

WE HAVE TO SAY GOODBYE TO RAY

Well, we finally know what was happening to Ray: he was getting old, blind and eventually died of natural causes at the end of June. Needless to say, I was really sad, but he had a long life and fortunately did not meet the fate of so many other hyenas that are killed on the roads. However, he had an encounter with a vehicle just a day before he died. He was spending quite a bit of time around the mining area at Bogenfels, mostly to cross the road to reach the natural spring to the south-east of the mine. Early in the morning, the driver of a mining vehicle saw Ray close to the road and stopped the vehicle. To his surprise, Ray came closer and closer and eventually bumped into the car. The environmental officer at the mine reported the incident immediately and we issued a warning to all mining personnel in the area to pay special attention on the roads, as it was clear now that Ray was blind.



Ray at hyena city

I removed the collar and searched the area for signs of other hyenas. There were quite a few fresh hyena tracks in the area and some jackals – not surprisingly – had also been there. So there were the culprits responsible for the false resting signal from earlier that day. Ray was collared for two years and we retrieved 16.000 data sets about his whereabouts, activity and movement. He spent most of his time near the seal colony at Van Reenen Bay and his favourite resting sites were at hyena city and north of Dormhöhle. He was a regular visitor to the accommodation site of the mine at Bogenfels, but other than that, he was rather a loner. His data does not indicate that he visited any active den sites. However, I was extremely lucky to spend a lot of time observing him and I will never forget my time with him at Christmas last year. I will definitely miss his company...

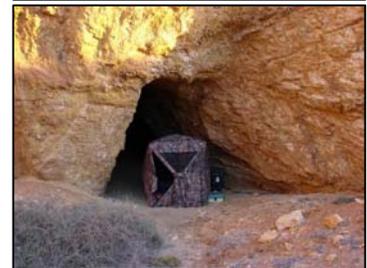
Thanks to the personell at the Bogenels mining site to care so much about Ray. Thank you to Amanda and Gaby for joining me on the trip.

I had to do a data download the following week and was a bit surprised to receive his signal once I had passed the gate to the mining area. The signal indicated that he was resting somewhere to the north of the mine. I drove closer to the area until the signal was strong enough to trigger a download. I had also planned to find Ray once the download had finished, as I wanted to have a look at his general condition. The download went well, but suddenly Ray's signal disappeared and with this the chance to find him. I couldn't do much and drove to Van Reenen Bay to drop most of the equipment for our next darting trip that was planned for the following week. I scanned for Ray's signal on the way to Van Reenen Bay, but the receiver remained silent. Amanda, the project's volunteer vet from America and Gaby, our German volunteer joined me on the trip and I decided to show them the Bogenfels Arch on the way back to Lüderitz. Shortly before we reached the Arch, I suddenly received a mortality signal for Ray. What was happening? A mortality signal is only sent, when the collar does not move for 8 hours and we had spent a lot less than 8 hours in the area. However, sometimes a hyena carcass is moved and once movement is detected, the collar sends its normal activity/resting signal. Therefore I knew that Ray is dead and that some other hyenas or jackals had moved the carcass the previous night. We went back to the area where I had triggered the download just a few hours earlier and as expected, we found Ray's carcass not too far away. His body was already too decomposed to see his condition, but he appeared to be quite thin.



BOGENFELS ATTEMPT NO 12 & 13

Now where Ray was dead, it was the more important to collar another hyena at Bogenfels. We also invested a bit o improve our methods and it was the first time that we wanted to try to dart from a hide. When I bought the hide, it actually looked big enough to have two people in there comfortably, but well, it turned out to be rather small. It is difficult to explain how uncomfortable it is, but I give it a try. First we obviously have to have all necessary equipment inside the hide (storing it outside would just attract more cheeky jackals). The nights in winter are long and Amanda and I have to spend 12 hours inside the hide. We change shifts every two hours and one person can somehow lie in the back of the hide. Stretching legs is not possible, so one "sleeps" in the foetus position most of the time. Then we change for shifts and the person on watch sits on a very uncomfortable camping chair (well, if used for camping it is comfortable, but sitting on it for hours on end, pushes the limits). To make things even more difficult, the jackals decided to not only eat our bait, as they always do, but also to destroy our alarm system that serves as a back-up in case the person on watch falls asleep. However, falling asleep during the watches was rather difficult, not only because of the camping chair issue, but also because the west coast winter this year decided to be one of the worst I ever experienced. Degrees close to zero, lots of fog and lots of rain! Somehow the rain seems to follow me on my darting trips...But by now, all of you know that we don't give up and just try to make the best out of the situation. We spent three weeks around Bogenfels to try to collar another hyena, but did not even see one this time. However, we can't complain about jackal presence, but that's no news. I really did no expect to have no sightings, not even at the seal colonies. We had no other chance than to leave the site for some time, as we also needed to fit collars on inland hyenas. We decided to go back to Bogenfels once we have collared some hyenas in inland areas of the Sperrgebiet and we will possibly try to attract the coastal hyenas a bit further inland to our bait. The Bogenfels hyenas do occasionally go to the Klinghardt Mountains to the east of the coast and we have already decided on a darting site there. Well, but this still has to wait for a while, but I will keep you informed.



