



## EXPEDITION DIARY Namibia 2004

By David Moore

2 October

Since our arrival earlier in the week we have been busy getting things organized here at the base camp in Eorondemba, ready for the beginning of the 2004 Cheetah Surveying Expedition. Three of us flew out: Matthias our founder and Field Operations Director, Anthony on secondment from our partner organization 'Woodsmoke', and myself, David, the Expedition Leader. Harald, our local scientist met us at Windhoek airport and drove us straight out to the farm from which he coordinates his research together with his wife Birgit.

Over the last few days we have been setting up the base camp where we'll all be staying, sorting out the land rovers and organizing the rota ready for slot 1. Other local staff members are also hard at work getting the safari tents ready, stocking the kitchen and repainting the toilet blocks!

Yesterday we took the hour drive in to Windhoek to pick up some final supplies. It was a great ride back up to camp at dusk as the sun was setting and the local animals (oryx, kudu, steenbock, hartebeest, warthog.) were active, going about their early-evening business. Each morning we've also been out with Harald on his regular research work, checking the cheetah box-traps (there was a domestic calf waiting to be released this morning). During the course of the expedition I'll be keeping you up-dated as to how each slot is getting to grips with the different tasks and will keep you informed of our progress.

Looking forward to meeting the first team members on Monday!

6 October

Time has passed quickly since Monday, getting in to the swing of life in the Namibian bush, familiarizing everyone with the expedition equipment and bringing four wheel drive skills up to date. We also covered a lot of background information on Namibian wildlife, the project aims and were trained up on the various activities which are carried out within the survey area.

Today began with tales of the various jackal howls, bird calls and beating of hooves that were heard close to our tents during the night, but I don't think any of us were quite prepared for the full extent of all that had been going on around us while we were sleeping. When explaining his long-term project aim of developing a method by which to calculate the cheetah population, Harold had been clear about the statistically low probability of actually capturing a cheetah - so we were excited by the early-morning report coming in across the radio of cheetah spoor 700 metres from the camp. This was followed by reports of other cheetah spoor entering the farm overnight at two different locations. By 9:30 the box trap checkers discovered that we had in fact captured a cheetah in box trap no.3, a collared male already twice captured on the site and known to travel with his brother. The telemetry soundings soon showed evidence of his brother as well as a third collared cheetah, a female with cubs.

Although not an opportunity to collar a new individual, over time this kind of data is useful for building up a wider picture of the animals' movements (and also meant that all the team members were all able to gather together on site to witness the release of their chosen study species - see [www.biosphere-expeditions.org/expeditions/namibia+.htm#clip](http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org/expeditions/namibia+.htm#clip) for a short video clip of the release). We then followed this up later in the day with telemetry soundings of the pair working their way down one of the river beds, still on the farm.

I've now just left everyone around the camp fire where the day's events are being recounted: as well as the cheetah moment, it seems we also witnessed a horse masquerading as a zebra, detected spoor from a hook-legged porcupine, surprised a hearing-impaired baboon, and Chris was 'dive-bombed' by a weaver bird. I wonder what tomorrow holds...

10 October

The last few days have seen a considerable amount of activity on the study area with telemetry soundings from two cheetahs, which are already collared as well as a collared leopard from a neighbouring farm.

On Thursday we linked together fresh cheetah tracks seen over our morning Land Rover tire marks with soundings picked up by the telemetry team and were able to establish that several cheetahs were moving across the farm. With the help of our two bushmen trackers, Piet and Josef, we established their direction of travel and homed in on their location. The same situation arose on Friday when the linking together of spoor and soundings meant we were able to narrow down the cheetah's location to the nearest small hill just beyond the river bed. It wasn't until yesterday that Birgit's team were lucky enough to follow-up the data to the point of actually seeing collared cheetah no. 6 (still with all four of her cubs). Our scientists are encouraged by these results: it seems the cheetahs are returning to the area after being previously scared away due to extensive hunting by farmers.

Yesterday the entire team helped with the relocation of one of the box traps: Harald and Birgit had identified a 'marking tree' frequented by the cheetahs with fresh spoor and scat, so we moved one of our box traps to this spot from a unpromising location which had not seen any activity for over a year. Although it was empty this morning, we identified fresh spoor outside. There were no telemetry soundings of cheetahs in the area (the only excitement for the telemetry team came from digging the Land Rover out of a rut), so it looks like these spoor could be from a new individual. We'll keep you updated...

