



EXPEDITION DIARY Namibia 2006

By Clare Fothergill

28 August

It is a cold and wet day in Germany and Matthias and I are sorting out the last details of this year's Biosphere Expedition to Namibia. Tomorrow we fly to Windhoek to meet up with the rest of the scientific team who are preparing for the arrival of the first team on the 4th September. It is an exciting time as we will be embarking on Biosphere's fourth year conducting research on cheetahs in Namibia, with leopards and hyaenas recently joining in.

The weather in Namibia at the moment is hot and dry and a new fact that I have just learnt is that all areas of Namibia average more than 300 days of sunshine a year! So don't forget your suntan lotion! I am looking forward to meeting the first team members next Monday, so until then, safe travels.

Clare Fothergill
Expedition Leader

2 September

The sights and sounds of Africa have been filling my senses since I arrived here in Namibia. Together with the scientists Harald and Birgit, and their interns Steffi, Robin & Juergen we have been getting all the expedition equipment ready for the arrival of the first team. Land Rovers have been serviced, datasheets compiled, binoculars, GPSs, rangefinders and telemetry aeriels all checked.

The 20,000 hectare study area still shows the effects of the heavy rains earlier this year with tall grasses everywhere. Although beautiful to see this poses a fire hazard to the site and we will have to be extra vigilant whilst working in the field. The scrub savannah is full of birdlife with guinea fowl, sandgrouse, korhans, hornbills and rollers common sightings. This morning close to base we have also seen blue wildebeest, kudu, impala and hartebeest grazing. According to Harald there are approximately 20 leopards and up to 15 cheetahs which move through the study area. How many of those we shall come across in the next few months is yet to be discovered, but the sound of a radio-collared leopard only 500 metres away from us this morning was certainly exciting.

I look forward to meeting the first team members on Monday morning and can't wait for this year's expedition in Namibia to begin!

7 September

The first team members of this year's expedition in Namibia have brought with them an incredible amount of good fortune. After two days of training on data collection techniques, completing data sheets, handling equipment and off road driving we began data collection for real on Wednesday.

One of our daily activities involves checking box traps at various locations throughout the study site. These box traps are located in strategic places which cheetahs frequent to mark their territory and leopards visit to take bait. If a new animal is caught it is sedated, samples are taken and the animal's condition recorded before it is fitted with a radio collar. It is one of the most rewarding activities that can occur for this type of study but happens rarely.

So, when on Wednesday morning we received a radio call stating that a cat was inside one of the box traps no one could believe it! It was an incredible experience for all the team members to be able to see a wild cheetah so close and only on our first day of data collection. The animal that was trapped had been radio collared 13 months previously along with two of his brothers and had not been seen since.

Harald and Birgit co-ordinated an extremely controlled plan of action where we quietly moved the cat into the shade and gave it water. We then set two more traps in the hope that the two other brothers would also come.

This morning we were not disappointed – we now had three very large wild cheetahs in the traps. Harald and Birgit were so pleased to see the animals in such good condition and with their radio collars intact decided that we conduct a “hot release”. This means to let the cheetahs loose without any sedation. Again all of the procedures were done in such a way to minimise the stress on the animals who are obviously not used to being in a cage. With all the team members and staff safely on top of the Land Rovers, Birgit, Harald and myself set about releasing the animals.

It was an amazing experience and one that had my heart pounding as we each in turn released one cat. As we initially checked the traps the animals were demonstrating dominance behaviour by lunging at us and hissing. 60kg of wild animal bearing razor sharp teeth is not something I will forget in a hurry! As I walked to my cage however and climbed on top I could only be awed by the beauty of these creatures, their eyes so huge and markings so delicate. I slowly raised the door of the cage with the animal growling beneath me and within a moment he was gone, sprinting through the sandy river bed and into the camouflage of the open savannah. After 300m he stopped and turned to have one last look at his captors and then was gone. What an incredible morning.

9 September

The days following the cheetah release could easily have become an anticlimax for all of us. Fortunately we have had some really rewarding experiences and none of the momentum of data collection has been lost. Yesterday afternoon all the teams radioed in to say they needed more time in the field to complete their studies.

Harald, Karo, Jethro and Manuela had found fresh spoor of the three sibling cheetahs firstly at the Alter Damm watering hole and then in a dry river bed where there was clear evidence of a chase to catch an oryx. It seems that no kill was made, but following the tracks for nearly 1 km they were able to see the huge leaps and bounds the cats made as they tried to reach their prey. The non-retractable claw marks distinctively visible as they sprinted together.

The telemetry group was also successful in receiving frequencies from all three cheetahs and a female leopard from two vantage points. The specific locations, however, could not be found as on the third hill top (to enable a triangulation to be made) there were no signals at all.

Matthias, Dusty and Kathleen made 16 game count entries, which is the current record but could not disguise their disappointment when on the way back home (outside of the data collection route) they saw herds of impala, hartebeest, waterbuck, oryx and lots of warhogs, which could not be recorded. The stunningly beautiful sunset made up for this, however, as the sky was awash with hues of red, purple, blues and orange.

The night observation team were treated to a sighting of an armadillo who seemed to be naturally comical as he mooched around the water hole with his huge ears and nose. A jackal and a couple of impala also paid a visit to the moonlit site.