RODIN PLAYS GAMES WITH US

When we realised that there were no hyenas in the Bogenfels area, we decided to spend one week at my igloo at False Plumpudding to hopefully collar another hyena in Rodin's area. To tell the truth, we also just wanted to see a hyena at this point to keep our spirits up. We set up the hide very close to the coast just south of the igloo. It was a beautiful site, but very exposed to the fog and spray. However, there were a good amount of hyena tracks around and we had our hopes up.

And, we were rewarded: shortly after midnight a hyena approached the bait, but was not too impressed by the unavoidable jackal presence and moved away. But: this was our first sighting since the beginning of the darting season. Four hours later we again saw a hyena close to the bait and also at about 5:30 in the morning. Well, both of us had the feeling that it was the same individual all three times and the hyena seemed to be interested in the bait, so we were sure that it would come back the next night.

Later that morning we started to drive towards the Baker's Bay seal colony. I switched my receiver on to hopefully find Rodin to do the data download, that was already overdue. I couldn't believe my ears, when I received a strong signal from the igloo. Rodin was very close to us, but it also meant that the hyena sighting of the previous night, could have been him – and he already has got a collar... We found Ray about 200 metres away from the igloo, resting between the hummock dunes. I downloaded the data and we then went to the seal colony in the hope to see a hyena foraging there, but no luck. After lunch we drove back to the igloo to get some rest before returning to the hide in the afternoon. The data revealed that it had indeed been Rodin spending the night with us...

Before settling for our night watches inside the hide, we scanned the hummock dunes for Rodin and we saw him starting to move shortly before sunset. He walked towards the igloo and ten minutes later he approached the bait. However, a jackal had again claimed the bait as his trophy and Rodin lost interest and moved out of the area about half an hour later. Rodin probably also knew that bait means bad news, not knowing that we were not interested to pinch him with another dart... We stayed for another three nights, but didn't see any other hyenas, but our meeting with Rodin was really special.



Rodin in between the hummocks

AT GABUSIB TO FIND CASPAR'S "PARTNER"

Over the past two years I have neglected the inland study sites during darting trips as I tried again and again to collar hyenas around Bogenfels. So it was about time to return to Caspar's area to try to collar another brown hyena there. High on my wishlist was to capture a lactating female – and I let Amanda know that this is what we are going to dart (☺). Our night watches started off very well – lots of hyena sightings, but all of them were to skittish to approach the bait. Then, finally, during the second night, we had an adult animal at the bait (but not feeding on the meat, rather drinking the water that we supplied too). The hyena was not at all concerned about the spotlight and we managed to dart it shortly before midnight. After ten minutes we started searching for her and suddenly realised that there were three hyenas in the area. We found the sedated animal and it turned out to be a – guess what – lactating female. The two other hyenas were a bit smaller and stayed in the area, so we assumed that they were her cubs. Our jackpot hyena, called Maya, was in a good condition and had about 8 kg of food in her stomach and our weighting scale reached its limit. No wonder that she was not interested in our bait! Everything went well and she walked off about 3 hours after being darted. The other two hyenas had disappeared in the meantime, but we went back to the hide to see if another hyena would come to the bait that night. Shortly before sunrise, we spotted another hyena, about 20 metres away from the den. We did not get a chance to dart it, but we had two more nights to go and with one capture done, we were in a really good mood. Unfortunately, although we saw hyenas again, we were not able to dart another one during that trip. However, we returned three days later, but this time the rain followed us again and we had to leave for Lüderitz to avoid getting stuck in the desert. A week later we were back for our third trip. This time

the hyenas stayed away for most of the time, but we had an incredible experience, which made up for the lack of hyena sightings: two honey badgers came to our bait and started feeding on the rabbit carcass that we had used to make a drag. It was incredible! One of the badgers came quite close to our hide and we were getting a bit worried, as we did not want to upset these two (well, they can be pretty aggressive). Unfortunately we had to start working in our new study site in the Tsaukaib Mountains for the next two weeks, so we left Gabusib, but we will go back in the middle of September.