As I write, everyone is having a go at creating tranquilizing blow-darts and testing their aim on our dummy model cheetah which has been tactically placed by the camp fire. We're winding down from the activities of the week with plans to visit a neighbouring guest farm on our day-off tomorrow.

14 October

Temperatures were up to 39 degrees centigrade today, but it's cooled down now, so I'm able to sit outside in front of the tents to write the diary - quite a change from last week when temperatures went down surprisingly low to the zero mark in the early mornings and we were all crowding round the camp fire. Even the bush is starting to look a little less barren with the green of spring arriving.

Familiar now with the different activities, the team members have been getting along well with the data collection. Tuesday afternoon's Game Count team had an exciting diversion from the task of following a fixed route around the farm to count and judge distances from the vehicle of the numerous oryx, kudu, hartebeest, zebra and spring bock (as well as the elusive giraffe family): only 5 km from the camp, 100 metres from the track, Chris spotted a family of cheetahs lounging under a bush. Although they departed fairly hastily, telemetry readings from the morning enabled us to identify them as a collared female with her four cubs. Given that such random sightings are unusual, we were even more surprised when we came upon another family of three cheetahs about 3 km further down the road by the donkey bore hole, causing a disturbance as they hassled some kudu. On the same day, the follow-up team also glimpsed a third family group making a hasty get-away up at the northern end of the study site.

Although the box traps have been quiet this week (barring the give-away spoor by the entrances), the telemetry soundings to detect and track those cheetahs already wearing collars show that there are cheetahs moving on and off the farm every day. Today's follow-up team zoned in closely on one female cheetah with cubs heading west across the farm, and they were able to plot her movements and follow her fresh tracks right over to her exit point.

As is often the case, the process of collecting the data took us to within several hundred metres of the animal without actually seeing it.

Alongside the survey work, the team members are enjoying their time...Judy has shared her Black Jack knowledge with us during an evening of Bush Casino, Wienke and Anthony are extending their guitar repertoire and Paul is keeping our list of new animal sightings up to date!

20 October

Having kept their location secret through most of the first slot, the giraffes put in a goodbye appearance for the departing group of team members, and then greeted us with a repeat encounter for the new team who did their first box trap check yesterday morning. The mother and calf seemed unperturbed by our presence.

Along with the changing of the groups, there has been a dramatic change in the weather, with thunder and lightning now order of the day. Although it stayed fine enough for most of yesterday, the storms could be seen further off at all angles in the distance. By evening time we were forced to take refuge in the communal tent as the rains arrived and then seemed to stay directly above us for most of last night. The tents seem fairly waterproof, but sometimes required a tactical positioning of the bed to avoid any drips!

Trapped together at close quarters in the middle of the African bush with no electricity, slot 2 have been bearing up very well, and have certainly made a dent in the camp's beer supplies. Hope it doesn't run out before the next trip to Windhoek.

I guess the animals weren't moving much in the night as the spoors team from this morning had very slim pickings, though they did come back with a very good photo of an aardwolf track. The box trap team also spotted the unusual African wild cat, a close cousin to the common tabby though much more vicious. No sight or sound of the cheetahs today though. When reactivating the traps on Monday evening, however, we discovered fresh scat on one of the trapped marking trees, indicating that a cheetah had been visiting while the trap was unarmed over the weekend. Clever!

During the course of this morning the skies cleared and for the moment we are back to clear blue skies and sunshine. After the lunch break the follow-up team will head down to the southern end of the study-site to test some of the telemetry points there and see what can be found.

26 October

Following yesterday's break and trip to Windhoek, Düsternbrook and Joe's Beerhouse, slot 2 are back in to the swing of the research activities today.

