat wave.

All team members are now on their way home. Thank you guys for your contribution, hard work and creative input into the kraal project and during camp activities. It was a pleasure having you around.

Will you ever forget the call in the bush: "dive" :-)?

PS: Cheapo Claudia – you made it even without your luggage throughout the expedition.

11 November

Everybody of this year's last slot arrived safely at the border and on time. It's no longer a surprise that at least one of the team members is without any luggage. This time it was Tim and Belinda that had an "unburdened" transfer to camp. Meanwhile the luggage has (already!) arrived at the station. Practice makes perfect.

As Monday was hot, we cut down breaks between our project presentation, equipment training, first bush walk, talks about our activities and rotation plan and Land Rover driving to finally enjoy our natural pool in a water stream not far away from camp. This was just perfect to cool down a bit at the end of an intense training day.

By the way, 'mummy' has given birth to 4 cute babies on Monday – behind the boxes in the office. They are all fine.

After dinner the first team with Tim, Belinda, Tina and Flavio left camp with Francois by car to do a telemetry session at night. The purpose of this activity was to find the hyaena captured last week. Bugged by millions of mosquitoes, but happy, they returned: the hyaena is still in the area and they even got a weak signal of our collared female leopard.

On Tuesday evening team 2 with Andi, Tamara, Simon and Stacy (attending her second slot in a row) went out with Neil as well. This time they couldn't get any signal of the collared animals. Besides the telemetry activity itself both teams saw lots of nocturnal wildlife: African porcupine, jackal, honey badger, mongoose, serval cat and many hippos wandering around.

Team 2 came back on Tuesday morning from a long Mamili Foot Game Count and Transect. Warthog, black-backed jackals, hippos and two herds of buffaloes with each over a 150 animals as well as two different leopard tracks as a result were proudly reported.

16 November

All our transects have been pretty quiet and we haven't seen a lot. All of us had to face the exhausting heat with temperatures around 40 degrees. Every evening we've had heavy thunderstorms and lightning in the distance, so the humidity came on top. And yet the team is in excellent spirits.

Saturday we had our day off and enjoyed the relaxing environment of Lianshulu Lodge. as well as the boat trip along the river Kwando. Even though we did not have a lot of sightings, we still spotted two elephants, impala, a big crocodile, monkeys with babies, hippos and iguanas.

Over the last two days the picture suddenly changed. On our Foot Game Counts in Mamili National Park, close to the research station and on the road to our boat, a lot of animal activity has taken place – there are tracks of elephants, hyaena, leopard, kudu, a lot of buffaloes and hippo all over. And yesterday afternoon we at long last received a telemetry signal from our collared female leopard again. We will try to follow her tracks within the next few days.

Our overnight team of yesterday had to return to base because of a heavy downpour. The water level of the flooded areas has dropped notably so that we now have difficulties making it across the shallow water in our boat. But we're just about swinging it. Then this morning one car at the station started to give us trouble – an additional logistical challenge. "Expect the unexpected", is keeping us busy in the wilderness!

20 November

The last few days of this week were influenced by the weather - a lot of rain limited our activities. But still we managed to finish our prototype kraal. It is thick, high and has a strong entrance (see pictures on 'pictureshare'). Makando is proud of the result. Now it is going to be tried out under real conditions by having two goats "living" in this kraal.

We also used the to catch up on data entry, especially the results of our community workshops.

Congratulations 'slot 6' for keeping up your excellent team spirit. It was a pleasure working with you all. Have a safe trip home or exciting travels for those who are going to spend some more time in Namibia/Botswana.

This was the last entry of this year's Caprivi expedition. Seven slots are behind us. A long time that went by in a flash. It was an expedition characterised by the logistical challenges caused by the flood, a situation we had to face from the very beginning. Overall I believe that we managed it all pretty well and I hope you will agree - it would not have been possible without you team members who put such a big effort into it. Thank you all!

Please don't forget to share your pictures www.biosphere-expeditions.org/pictureshare and I hope to see you again sometime....

Best wishes

Ronald Seipold
Expedition Leader
also on behalf of Malika, Kathy & Peter.