After a huge rainstorm (when I actually put on my waterproof jacket!) the weather has returned to being hot and incredibly dry. It is amazing that the savannah supports so many animals in such a hostile environment.

12 September

On Sunday afternoon the whole team ventured up to Kuduberg, the highest point in the study area (1650 m) to experience a stunning view of the 18,000 hectares we are working in. Later on sundowners were enjoyed on Mathildenhöhe as another beautiful African sunset took our breath away.

The team members who stayed on the farm on the day off from data collection diligently checked all the box traps, which had been set the previous day. Although all were empty the journey revealed some serious poaching activities. As we arrived at one of the box trap locations, we were alerted by the presence of more than 25 vultures flying overhead. On closer inspection by Matthias and Dominique, the intestines of an animal were found in the bush. Although at this point we could not identify what it was, the fact that the remains were still intact suggested that this was a fresh kill. After discussions with Horst, the farm manager, and another visit to the site it was discovered that it was a mountain zebra that had been killed. Biosphere's presence on the farm and the continued work throughout the year by Birgit and Harald has almost reduced poaching on the farm to zero. So this was a big blow to everyone's efforts. We are still monitoring the border fence to try and identify where the poachers left the farm with their trophy.

On a happier note Amanda, Krista and Dominique saw 10 young male kudu at the observation post at the Alter Damm along with warthogs and a male jackal. Whilst checking the box traps this morning Dusty, Kathy and Matthias found a baby baboon inside the cage. Dusty let it loose and it shot off into the bush towards the barks of the rest of its troop.

13 September

Yesterday afternoon saw a record number of game sightings with over 26 different encounters recorded by Jethro, Karo and Manu. This included sightings of kudu, mountain zebra, springbok, hartebeest, oryx and steenbok.

This morning Amanda, Krista, Springhaan and myself identified six different leopard spoors. The first was a group of three animals, a mother with two cubs. The clearest of the spoors, was over six days old. The other three leopard spoors were younger; perhaps only 12 hours old and the spoor tracking team will follow these this afternoon. Birgit suggested that the reason for such a high number of spoors in the one area was due to the death of two old leopards approximately a month ago. The territories once occupied by these animals is now available and it is possible that new animals are moving into the area. It was almost unbelievable to see so many spoors on one stretch of dry river bed.

Stefan utilising his new tracking skills retraced Dominique's footprints in the dry river this morning. He successfully found her room key which she had desperately been searching for since yesterday afternoon! Leika, (the collie dog) also returned her lost glasses case in her mouth in the vain hope that someone might throw it for her!

17 September

The last days of data collection by the first Biosphere Team in Namibia were completed with loads of enthusiasm and lots of laughter.

Over the two weeks we managed to capture animals on eight different occasions in the box traps – only three were cheetahs of course but we also had three porcupines, one baboon and one guinea fowl.

The spoors found indicate that there may be two groups of three cheetahs in the study area but we had no sightings or box trap activity from the new group as yet. There are certainly a number of new leopards active on the farm and the spoor from the mother with two cubs was a hugely exciting find.

The first team have now left Okomitundu and gone their separate ways to continue travelling or to fly home and all will be sorely missed. The cries of 'yeah baby yeah' will no longer be heard and the Amarula stocks can now be replenished! Fortunately Stefan did not drive away with one of the Land Rovers and Dominique will continue her search for the elusive meerkats in the Kalahari!

I would like to say a big thank you to you all for a superb first two weeks of the expedition and for all your hard work collecting data. I hope the memory of the capture and release of three cheetahs will be etched in your minds for a long time to come. Don't forget the beautiful sunsets, full moon, crickets in the tall grass, one-eared steenboks, hot sunny days, the view from Kudubergand well there is so much more. See you all again soon!

Safe travels.

20 September

After a hectic Monday morning in Windhoek sorting out cars, tyres and general supplies Steffi, Robin and I met the new team members at Casa Piccolo. Over the weekend there had been an incident at the farm involving the energy company who are putting in new power lines and the 100 km long water pipe which runs from Swakopmund to Karibib. A miscalculation by the guys digging the holes for the new pylons had resulted in a 50 m high fountain of water spurting out of the pipeline for two hours. Whilst the pipeline is being fixed over 50 farms are now working with reserve supplies and we are all being careful to use as little water as possible. It just makes you realise how vulnerable we are in this hostile environment and also makes me realise how much I take for granted the water coming out of the tap every day.

In continuation of 'this is Africa' week, a bush fire broke out on a farm approx 40 km away from Okomitundu. The black smoke could be seen from the farm and Horst sent his farm staff along with a huge water blower to help fight the fire. There are no official fire brigades out here in the bush and all the farms help each other out wherever possible.

Fortunately this morning we awoke to clear skies and little wind. The fire had been controlled last night by back burning and everyone is hoping that the smouldering ashes will not reignite this morning. Bush fires are part of the natural rhythm of the landscape here especially in the dry season. However, in the commercial farmland area a fire could destroy the livestock, game and habitats that exist on the farms and the livelihoods of hundreds of people.