Last week did not throw up any fresh sightings, at least not of cheetahs – the only temporary residents of the box traps were a baboon, an agitated aardvark and a rabbit. On their rounds, the game count team also came across a pair of aardwolves as well as a black mamba stretched across the farm tracks (fortunately it slithered away). The telemetry team picked up soundings from the brother coalition of cheetahs number 15 and 16 to the east on the neighbouring farm, whilst the other collars are absent for the moment. There has been no shortage of spoor tracks, however, with several fresh tracks picked up in the southern part of the study site, presumably from uncollared animals. The follow-up teams have spent time checking out the marking trees in this area hoping to find a promising spot for positioning one of the box-traps where the cheetahs are likely to visit. As a result of the investigations we moved one of the box traps from the north of the site on Friday.

Yesterday we were contacted by a farmer who had captured a collared cheetah (not one directly from this project) on his land 120 km away. In many cases cheetah capture by a farmer results in the animal being shot or placed into captivity, thereby removing the main game predator from their commercial farmland. Relocating the animal to a new territory is not an option, as it would simply return to its former home. In this case Harald has been able to negotiate with the farmer who has agreed to release the animal – given the pressures on the animal, its future survival is far from secure, though it's the best result we could expect.

I don't know if it's the rains of last week encouraging the insects out in to the open, but evenings around the camp fire have certainly seen their fair share of wildlife activity, with our friendly ever-present 'skunk-back' beetle and a large brown solifuge spider (it looks mean, but is pretty harmless like all the spiders round here). With a full moon due in a couple of days, I'm sure there's more activity on the way.....

29 October

Yesterday's fortnightly aerial telemetry fly-over gave us readings of all of the collared cheetahs in the surrounding area, letting us know their approximate position. As a result we decided to venture out on to the neighbouring farm in the afternoon where cheetah no. 14 had been detected together with her two cubs. Male no. 2 was also picked up by the telemetry equipment and led everybody round in circles for a while before the team was eventually able to locate the female with her cubs and get great views of them working their way along the fence line towards our study site. Their spoor have again been picked up this morning and should provide some interesting clues for the follow-up team this afternoon.

This morning's spoor team radioed earlier with news of very fresh spoor from a large male leopard, heading west across the farm which were picked up again in a dry river bed just by the newly positioned box-trap. They have now just returned to camp with news of a fresh kill - an oryx - which had been dragged through the bush and across the external fence before being deposited in its half eaten state on the other side. There were no big cats in the box traps however - only one large and frightened porcupine which darted to its burrow upon release.

Some good friendships have been developing over the past two weeks and there are plans underway for a grand 'last night' send-off tonight. Hopefully Jude will have finished fashioning her disco mirror ball so that it'll be in place for tonight's fire-side rendition of Bohemian Rhapsody.

18 November

On their second full day of on-site activities, slot three are in the swing of the data collection work with quite promising results so far. All this despite the temperamental weather with passing storms and strong winds causing the camp on occasion to turn in to a minor flood zone.

It seems we only have to leave the camp these days in order to find fresh spoor, with the first spoor reports coming in on day one as we drove round to re-set the box traps. Yesterday's spoor tracking team found more cheetah tracks entering and exiting the farm (as well as spotting a bat-eared fox with cubs), while this morning's box trap team found more outside one of the traps as well as next to an old marking tree. Then this morning's transect and spoor teams found leopard spoor in two different locations along a river bed - the follow-up team have just left this afternoon to see if they can establish if or where the animal left the study site.

From the telemetry teams we've had signals from the male coalition of cheetah's no. 15 and 16 who are still lurking on the neighbouring farm, while this morning's team picked up signals from female no. 6 and her four cubs. We even had our first cheetah sighting when we followed up the telemetry yesterday afternoon with Chris getting a fleeting glimpse of an unknown cheetah disappearing in to the bush. With nobody to confirm his sighting, he's having to deal with the scepticism of his fellow team members (and rumours that it was actually an oryx). I was out with the game count team getting close to the giraffes and crashing the vultures' water hole party, so I'm remaining neutral on this particular issue.

With more certainty we can say that there was a hysterical guinea fowl in one of the box traps this morning as well as a pangolin on Tuesday. This pangolin (a shy nocturnal aardvark-like creature with scales) rolled up in to a ball when we approached, but we were able to lift it out and place it down in the bush for it to scurry back to its burrow once we had left.

