

OUR "MINERVA" ADVENTURE

We last tracked Minerva at the beginning of December when Gino was here for our usual tracking flights. Her collar worked fine, but we knew that we had to drop the collar off during Gino's next visit, which was planned for February. We finally managed to fly and track Minerva in April. The collar was already sending a recovery signal, as the battery voltage was already low. This is not a reason to worry since we can also drop the collar off in recovery mode. The only disadvantage is that we can't judge from the VHF signal whether the drop off really worked. So we circled a few times around Minerva and triggered the drop off several times. Since Minerva was in a resting site, we did not want to go to retrieve the collar immediately and postponed the retrieval to the next day. We still had to locate other hyenas in the morning, so we wanted to fly first before collecting the collar. On our way back from the tracking flight, we flew to the area where we triggered the drop off and to our surprise did not receive any signal. We eventually received the signal a few kilometres to the south, so it was clear that the collar was still attached to Minerva. We had encountered the same problem years ago with Halenge, where the collar was still stuck in his mane for two weeks before it finally dropped off.



Minerva's collar hidden underneath kelp

Sea water can cause a lot of damage and we were really concerned that the electronics were damaged. I let the collar dry out over night and attached it to the computer the next morning. As expected there was no communication between the collar and the computer and our only hope was that Televilt, the producer of these collars in Sweden, could still extract data. I couriered the collar immediately, but it only arrived overseas a week later. The first email I received from Cecilia at Televilt was not too positive, as they also failed to extract data during their first try. But, the Televilt technicians did not give up. The longest three ours of my life followed and finally another email arrived with a large attachment: they did it – Televilt still managed to download 27 000 data sets!!!! However, for some reason, and this reason became clear later, the collar already stopped collecting GPS data at the end of December. Nevertheless, a huge success, and I quickly plotted the data. To all of our surprise, Minerva turned out to be a hyena that likes to walk/wade/swim to Flamingo island now and then. No wonder that the collar stopped performing, as it is definitely not made for marine mammals...! But the data also gave us other incredible important information including the location of the active den site. It is a beautiful den, right on top of a mountain, overlooking the dune fields to the north. So far, we weren't lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the cubs, but I'm sure that we will be able to observe them for a bit soon.

However I wanted to make sure that the collar was still attached and went to where we received the signal to have a look. Minerva was nicely lying in a resting site and the collar was firmly attached. I triggered another drop off while Minerva was walking to another resting site, but the collar stayed on. Well, not much we could do. Unfortunately I had to go to Europe for two weeks, but Gino and Kathie stayed in Lüderitz to fly every second day to monitor the collar's movement. Finally a week before I was to return to Lüderitz, the collar stopped moving. So we all had our hopes up that it dropped off. But, knowing Minerva's habit of using the same resting sites again and again, we couldn't be sure. To avoid unnecessary disturbance of Minerva, Gino and Kathie waited for the collar recovery until I was back. They picked me up from the airport and we went straight into the field to find the collar. Well, easier said than done. We arrived at the site that Gino and Kathie had marked while flying. We heard the signal and I went to search for the hyena and/or collar. It became clear very quickly that the collar must have dropped off, as no hyena was nearby. We searched and searched until I finally found a spot, right in the surf zone that was covered with shells. The signal was strongest there, so Kathie and I started digging. I also saw a piece of Kelp right next to the area where we were digging and lifted it. Unbelievable but true: the collar was hidden underneath the kelp. I think everybody can understand our relief and joy, but also our worries, as the collar must have been exposed to the sea water for at least a week.



Minerva's active den site

Thanks to Gino Noli and Kathie Peard for keeping an eye on Minerva and her collar while I was away. Huge thanks go to the staff at Televilt, especially Cecilia and the technicians. Their brilliant customer service makes working with these animals a lot easier.

ON THE LOOKOUT FOR OONA

We were not only busy with Minerva during the last three months. We also tried to find Oona to download data on two occasions. First, we tried with the plane – initially we could not find her. We searched the Koichab area, where she usually rests, but nothing. We then flew towards the Tiras mountains – an amazing flight – the dunes were covered in vegetation and we knew that our chances to find Oona would be small, as we already suspected that she moves into the areas where the game is. But, on our way south from the Tiras mountains, we finally received a signal. Gino and I looked at each other in disbelief, as the area was completely flat and void of any significant vegetation that spotted hyenas would use as a resting site during the heat of the day. Far ahead of us however, we spotted a small area with some bushy vegetation and this is where we found her. The download did not go too well, as the dunes often swallowed the signal, but we were still happy to have found her. The data showed that she was actually spending a lot of time in this new area and that she travelled usually between the northern trip of the Hasenberge to the southern tip of the Namib dunes. At least this gave me an idea where to search for her the second time. Gino was back in South Africa so that I had to drive to the area with the car. Our new project volunteer and I drove along the Koichab dunes to the eastern boundary of the Namib Naukluft Park, where we found her the last time. On the way, we saw many springbok and gemsbok herds and there was so much vegetation that my car really started to struggle. Well, to our surprise, we did not find her anywhere. I guess this is just one of the few times where she stayed in the Tiras mountains. However, our volunteer vet arrives soon and we still have to fit two brown hyenas and another spotted hyena in the same study area. We probably have to spend quite some time in the Koichab and I'm confident that we will finally manage to do another download before Gino comes back in August.