The team members set off this morning to begin data collection after a day of training and lectures. Yesterday during the box trap checks we all visited the den of the brown hyaena. The stench from a rotting jackal lingered in the air and there were piles of bones and feathers everywhere. It was a strange sensation to realise that we were standing on top of 15 sleeping hyaenas who probably were wondering what was disturbing their morning sleep. Fresh spoor surrounded the den and Harald was reassured that the hyaenas were still using this site. It is only possible to visit the den once every month - otherwise the disturbance results in the whole pack moving to another area for at least six months before they feel comfortable to return. Although hyaenas are social animals, they hunt alone, travelling up to 50 km each night. With the last slot we identified their spoor on the other side of the farm and we are hoping for more evidence of their activities in the next two weeks.

Huge fresh leopard spoor were present around and right up to the gate of the box trap at Kuduposten yesterday and one of the baits has been taken. So everyone has fingers crossed for more leopard action in the next few days!

21 September

There must be something extremely lucky about the first day of data collection. I know that the first slot team members will not believe me when I say that yesterday morning we caught a leopard!! And you will definitely think I am making things up when I say we caught another one this morning!

The first leopard was a huge male that we found in the Mathildenhoehe box trap yesterday morning. It had no radio collar, which meant that we needed to dart it to take blood samples and fit it with a radio collar. To assist us with that Harald contacted Dr. Mark Jago a local vet who has a huge amount of experience with large cats. Fortunately Mark was available and flew in this morning in true African style piloting his Cessna 206 and landing extremely smoothly on our small landing strip despite the strong winds.

When Harald and Birgit had been to check on the condition of the leopard yesterday afternoon they spotted another leopard outside of the trap! Normally leopards are solitary animals so this was totally unexpected. The afternoon was then spent retrieving box traps from around the farm to set up another trap with the intention of catching the additional cat. No one could really believe that any of this was happening. With the caught leopard placed in the shade and doused with water to avoid dehydration and with the new traps in place we all returned to the farm to speculate on what the following morning would have in store for us.

After collecting Mark from the air strip this morning we all proceeded to the box traps. It was nerve-racking waiting to hear from Harald who went ahead to hear whether or not we had caught two leopards. Sure enough we had. The second cat was much smaller and appeared to be a female. Totally unbelievable!

The next two hours followed with a well executed plan which involved darting both cats and waiting until they were well and truly asleep. The animals were weighed (64 kg male and 32 kg female) and a variety of samples taken including blood, hair and ear secretions. Paws, limbs, tails and teeth were measured and recorded whilst the leopards were hooked up to drips to ensure that they did not dehydrate. It was incredible to see both cats lying next to each other seemingly peaceful when only an hour before they had been snarling, growling and lashing out. Once the radio collars were fitted the rest of the team were allowed a closer look. They were both magnificent creatures, tort with muscle and covered in beautiful spots and rosette markings. Their coats were in an excellent condition and their faces were relatively scar free (unusual for a leopard). It was an incredible experience to be so close to and actually touch an animal normally so secretive that a sighting of one never mind two would be rare. In the combined experience of Mark the vet, Harald and Birgit with over 300 leopard encounters and dartings none of them had ever seen the combination of a male and female together.

This was another amazingly lucky, once in a lifetime experience. Just incredible!

25 September

After the release of the two leopards we have been closely monitoring their whereabouts with the telemetry kit. During the first 18 hours after we had radio collared them, we were continuously tracking them, which meant taking shifts during the night through to the early hours of dawn. Teams of four people armed with headphones, aerial and receiver sat on the back of the Land Rover in the darkness surrounding Mathildenhoehe whilst an incredible festival of stars shone down. With no moon in the sky, the milky white way (as Matthias used to call it) and a multitude of constellations shone down.

The following day Steph, Mark, Gill, Harald and Joseph (a San bushman) tracked the new young female leopard along the riverbed from where she had slept into the rocky outcrops on the edge of the farm. The leopard was so close that Steph said "we weren't sure whether we were tracking her or she was tracking us!" Fortunately humans are too large for leopards to consider prey.

On the other side of the farm Jo, Jim, Peggy and Robin were searching for the spoor of six cheetahs, which Springhan and Adam (the farm labourers) had said they had seen when returning late to the farm the previous evening. They had spotted the cats sitting on the gravel road and the spoor had lead onto the farm property. It was later confirmed that the spoor reflected the presence of two adult females and four cubs. There must be something in the air as we are having record numbers of evidence of cats in the study site.

Poaching activity also reached a hiatus when the observation team and I spotted seven dogs and two poachers coming to the water hole. What followed was a speedy operation which involved Harald, Horst, the police, farm workers and the bushmen who tracked the poachers onto a neighbouring farm. Unfortunately no arrests were made as there was not enough evidence available. Just the presence of such a high profile quick response team, however, must have given the poachers a shock and we hope that the recent spate of poaching will now be halted.

The box traps have been relatively quiet since the leopards but Stefan (or is it Ray?) did have the excitement of releasing a huge angry warthog yesterday. We had no doubt in our minds though that after all his bush training Stefan was the man for the job and the warthog ran off relieved to be free. Everyone has decided that if we ever find a baboon in the trap that Stefan as the biggest and possibly hairiest man here will display enough male dominance to quell any signs of baboon aggression!

