



EXPEDITION DIARY Namibia 2003

By Ben McNutt

18 October

Today sees the end of our first week of expedition work in Namibia.

So far the expedition has been very successful - I have just heard on the two-way radio, that some of the team members have just found another 'play tree' (a place where Cheetahs socialize, mark and scent), that makes four new trees in as many days, and possible new locations for our box traps. Harald and Birgit, the resident scientists, are really pleased, as prior to our arrival; it took them four months to locate just eight trees. Now with the Biosphere team on the scene, they plan to survey all of the farms 10,000 hectares, to locate all of the Cheetah's 'play trees'.

Whilst carrying out a play tree survey, Lisa and I were lucky enough to catch sight of a cheetah!!! At first I thought it was a just a jackal, as it was about 300 meters away, then as it came into full view we realised it was a young Cheetah, especially when it sped away from us at an incredible speed! We tracked it with the help of one of the Bushman trackers - Joseph, who confirmed it was the tracks of a year old Cheetah - what a great first day in the bush!

Unfortunately we have had no luck as yet on trapping a Cheetah in one of our box traps, we have however caught a porcupine, who was rather reluctant to leave the trap, forcing a couple of team members to 'tip' the porcupine out.

We are working on a different farm from last year, and the new location is literally teeming with wildlife - So far, we have seen Kudus, Oryx, Hartebeest, Springbok, Waterbuck, Steenbok, Jackals, Baboons, Warthogs, Eland, Giraffes, Zebras, Suricates, African Wild Cat, Aardwolf, Springhares, Mongoose, Scrub hares, Ostriches, Aardvark, over 60 species of birds - and one Cheetah!

Today we found a possible cheetah 'kill', the remains of a poor old Hartebeest, although we can't be sure that it was not a leopard, as the vultures had obliterated any tracks that had been left in the sand. However, we have been finding fresh tracks of both cheetah and leopard, some very close to one of the traps. So next week we may have some luck!

23 October

Success at last! A cheetah caught in one of our box traps! One of our expedition members, Terry, discovered a freshly marked 'play tree' just a couple of days ago whilst carrying out a play tree survey, on foot through the 'Veldt'. The tree looked as though it was frequently visited, so we spent a day moving one of our box traps to the new tree, and created a kraal of thorn bushes around it. The only way for the cheetahs to get to their marking tree was through the tunnel trap.

The cheetah we caught today turned out to be one that Harald and Birgit had already collared. A 4 year old male cheetah, weighing about 49kilo's, and one of two brothers who are companions. As this cheetah had already been collared and had samples taken, we just needed to release it. We all approached as quietly as we could and stood about 20 meters from the trap as Harald climbed on the cage to lift the gate. Within about three seconds it was all over, as our cheetah sped out of the trap and off into the bush! To be that close to such a large wild predator was a real privilege, and an experience that all those in attendance will remember for a long time to come!

31 October

Since my last diary entry our first group has departed, taking with them memories of long hot days, the ups and downs of field research, glorious sunsets and one wild cheetah.

Now, as our new group are getting stuck in to their first week, there have been a few events worth mention.

The beginning of the week saw some spectacular electrical storms and torrential downpours. The rains have now passed and we are all looking forward to the promise of new growth and desert blooms.

However, the rain has also brought with it an increase in snake (and tortoise) activity. My briefing on 'what to do if you come face-to-face with a dangerous snake' has already proved to be useful! As one of our team members casually informed me that he almost stood on a large puff adder, while looking for 'play trees' in the bush. Luckily he heard the warning hiss and froze instantly (the correct thing to do, as a snake will not strike at an immobile object) and waited for the disgruntled puff adder to settle down, before edging away VERY slowly!

No cheetah sightings to report, but so far we have seen fresh tracks, an aardwolf, an African wild cat and a honey badger. Just today we had an armadillo and a porcupine in our box traps, so things are starting to come out again after the rain.

We have also moved one of the box traps to a new 'play tree' that Pete (one of the Bushman trackers) discovered last week. It sports some fine examples of fresh cheetah scat!

