

Erin McCloskey, '98 BSc(Env&Cons), gets an experience that can only come out of Africa

On a hot day last November I stood in the dry grass of the Namibian savannah staring through my binoculars at three cheetahs stopped in the shade of an acacia tree. It was an image I'll never forget.

I was about 160 km northwest of Windhoek with seven other people — not a wildlife biologist among us — for a two-week research expedition helping two scientists studying cheetahs, leopards, and brown hyenas. Seeing firsthand the diversity of African wildlife and landscape was the realization of a dream.

I had gone to Namibia with the organization I work for, Biosphere Expeditions. The expeditions Biosphere offers are a win-win scenario for both researchers and lay people interested in wilderness adventures. Conservation biologists are dedicated to conducting much-needed research on endangered species, but are typically short on funding and workers. At the same time there are people who relish the chance to help with the research while getting a hands-on wildlife experience.

I'm one of those people. My U of A degree in environmental science, with a major in conservation biology, gave me a background that fueled my interest in raising public awareness about conservation issues. It led to a career as an editor and writer and got me more heavily involved with environmental issues. Over the years I've worked on wilderness and wildlife protection campaigns, lobbied the government, and stayed "active." This is all valuable behind-the-scenes work, but I also wanted to get my hands dirty, to study the wildlife and wild spaces that I loved in a more tangible way.

Volunteering with conservation organizations provided the experience I craved. And then in 2006, Biosphere

Expeditions approached me with the opportunity to launch and head a North American office for their organization. My first expedition with the organization was to Namibia where I started each day at dawn by jumping into a Land Rover with other members of the team and heading off onto the field. We learned how to search for tracks, identify animal species, take telemetry readings, and set strategically located box traps throughout an 18,000-hectare study site.

The scientists we worked with had been researching the area for a few months and had captured two leopards, a coalition of three male cheetahs, and a young male hyena. (With the help of a veterinarian, the animals were sedated and measurements and DNA samples taken.) All the animals were also fitted with radio collars, except the hyena, which was too young. Once an animal is fitted with a collar, the scientists can track its location and map its territorial range.

We didn't expect to see one of these highly elusive and camouflaged animals in the flesh unless it was in a box trap. But one afternoon my group was conducting a wildlife count with Harald, one of the scientists. Harald stopped the Land Rover to check for one of the leopard's radio signals that had been

picked up that morning by the telemetry crew. We also picked it up. Checking other frequencies, we picked up the signal of a second leopard.

Cheetahs and leopards have such a vast range that the signals from our radio-collared individuals were not often detectable, so it was exciting to hear the

two cats within close proximity. As Harald changed to the next frequency he said the odds of us picking up the cheetahs as well were next to nil. But the next frequency produced a

loud and strong signal, as did the next and the next. The cheetah signals were coming in so strong that the cats had to be just over the adjacent hill.

We raced over rocks and gullies, tussocks and brambles in a high-speed all-terrain chase. We were, after all, chasing the fastest land mammal on earth, which can reach a speed of up to 110 km/h. We followed the beeps emitted



Erin McCloskey uses the telemetry antenna to listen for signals from animals that have been fitted with radio collars. After picking up the signal from a cheetah, her crew followed the sound to an unforgettable scene.

by the radio until Harald lurched the Land Rover to a halt, jumped out with his binoculars, and pointed at the cheetahs resting under the acacia tree.

Observing these stunning creatures exceeded my expectations as I felt a rush of exhilaration and gratitude. It was one of those moments — along with the times when I've been on my hands and knees in the sand helping a loggerhead sea turtle hatchling make it to the water, or been on a research boat watching the blow of a gray whale — that I've thought that if one day my life flashes in front of my eyes, these would be pretty good images.

Working with a diverse group of people on a common goal and really feeling you're making a difference is an amazing and memorable experience. It's also a joy to reflect upon the things that we have done, not just what we have seen. And in our trips to beautiful lands it's empowering to know that we gave, and not just took. ■

Erin McCloskey is the North American Operations Manager for Biosphere Expeditions, an organization dedicated to sustainable tourism and community development, providing jobs, alternatives to wildlife exploitation, increased public awareness, and long-term conservation support.

The organization currently runs nine research projects throughout the year. The geographic locations are Namibia, Peru, Brazil, Azores, Altai, Honduras, Oman, Sri Lanka, and Slovakia. Ongoing research includes studying species such as the snow leopard, Arabian leopard, European wolf, chamois and Asian elephant; biodiversity surveys in the Amazon or on cetaceans and sea turtles in the Atlantic; and analyzing human impact on coral reefs or wildlife conflict with rural communities.

Check www.biosphere-expeditions.org for more information on Biosphere Expeditions.