28 September

On Tuesday morning it became clear exactly which animal can break a man's spirit in Africa. It is not the fearsome lion or the cunning crocodile, but the seemingly innocuous honey badger! Harald, Jo, Jim and Peggy were checking box traps when they came across one honey badger in the trap and another just outside. All teams were called from the far corners of the farm to watch the release of this fearsome beast. Harald briefed us that honey badgers could be very aggressive when being released and that everyone should stay inside the vehicles. Harald seemed a little apprehensive which was strange for a man so used to dealing with large carnivores. He recalled tales of how the badgers could kill a man if provoked! He intrepidly approached the trap and lifted both gates carefully whilst the honey badger watched his every move. Then to our amazementthe honey badger crept timidly out of the cage and disappeared. Yep that was it - so quick that no-one even got a photo! Obviously we all took the opportunity to take the mickey out of Harald teasing him that he should be so scared of such a placid creature!!

Yesterday afternoon whilst spoor tracking Steph, Mark, Gill Joseph and I were incredibly lucky – again. Whilst driving along the fence line towards Kuduberg we saw, right there in front of us, a leopard!! It ran from left to right across the road and then crawled under the fence to the neighbouring farm. Steph and I were jubilant shouting "did you see that?!!" We found one spoor in the sand where it had crossed the road but nothing more than that. It just reflects how stealthily these animals can move around. We saw it less than 60 metres away from us and could identify where it went under the fence and yet there was only one spoor track and no other evidence of its presence. Amazing.

Stefan, Kerry and Daniella seem to have a good luck charm on the Pearlhuhnposten box trap and have so far released a warthog, porcupine and lastly a caracal!

14 October

Despite the fact that not one of the box traps has had anything in all week, things have been far from quiet at Okomitundu. The bush fires have continued to threaten the study area. With huge thunderstorms and lightning every day the chance of fires has increased. It may seem odd that we can be having rain and fire at the same time, but the weather here seems to get lost in the huge skies. Whilst it is raining on one side of the farm, the other side remains bone dry. In addition the strong winds carry the flames and hundreds of hectares are consumed in an astonishing amount of time.

For the past week Horst and the farm workers (Adam, and Springhaan included) have been fighting fires every night on other people's land. Two nights ago Harald, Oliver, Martin, and James also joined in to help put out a fire on the neighbouring farm to the south. Last night this fire had grown so big and close to Okomitundu that you could see the silhouetted bright orange flickers of flames from the farmhouse. There must have been over ten different teams and vehicles (from the surrounding farms), each with a water pump trying to dampen down the edges of the fire. In an attempt to reduce the risk to Okomitundu 1,000 hectares were back burnt, from the water pipe road south. Back burning is a risky activity which involves lighting managed fires ahead of the flames in an attempt to burn all the vegetation so that the original fire will die. This was done in case the wind changed direction and brought the fire closer to the farm.

Three Biosphere teams also went out in this morning to help extinguish the remains of the back burned area. This involved dousing down the smaller flames with water and digging smouldering trees stumps into the ground. Although the back burning was successful the original fire was still burning out of control until this afternoon when the best result occurred. A huge thunderstorm rumbled across the sky and at last a massive downpour of rain which soaked the entire farm and killed the fire. It really was such a relief for everyone but especially for the farmers who have been fighting fires everyday for the past week.

Data collection activities have now resumed as normal although things are a bit quiet on the animal front. On Friday the 13th however, whilst searching for telemetry signals Karin, Lutz Jenny and myself did hear the frequency of all three cheetahs from both Eulenkuppe and Felixposten. We were over the moon when we heard the third signal of 006 (Charlie) and could triangulate his position. Cheetah spoor of both male and female animals have also been tracked by Sally, Steven and Margot along the Kuduposten river bed.

Nora and Renate have been extremely patient with the film crew who are following them around on their activities. Nora is determined to walk at least part of the way up to Kuduberg this afternoon however in order to stretch her legs and I don't think the film crew will be following her there!

18 October

Well, the totally unexpected has happened – we have caught a brown hyaena! Unbelievable! In fact I didn't believe it at first and thought that Robin, Nora and Renate were joking when they radioed me yesterday to say there was a hyaena in the box trap next to the zebra carcass. Steve, Sally and Margot were over the moon that their kraal had successfully enticed the hyaena in. Needless to say there was no modesty involved in congratulating themselves (all in good humour of course)!

It was ironic that neither the film crew, James or Birgit and Harald were on the farm at the time of the capture. Obviously everyone was so excited and after we had provided the hyaena with water and shade we left him overnight to organise the plan for this morning. Initially because of the animals' size and demeanour we thought it was a large female. However on closer inspection by Birgit and Harald we discovered he was a juvenile male (so much for my identification skills!)

We all went to the box trap this morning to find an extremely timid animal with beautiful big brown eyes, soft features and a fluffy coat not what was expected of a scavenging carnivore normally renowned for their ugliness! According to Birgit these were all signs that the animal was still only a year old. After adjusting the dosage of the anaesthetic Birgit successfully darted him and we waited for 15 minutes for the drug to take effect. Once he was completely unconscious the hyaena was brought out of the cage into the shade where the examination table had been placed. Then, as with the leopards a series of samples were taken including fur, blood (thanks to Sally and Steve for their expertise) and saliva and a variety of bodily measurements made. Weighing only 25 kilos this really was a lightweight animal and too small for us to fit a radio collar. It was disappointing to know that we will not be able to track him any further but the risks of fitting a collar, which may later cause the animal some distress were too high. Instead he was fitted with an ear tag so if he is ever caught again we will be able to compare his size, weight and general health.