Needless to say, the team members are having fun settling in here at the camp - the only screams so far have come from Jenna who mistook a millipede for her hairbrush, though there are fresh reports coming in of a large, but benevolent mouse who makes a tour of the tents late at night. Robin has hatched a plan to tether a honey badger outside his tent to ward away any unwelcome visitors, though with even distant sightings of this ferocious animal being rare, we suspect he may have to revise his plans.

The data entry team have finished early and are leaving now to check out some new marking tree locations, so I'm going to get a lift up to the farm with them to send this!

23 November

Last Thursday presented an exciting follow-up when two teams went out to track the leopard spoor found in the morning. These spoor led them along a river bed before disappearing down in to an aardvark burrow. Even our tracker, Josef, was nervous for a moment as we wondered if the leopard (not an animal we would want to corner) was still down there. Everybody held back at a cautious distance until Josef was able to identify the exiting spoor and establish that it had already left and continued its way up the river bed.

We've also put in a great deal of effort in pursuit of the adult male cheetah no. 2 who managed to escape our tracking attempts: adult male cheetah spoor were picked up leaving the farm on Friday morning and then entering again on Saturday. Although the telemetry teams were able to link these in with signals from cheetah no. 2, the afternoon follow-up teams failed to locate him - not for want of trying! Harald knows that he has quite a large territory, often simply crossing the study-site on route to more distant hunting grounds, so I guess he was just too fast for us this time.

In addition we have found spoor from a young female cheetah, which we presume to be un-collared.

We are back now to the clear starry night skies that we experienced last month (with a full moon due on Friday, so I'm told), and the team members are also enjoying their evenings at the camp. After the first few days spent enjoying the unusual sounds of the bush, we've now moved on to the treasures of Jerry's CD collection and Robin's 'ipod' (not to mention Anthony on the guitar), and have created a few night sounds of our own to rival those of the jackals.

This morning's teams have just returned to camp for lunch and shelter from the sun. The spoor team found leopard spoor (about 8 hours old), the box-trappers had a porcupine, and although the telemetry team heard nothing from a cheetah, they do have tales of fighting rival factions of baboons.

28 November

Cheetah no. 2 has definitely gained himself a reputation during the last slot of the 2004 cheetah surveying expedition. After relatively scarce signals during the routine telemetry rounds, his collar signal was picked up late on Wednesday evening when some keen team members were squeezing in a little extra telemetry work up at the look-out. We then received a very faint signal from him from the telemetry team on Thursday.

Our big chance of a closer encounter came on Friday when the aerial telemetry flight picked him up on the neighbouring farm and the entire team headed over for their last afternoon to see if they could locate him. Alas it was not to be - the dramatic electric storms accompanied by torrential rain and hail meant it was impossible to do telemetry and everybody was forced to return and enjoy sundown at the camp. Cheetah no.2 had not had his last word, however, and the box trap checkers found trace of him on their Saturday morning check - he had actually hopped over the central plate of one of the box traps to gain access to the marking tree, left spoor and scat as evidence of his visit, and then safely exited to continue on his way (this is only the fourth time in six years that Harald and Birgit have come across this kind of cunning behaviour).

Even if cheetah sightings are limited to a couple of unconfirmed fleeting glimpses, there has been plenty to ensure a satisfied slot 3: The wallowing warthogs on the water hole observation are high on the list, as well as the newly born kudu still wrapped in its placenta along with a chance observation of an aardvark on one of the night drives. It is also clear that several cheetahs have been on the farm over the last couple of weeks: Friday's spoor team found evidence of a female cheetah with cubs and were able to follow the tracks to the bush which the animals had used as a resting place.

Gottfried the farm worker also sighted two cheetahs (one with a collar) by the dam on Wednesday morning and the telemetry team detected that it was cheetah no.14 which has since moved to the neighbouring farm.

As we finish for 2004 (we'll be back in March 2005 to follow-up on cheetah no.2!), let me thank everyone for their excellent contribution over the past two months. All teams have thrown themselves into the activities with enthusiasm both for the less glamorous activities - making the meeley-pop, doing the car checks - as well as the more obvious highlights. Your great attitude has been vital to making the expedition a success! I'll be forwarding the last day group photos by email shortly, and of course we'll also be sending out the post-expedition report within six months.