That's all for now, but I'll send some more 'tales from the bush' next week.....

5 November

At the weekend, we spent our day off visiting a traditional craft-market and a thermal spa to the north of Windhoek, on the way home we stopped off at the atmospheric 'Joe's Beer House' for some excellent food and refreshments.

The rains have returned, with cloudy skies and the occasional windy downpour during the last couple of days, but the cool air makes a refreshing change. It was 100 degrees in the shade on Sunday! There is still a lot of electrical activity, and we are treated to spectacular light shows most nights, as the lightning jumps from cloud to cloud in the distant evening skies.

The guys have started a fresh bird list for this slot, and the current total is already at 73 species, with 17 African Pelicans spotted at the water-hole last night. The Giraffes are also venturing closer to our base-camp; they came within 500 meters last night.

There has been some fresh spoor (tracks) of a juvenile cheetah around two of the play trees in the south. The tracks went right up to one of the box traps, but then he decided against venturing inside. We have also found spoor of two adult cheetahs, and a leopard with her cub.

The telemetry groups have reported signals from 'Max and Moritz' two collared cheetahs – probably brothers) who are hiding out on a neighbouring farm. Hopefully they will return in the next few days.

The guys have found three new 'play trees'. Carole's tree has very fresh scat, so last night we moved one of the box traps to the new tree – hopefully our efforts will prove to be fruitful, only time will tell.

9 November

Our second expedition group has just departed, with two separate cheetah sightings on the last day of the expedition!!! When the team members reported the cheetah sightings over the radio, the radio telemetry group were immediately on the case, to confirm whether the big cats were indeed our two collared cheetahs. There were no signals confirmed! This data meant that we now have two new visitors to the farm – Harald and Birgit are really pleased with this news, and we are keen to trap and collar these cheetahs

There have also been new leopard tracks discovered by our spoor tracking group – female and cub. One of the groups also spotted a caracal, only 20 meters from the vehicle. Werner (our resident white bushman) said that it was the second time he had ever seen a caracal, in thirty odd years of exploring the bush! On Friday's night-drive a civet cat was also sighted in a distant tree and a bat-eared fox was seen.

For those of you who were on the first expedition slot, it is with great regret that I must inform you that 'Peppe', the sexually repressed ostrich, is alas no more. He died in a worthy cause – as cheetah food – and has gone to the great ostrich harem in the sky! On the positive side, the 'Terry-tree' produced an aardvark for us yesterday, the group watched from a distance, as the little ant-bear was released, and sped of into the distance.

18 November

Our new group have immersed themselves in expedition life, getting into the routine of an early start and then out on one of different daily activities – checking box traps, looking for fresh tracks, radio telemetry, searching for 'play trees', counting game species and data-entry . With regards to captures and sightings, things have gone very quiet on the feline front; however we are still finding fresh tracks of both cheetah and leopard on a regular basis, so they are still there – just proving to be frustratingly elusive! (although I suppose that's a good thing).

Last week, Harald (the scientist) went on one of his regular fly-overs, he was searching the area to the north of the Biosphere Expeditions study site, using a light-aircraft with specially mounted radio telemetry equipment. Of the eleven collared cheetahs that he was searching for, he managed to pick up signals for ten (and saw four) – not bad for an afternoons work! He hopes to survey the area which includes our study area before the end of the expedition.

A couple of our team members have also added a new mammal species to our list of sightings today – a cape fox. Then Neil promptly spotted another two! Some of the guys also spotted an aardwolf the other night, just ten feet from the Landy, and not at all bothered by the spot-light. The giraffes have also been seen most days. The bird list is also growing by the day, with a giant eagle owl, a pair of hamerkops, a secretary bird, Walberg's eagle, and a prestigious marabou stork making an appearance.

The weather has been a real mixed bag, with lots of blazing hot days, some refreshingly overcast days and a couple of rain showers. On our day-off in Windhoek, we even had a quick shower of hail stones!