The health check and taking of samples took us about 45 minutes and after a few flickers from his enormous ears Birgit decided we should put him in the shade to wake up. This process took a lot longer than we expected and although he was awake and moving about he was in no hurry to move off. This was quite a different experience to darting the leopards because the hyaena was so timid, so much lighter and woke up very slowly. Once again however, the whole process was conducted in a very calm and quiet manner.

I personally can't believe what great fortune we have had on this expedition so far. Three cheetahs, two leopards and now a brown hyaena. Just mind blowing!

20 October

It is the last day of data collection for the 3rd Namibian Biosphere team. What a crazy two weeks it has been. With so many nationalities on the team (Australian, British, Canadian, Italian, Swiss, and German) it has been quite a hilarious cultural exchange as well as an excellent time in the field.

We have had a record number of sightings on game count with 26 different entries on one session and a record number of triangulations of the leopards and cheetahs - four in total. Apart from the great day when we found the hyaena in the trap we only had two porcupines for the whole two weeks which was surprising.

Wednesday afternoon Jürgen, Gill, Jane and Feda had to stop checking the border fence when they came across a herd of mountain zebra which were separated by the game fence. When they drove closer to the herd they realised that one zebra foal was trapped on one side of the fence whilst the mother on the other. Up until this point there had been no holes or damage to the fence at all and it is a mystery how they became separated. Not wanting to panic the animals by driving closer they left them hoping they would find their way back and this morning Harald, Nora and Renate could find no trace of the herd at all – so we can only presume they were reunited.

Another unsolved mystery has been developing around the box trap at Kuduposten. There have been fresh leopard spoor there for the past three days, building our expectations. When Jenny, Lutz, Karin and I checked it yesterday the box was closedbut empty with spoor of a female leopard outside it. However the trap had strangely reset itself, which although not totally impossible is extremely unlikely. So all sorts of stories were being suggested as possible reasons, even that the leopard let itself out!!

Another fire broke out yesterday and Harald was immediately on the case. It was incredible that even after two afternoons with huge downpours of rain that some trees within the burnt area were still burning from earlier on in the week. The flames were already quite high and the fire was spreading to the surrounding bush. This was really close to the farm just off the water pipe road near Felixposten. So with Horst's team, Harald, Jane Gill and Feda, two water pumps and some spades the fire was thankfully extinguished immediately.

There have been quite a few classic quotes with this group many of them 'you had to be there' but the funniest of all must have been Margot saying to me whilst on observation at the water hole, "Gees I could never fall asleep in this position" (sitting upright in a safari chair) when two minutes later she was snoring! And just to clear up any confusion for anyone (Jane, Margot, Steve etc) spoor is another word for animal tracks not faeces!!

22 October

I am now back in Windhoek where the amazing purple blooms of the jacaranda trees are still out in force. The third slot has come to an emotional end with many tears shed as team members parted ways to travel home or to continue their adventures. It has been another great two weeks with the fantastic bonus of a hyaena capture and release. A big thank you to everyone for all your motivation and hard work with collecting data and for all the laughter that went with it. I hope you all take away some great memories and here are a few of mine: big bushfires, triangulation of the cheetahs from Eulenkuppe with team Fritz, the border fence drive with team zebra, the massive rainstorm on the game count, the first visit to the brown hyaena, and that beautiful final sunset on Mathildenhoehe. And of course let's not forget that 'P is for pleasure' and 'F is for fantastic friendships'.

So, tomorrow is the start of the fourth slot and I can't begin to imagine what surprises lie in store for us. Let's hope that the awesome good luck that we have had so far will continue.

25 October

Today we had a right touch! (According to Jocelyn that means we had a winner) Yes it was the first day of data collection and unbelievably we had another brown hyaena in the zebra carcass trap. Now it is just getting ridiculous – anyone would think that we plan it this way! Again Robin was checking the trap so he now feels as though he has the hyaena luck!

Unfortunately the animal was even smaller than the last one and roughly the same age (under a year old) so Harald and Birgit decided not to sedate it as it would not be possible to fit it with a radio collar. Instead we had the exciting alternative of a hot release. The hyaena was in good health and after he had been cooled off with some water Harald lifted the doors of the box trap for him to return to the wild. It only took a moment for the hyaena to jump up and gallop off into the bush with his long mane of 'hair' flowing behind him. He actually looked quite big outside of the trap and although we considered him to be small I personally would not like to meet him on a dark night!

There was obviously something in the air this morning not only because of the hyaena capture but also because there was a lot of game around. On the way to Johannesposten Tanya, Dagmar, Solene and I saw loads of Kudu and Oryx and even disturbed a Zebra and her foal as we arrived at the water hole. Whilst sitting at the observation point we were visited by 6 kudu, 2 hartebeest, 2 wart hogs and a jackal! Not bad for a morning's work.