Honey badgers at the bait



Maya, our new female

Thanks Amanda for darting the "right" animal, Gaby and Steve for helping in the field and the Lüderitz Spar market and Wilfried Erni for supplying bait.



NEW STUDY SITE IN THE TSAUKAIB MOUNTAINS

Our proposal to the Nedbank Go Green Fund was approved earlier this year and we therefore started to work at a new study site. The Tsaukaib Mountains are approximately 60 km south-east of Lüderitz. We had seen brown hyena signs during previous visits to the area and at the beginning of June, while riding on horseback through the desert from Aus to Lüderitz, a trip that was organized by the Namibian tour company Reitsafari Horse trails, I saw two subadult brown hyenas around our camp at night. We also think that the Tsaukaib hyenas' home ranges overlap with the home ranges of spotted hyenas around Letterkuppe, which is another 30 km to the east. We have already been out for one darting trip to the Tsaukaib Mountains and set up our tented camp. An adult brown hyena came quite close to our bait during the second night, but not close enough to be darted. Unfortunately it started raining (!) again and by now we know that hyenas don't really like the rain. We had to leave two days later, as Gino was on his way to Aus for our aerial tracking week. The next darting trip to the new study site is planned for the end of September.

MAYA AND HER NAUGHTY CUBS



Well, Maya's story has hardly begun and actually already ends in this newsletter. As you have read above, she was captured and collared while foraging around Gabusib with her two cubs. We finally managed to do aerial tracking at the beginning of September, about five weeks after we collared her. Gino and I located her signal in the Klinghardt Mountains quickly, but the shocking news was that we received a mortality signal. We circled around the spot, where the signal seemed to come from, but could not see a carcass. So we hoped that the collar just dropped off and that Maya was still alive. I triggered a download and had a look at the data immediately once we were back at the hangar in Aus (the hangar is our new "camp" for our aerial tracking now). The data showed that we were actually circling around a bounced signal and that the collar and/or carcass was about 4 km to the east of the signal. The mortality signal started sending four days after our capture. However the good news was that the area, where the collar and/or hyena was lying seemed to be close to a den site. Maya's four day movement data and Caspar's data from the same time period showed extensive movement around one specific mountain. We decided to fly around the mountain the next day, but we had very

Brown Hyena Research Project

severe turbulences in the area, so that we could not get a proper look at the area. However, Amanda and I managed to drive to the Klinghardt Mountains one week later to recover the collar. Luckily we did not find a hyena carcass – Maya is alive and probably doing very well. The collar on the other hand is not doing too well. The cubs must have pulled the collar off Maya's neck with a lot of force, as the predator enforced (!) belting is ripped apart. Maybe I shouldn't always complain about my bias in collaring males, as they at least seem to be able to hang on to their collars a lot longer...

Thanks to Gino for making sure that I don't get too sick circling around a fake carcass. Thanks to Willem and Ingeborg Swiegers for being on stand-by while we were staying in the hangar and lots of thanks to Christine Wulff-Swiegers and Piet Swiegers for making us feel at home at Klein Aus Vista.

- I unfortunately have to report another road kill. This time a sub-adult brown hyena was killed on the road near Haalenberg. After the fish drying plant at Haalenberg was closed we actually didn't have a road kill there for quite some time. This sub-adult possibly came from the Tsaukaib Mountains, our new study site and I really hope that none of the hyenas that I'm hoping to collar there will meet the same fate.
- Our new base for flying is Aus. Gino has built a new hangar there and the Setabria is happily in there and was possibly more than happy to finally fly again. The hangar is also our base camp, which is fantastic, especially when the east wind is blowing. We flew for Oona for one afternoon, but could not find her. The next day we did three downloads: Maya, Caspar and Oona, who was hiding in the dunes the day before. We spent the last day flying to find Maya, unsuccessful due to turbulences and did Rodin's download.



Road kill near Haalenberg

FUNDRAISING AND DONATIONS

The **Nedbank Go Green Fund** approved our proposal to study brown hyena demography, feeding ecology and interspecific relationship with other carnivores in the Sperrgebiet National Park. This is another long term study and we have bought four GPS collars for this study.

Mrs. Jessie Salb donated US\$ 250 to the project. We will use this donation towards this year's darting expenses. Thank you very much for supporting the project!

THE BROWN HYENA RESEARCH PROJECT WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE FOLLOWING PEOPLE AND COMPANIES FOR THEIR HELP AND SUPPORT:

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