23 November

Our third group of expedition team members have just departed, with the last group arriving tomorrow. This email is to bring you up to date with the happenings of the last couple of days, since my last diary entry.

We've had lots of action on the cheetah front, with lots of fresh tracks, and freshly marked play trees. Frustratingly, we have also had fresh markings on one of the play trees where we have set a box trap. One of the little 'dust devil' whirlwinds partially destroyed our kraal of thorns, and not one, but TWO cheetahs hopped over the lowered barrier to mark the tree. The kraal has been re-built, but I doubt that the two phantom markers will return to that particular tree for a few weeks.

We have also had a spectacular storm. We were all sitting up on an escarpment of rocks watching the sun set in a moody African sky, when we spotted thousands of swifts flying overhead, all moving away from the thunder clouds. Minutes later we saw a solid 'wall' of rain and wind advancing on us. It was travelling at such a speed that we all ran for the Land Rovers, diving into the first available car as the storm broke on us. We were right in the middle of howling winds, driving rain, thunder and lightning, and then minutes later it was gone! It was a last night to remember!

This is my last diary entry, as tomorrow I will be handing the role of expedition leader over to Ruth, who will be leading the last expedition group, as training for leading next years Namibia expedition. I hope you have all enjoyed the weekly updates.

Best, Ben.

30 November

The last group have arrived, and are getting to grips with the research activities. Their tracking and observation skills are improving but they have yet to reach the standard set by our resident 'white bushman', Werner, of spotting a warthog at 3km.

The first morning found two porcupines in the traps. Having been rudely awakened from their slumber by our arrival, they took a little encouragement with a broom in order to get them out. Since then the traps have been very quiet although we found tracks from a cheetah chasing a hartebeest past one of the traps.

The weather has been unbelievably hot – reaching 45 degrees in the shade! Thankfully it broke last night and the rain has cooled things down again.

Spoor tracking groups have found evidence of cheetah and leopard crossing the farm. The play tree groups have found some very clear spoor in the west of the farm, whilst searching for marking trees. One set was from a young leopard, which we found quite by chance when we parked the car beside it and the second set was from a large male cheetah. Both animals are uncollared, so we are ever hopeful that they will find their way into the traps.

6 December

Box trap groups had a good start to the week, with Aardwolves in the trap at the 'Carol Tree', two days in a row. Cheetah spoor have been found around the traps on two occasions – in both cases the cheetah walked right up to the trap, then thought better of it. But sadly no cheetahs have ventured inside - they're just getting to be too smart.

Telemetry groups have found the brothers, Max and Moritz, in their usual hideout just to the north east of the farm border. They are so close but impossible to see. Now that our eyes are trained, the antelopes seem to stand out so clearly against the bush background, but the cats are completely invisible.

The bird-watchers amongst you will be interested to know that the Marabou Storks are back at the dam and that the Secretary bird has been sighted again.

Night drives have seen Bat-eared Fox, Jackal, Spring Hares, and one group had a really good sighting of an Aardvark as it ran for cover.

One last play tree has been found, down near the main river bed. At first we thought it was a leopard tree as the lowest branch was 4 metres from the ground (cheetahs are poor climbers so prefer to jump onto the tree rather than climbing), but Harald and Birgit think that it could be cheetah, thus confirming our belief that cheetahs can fly! Well how else do you explain the presence of two or three spoor tracks, then nothing for miles! Yesterday afternoon, the play tree groups re-visited all the trees found over the last two months to check for recent signs of activity.

The last game count group came back with excellent news – they had sighted a cheetah in the southern part of the farm. It was only a fleeting glimpse, but the speed and the running posture made it unmistakable. A great note to end on.

Sadly this is the end of this year's expedition and my last diary entry, but Harald and Birgit's work here will continue and Biosphere Expeditions will be back again in February and March to assist them.

So farewell from this year's expedition team.

Ben, Lisa, Ruth, Werner, Harald-the-cook, Steffi, Niko, Marcel, Harald, Birgit, Arne and Bungu.