Pilvi who is a vet in her normal life thought she had discovered a case of anthrax in a bloated kudu carcass before she realised that it was a wooden model! There also seems to be a lot of cheetah and leopard spoor out and about today so who knows what the box traps will hold in the next few days.

We have had mackerel skies for the past two afternoons so we are expecting a change in the weather – as yet nothing has changed and the daily temperature is gradually increasing, 32 degrees is now quite normal in the afternoons.

28 October

A huge thunder and lightening storm cleared the air yesterday afternoon but the temperature has now risen back to 32 degrees Celsius! We were hoping that the rain would dampen the sandy roads and river beds to enable us to see loads of clear carnivore tracks this morning. Unfortunately the only spoors we found were the 3 cheetahs leaving the farm!

Yesterday at the Alter damm, Nathalie, Celeste, Valentin and Lucca were lucky enough to find the clearest spoor I have ever seen of the cheetahs coming to the water hole to drink. Eva and Albert also heard the frequencies of the three radio collared cheetahs close to Eulenkoppe before the lightening made telemetry unsafe! We felt sure that today we would find more evidence of their presence but there was no such luck. Today seems to be generally quiet in terms of animal activity with empty box traps and no other spoors found anywhere.

The cicadas are buzzing away in the afternoon heat now and the mosquitoes conspicuous by their absence in the first month are now out in force. Fortunately the huge forks of lightening stabbing through the skies yesterday did not resume any bush fires especially as all the farm workers have been fighting one on the neighbouring farm for the past two days.

Everyone has been practising the procedures required for sedating a cheetah this afternoon so all we need now is to find one! Jocelyn says she has had a vision of one and is convinced we will see it before next Friday!

31 October

It was a beautiful cool and fresh morning to be sitting at the Alter Damm observation hide. When Eva, Albert and I arrived, there were already eight kudu making their way to the water's edge. There were two males who looked extremely majestic parading their symmetrically twisted horns. The rest were females, two of which were juveniles still suckling from one of the cows. They seemed to be totally unaware of us as they browsed on bushes and drank silently. Another eleven kudus visited the water hole over the following hours, which must be a record for a morning of observation.

Nathalie, Celeste, Valentin and Lucca whilst checking the border fence came across huge herds of kudu and zebra this morning and were pleased to announce there was no evidence of any damage to the fence. We have had no known poaching incidents for a while, however, Pilvi, Lindsey, Jocelyn and Joseph did find the spoor of two donkeys and six dogs inside the game fence area on Saturday.

The box traps continue to be empty with a few frustrating spoor of leopards found adjacent to the Mathildenhöhe and Kuduposten traps.

Jürgen, Tanja, Solene and Celeste decided to walk all the way from the farm to the top of Kuduberg on Sunday – no mean feat at all. We were all rewarded by fantastic views from the summit and an even more stunning sunset. Just before we got to the top we came across a small herd of Cape mountain zebra, which was a real treat and quite an amazing sight to see them bounding through the rocks.

Everyone enjoyed a day off from data collection yesterday and we are all now focussing on the next few days to bring us what everyone is hoping to see – a wild cheetah or a leopard – either will do apparently!

2 November

Be careful what you wish for because you might just get it – so the saying goes. Last night whilst sitting around the campfire we had a hysterical half hour retelling Harald's honey badger tale. What then followed was a series of funny predictions for today's box traps which concluded with there being a honey badger in all the traps which Harald then had to deal with. Renamed the 'psycho killers of the savannah', we really had quite a laugh at the badger's expense. Today however, there were a few shocks in store.

Firstly Lindsey, Jocelyn and Jürgen had an extremely close encounter with one whilst sitting on top of the rock adjacent to Felixposten. The animal (which sounded like a kudu walking on rocks?!) just appeared next to Jürgen and looked him straight in the eye before turning around to seemingly disappear. After a few shocked moments the badger then started snuffing around in the rock space underneath the observation team which was enough to send them packing with hearts pounding armed with rocks and a pen knife! The reputation of the honey badger is not something to be joked about as they can be extremely aggressive even when not provoked.

Back in the safety of the Land Rover there was disbelief when Steffi radioed to say that another badger had been caught in the Kuduposten trap! Once everyone had completed their morning's activities we all gathered at the one box trap to watch our intrepid scientist release the beast. After a few expletives Harald approached the trap to be greeted with growling and snarling from the badger who was reaching out to grab his leg. Just as Harald had explained with the last badger we captured (with slot 2) this one did jump up and was hanging underneath the roof of the trap desperately trying to get its teeth and claws into any part of Harald it could. Even when the gate was lifted it refused to leave the trap and tried to dig its way out of the closed end of the trap. Not taking any risks, Harald backed off the trap carefully and tried his luck with walking through the thorny kraal rather than walk anywhere near the open trap. Eventually after much jumping, thrashing snarling and biting the animal realised the trap was open and ran off into the bush. I think that was enough of a honey badger experience for everyone!

3 November

A cold morning of 8° C greeted us as the sun rose over Okomitundu today. As the moon has been waxing during this last week the team members were eager to have a night observation. So last night with clear starry skies every one went out to sit in the moonlight hoping for some nocturnal surprises. Unfortunately only an oryx turned up at the Alter Damm and only a few bats at Nicodemusposten!

The box traps this morning were also empty but there is still plenty of fresh leopard spoor around the study site. Yesterday the old female leopard was heard from two locations by Pilvi and Dagmar whilst conducting telemetry. The young female leopard (Alex) has been the most active of all the collared animals recently and has been triangulated on two separate days. Solene and Tanya could hear her frequency 360° around them which means that she was very close and they concluded with Jürgen that she was fewer than 100 m away from them! Quite an exhilarating experience by all accounts. On the following afternoon Eva and Albert also heard her extremely close and from six different locations. Despite these close encounters no one has had any sightings and it begs the question 'who is watching who?'

Lindsay and Jocelyn after recovering from their honey badger experience have been marvelling at Josef's amazing tracking ability. Whilst spoor counting this morning we found a female leopard print, which was quite clear but when Josef showed us the following foot steps we could only see slight scuffs in the sand. From these scuffs Josef could easily track the animal for miles. He also wins the prize for the longest sighting on game count. He was adamant that he had seen a male oryx which was over 1 km away! These bush men are amazingly skilled.... or having a good laugh on us!

So, only three days before the final Biosphere team arrive on the farm. I can't quite believe how quickly it has passed and yet so much has happened. Every week has been totally different so I am looking forward to seeing what is in store for us still. Must be time for another carnivore capture...

5 November

So the end of the fourth slot was also concluded with tears and fond farewells. I think I will remember this one as the revenge of the honey badgers! A huge thank you again for all the effort everyone put into making these two weeks of data collection successful. Always with so much laughter – I think it must be something in the food!

We had a record number of triangulations – six in total, which meant that we tracked both the female leopards twice and two of the cheetahs. We also had the record number of activities being completed without interruptions. Unbelievably we managed to stick to the programme pretty well and this gave us the most data from all the slots so far. This was due to a lack of poachers, major fires and unfortunately only the one carnivore capture.

We were extremely lucky, however, to have the brown hyaena in the trap especially as it now seems as though the hyaena family have moved out of the den. The team went to observe the den on Friday afternoon and only found old spoor. Josef jumped a mile when he spotted a black mamba slithering off into the bush and this may be the reason for the lack of hyaenas. There also has been an increase in the number of hyaena spoor found on the other side of the farm – so we will have to be vigilant in the next two weeks to identify where they might be living.

So here are a few of my memories from this last two weeks – Lindsey's superb off road driving skills, the psycho killer of the savannah, bird calls with Jocelyn, the kudu drinking in the morning sun, observation with Tanja, Solene and Dagmar at Johannesposten, that great morning of animal activity with Celeste, Valentin, Lucca and Nathalie at the Alter Damm, French chocolate offered by a little French waiter, and sun downers at the pool with a thousand photos of the sun setting – I will never tire of that view!

No one has left Namibia yet from this group – so I hope you all have a great time in the next week visiting other parts of this stunning country and that you will take away some great memories from Okomitundu – we will miss you for sure.

9 November

The last team for the Namibian Biosphere Expedition 2006 arrived safely and are in full swing with data collection activities. To make full use of the current bright moonlight, half of the team went out to observe the water hole at the Alter Damm on Tuesday night. Not returning until 1.30 am they were lucky enough to have spotted two porcupines drinking, a couple of jackals, an oryx and possibly three bat eared foxes! Not bad for the first night.

The old female leopard (711) was heard with the telemetry receiver by Jane, Michele, Michael and Robin and a successful triangulation was made. All activities, however, were cut short yesterday afternoon when a huge thunderstorm rolled across the sky. Massive curtains of rain quickly surrounded the farm until there was a tremendous downpour and we all returned to base.

This morning the box traps were all empty and there were no spoors anywhere despite the fact that all the river beds were still wet from the rain. Obviously the cheetahs and leopards have taken cover from the weather elsewhere. Birgit, Angela and I were lucky enough to see a great performance by the meerkats outside their den and they hung around to give another show at lunch time for Shelley.

As I am writing another storm is brewing and I can hear the thunder rumbling as big black clouds are building in the sky. Not sure how long it will hold, but I think we will have more rain today. At least the rain reduces the risk of fires but it isn't much use for our data collection activities. Tomorrow morning one half of the team is going to start observation at 4 am (!) to try and catch some moon lit animal activity as well as to watch the sunrise over Alter Damm. Hopefully the weather will have improved by then!

12 November

We had a tantalising morning today when both the spoor tracking team and the telemetry team came across extremely clear and fresh spoor of three male cheetahs. The tracks were visible for at least 1km along the road towards Eulenkuppe and they reappeared where the Eulenkuppe river bed crosses the water pipe road. The spoor was definitely less than 15 hours old as Robin, Jane, Michael and Michele had walked the entire length of the river bed only yesterday afternoon. As yet we are unsure whether the coalition is the group we have radio collared or not, as we were unable to pick up any frequencies. If the animals had walked to the south of the farm last night, however, we would not be able to hear them. This afternoon we are going to the summit of Kuduberg, so we are hoping to hear their radio signals from there.

All groups have been having success on game count with up to 18 sightings of animals recorded on transect B and 26 on A. There was the additional bonus for Jane, Michael and Michele who saw at least 34 eland with over 10 calves! Yes, at last the eland have been found. It seems they have been grazing far in the western side of the farm whilst the calves have been born, but have now returned to areas closer to the farm.

We had a supper time visit from a coral snake the other night. The 30 cm juvenile slithered under the table as we sat down for dinner and Jane very calmly announced we had a visitor! It was quickly removed by Horst and relocated outside of the farmhouse fence.

13 November

Yesterday's visit to Kuduberg was stunning. It was such a clear day that we could see the summit of Spitzkoppe which is over 150 km away! Unfortunately we also made an upsetting discovery. The male leopard that we collared with group 2 had not been heard with the telemetry receiver since 20 October and we were beginning to wonder where he was. Yesterday from the summit of Kuduberg we heard the mortality signal from his collar. This means either he has removed the collar, or worse, that he has died. Birgit and Harald are now making plans to visit the neighbouring farm where the signal was coming from to see if we can actually find the collar and possibly find out what has happened. There were also no frequencies heard from any of the cheetahs so maybe we have a new coalition on the farm.

This morning, although it was our day off from data collection Jane, Birgit, Piet, Josef and myself all went to follow the spoor of the three cheetahs found yesterday. Although over a day old the spoor was still clear and we followed them for 2 km in total. Unfortunately they did not take us to any new marking trees or recent kills which is what we had been hoping for. The weather continues to heat up with 34°C (in the shade) for the past four afternoons and the box traps continue to be frustratingly empty!

15 November

Yesterday afternoon Erin, Shelley, Veronique, Harald and Piet started off with their game counting activity. They also took the telemetry kit with them as Birgit, Birgit (the team member) and Angela had heard the old female leopard's frequency in the morning somewhere in the western part of the farm. So in an attempt to get a better triangulation, the game counting team were going to multi task. Half way through conducting the game count they stopped on a hill to use the receiver and surprisingly heard both the older and younger female leopards who we think are mother and daughter. A loud, slow intermittent beep from the receiver indicated that both leopards were incredibly close and resting. Harald then suggested that they check for the cheetahs, more out of following procedure than really believing they would hear them. Suddenly an astonishing loud signal came through for F006, Charlie (the cheetah I released eight weeks ago) followed by F005 and F007. This was our cheetah coalition. They were so close that the signal was similar to a loud heart beat and was pounding out of the receiver. Apparently Harald then became both excited and serious as he drove some fantastic off road routes and with Shelley holding the antennae aloft they followed the ridge line towards the signals. The cheetahs started to move, indicated by an irregular beeping, but they were still really close and the Land Rover continued through the bush.

Eventually Harald stopped the car, the receiver loudly thumping out the signal and peering through the binoculars announced that he could see the three cheetahs! This was followed by some intense frustration as the others desperately tried to focus on the same location. Finally they all could see the cheetahs approximately 500m away from the car, resting under a tree. A few long distance photos were taken before the animals crept away and disappeared into the undergrowth. I can only describe the message that came through on the radio from Shelley as pure jubilation. I could hardly decipher what she said but through the yelps of joy and screaming I gathered they had just experienced an incredibly scene.

This morning two teams have gone to the neighbouring farm to look for the male leopard's collar and try to solve the mystery of the mortality signal. The other team is out checking box traps. Everyone was on a high after yesterday's excitement and we are hoping the good luck will continue for the rest of the week.

19 November

So the final slot of this year's Biosphere Expedition Namibia has sadly come to an end. The last team managed successfully to retrieve the two 'lost' collars from the leopards and had mixed news when they returned to the farm. The collar which was sending out the mortality signal since before Biosphere arrived was found along with the remains of the leopard's skeleton. Harald and Birgit think that he died of natural causes.

The other collar of the newly trapped leopard was also found but without any traces of remains. This seemed to be good news that at least he wasn't dead but rather had somehow removed the collar. The mystery, however, was involved with how the collar was lost. It looked as though it had been cut possibly with a knife although Piet and Josef were adamant that it was not! Harald and Birgit are going to continue their investigations and have further talks with the farmer to see if he can shed some light on the situation.

Although the final team did not get a carnivore capture they did have an amazing cheetah sighting. The box traps were incredibly quiet with only two captures of porcupines and the hot release was renamed the 'tepid release'! The team did manage to complete three triangulations of the two female leopards who were found way out in the west of the farm.

Game count on the eastern side of the farm has seen an increased number of animals with eleven sightings being the average number. There have been loads of spoor everywhere except on the transect routes! There were five leopard tracks, five cheetah tracks and two hyaena tracks spotted just by chance.

I have just finished packing up all the equipment and am ready to leave Okomitundu. I would like to say a heartfelt thank you to everyone who has participated in this year's expedition. Thank you for all your hard work, ideas, enthusiasm and laughter. It has been extremely successful in terms of data collection and I am sure Harald and Birgit will be busy for the next couple of months analysing it all! A big thank you to you both for all your energy and passion. Also a big thanks to Steffi, Jürgen and Robin. It has been a fantastic three months here in Namibia and I leave with a heavy heart, but wonderful memories. Good luck to you all and hope to see you again soon.

Clare Fothergill
Expedition leader