WHAT IS HAPPENING WITH RAY?

When Hartmut and I saw Ray in February during our Bogenfels darting attempt no.11, we both agreed that he did not look too well. When I went to do his next data download in April, I decided to go and find him to have a proper look at his condition. Katta joined me on the trip, it was her first time with the hyena project and even more a reason to get close to one of the animals. We found Ray resting in the eastern cliffs at Van Reenen Bay. It took us a long time to find him, as he was resting in a very deep cave. Our approach was not as quiet as we liked – it was very steep terrain, but we did our best. Eventually we arrived at a spot above the cave, but Ray must have heard us and came out to have a look. Luckily he did not look up and concentrated to scan the area in front of him. However, he obviously smelled something fishy and decided to walk to another resting site. This gave us a good opportunity to have a proper look at him. I took a lot of photographs to investigate them later, but his general appearance and movement did not look too good. He was limping and also visibly thin.

At home I had the chance to have a look at the photos and could immediately see that the collar was damaged. The belting on the left side is badly broken and the collar might soon come off. It looks as if Ray was involved in a serious fight with another hyena, which could also explain his leg injury. However, it is still not clear to me why he is that thin. He hardly moves away from the seal colony area and should actually still find some food there, although pup production was extremely low last year and the colony is quiet empty. I really expected to either receive a mortality signal for the next download due to Ray's death or a collar drop off. But, when Gino and I flew at the end of May, we received Ray's normal signal at Van Reenen Bay. We prepared everything for the download, but suddenly the signal disappeared. Even the tightest manoeuvres over the cliff did not bring the signal back. By that time, both of us actually thought that we might have heard a ghost, but at the end we received a few more beeps, but nothing that was good enough for a download. We flew back to Luderitz and had no other chance than to give it another try the next day. We found him again in the same resting site than during the download with Katta and our previous day's flight. Why doesn't he move? Well, no idea, but at least we received data this time. His movement is very restricted, but he has never been the most active hyena. He is probably all right, but I have to do another download from the ground in July and will definitely go and have a look at him again.



Ray and his damaged collar

Thanks to Katta for joining me on the first download trip and thanks to Gino for trying everything to get his signal from the air.

“737” AT SWAKOPMUND

At the end of March we were informed that there was a problem with brown hyenas at the guano platforms north of Swakopmund. Some hyenas had gained access to the fenced-in area and had chased the birds away from one of the platforms and now prevent the re-settlement of the platform due to their presence in the area. Luckily Flip Stander went to investigate the problem and managed to collar one of the problem animals. The two brown hyenas that seem to cause the problem are subadults, but there are at least two other adult brown hyenas in the area. At the end of April, I finally had the chance to visit the area. Peter Sander from Swakopmund took the time to show us around and also joined us in the evening at the fence to try to observe the hyenas entering the area. We were lucky and shortly after our arrival, the non-collared subadult appeared. The hyena went straight to the fence, waded into the water to a hole in the fence and appeared on the other side of the fence again. It then walked or rather ran through the water to the bridges that connect the mainland to the other platforms and tried to get up, but luckily was unsuccessful, as the bridge is too high up. It then went to the gate on the bridge, trying to find a way through, but again, could not get around the gate. It continued foraging on the mainland and we eventually lost sight of it. The whole observation was actually really funny, but obviously it is a problem that the animals can gain access to the fenced-in area.

The next day, we tried to find the collared subadult, as we were hoping that the capture and collaring scared it out of the area and hence solved the problem with at least one of the hyenas. However, we found him to the north-east of the platforms resting in the hills. He is in a fantastic condition and we think that he is about 2 to 2 ½ years old.

At present we could only give some recommendations regarding repairs on the fence. Flip agreed to also try and collar the other subadult and give both of them a good scare, so that they hopefully learn to avoid the area. Peter Sander is currently tracking the hyena, which we named “737”, as Peter initially was convinced that his radio frequency was 149.737. We searched for the hyena with this frequency during the first day until we finally figured out that it is the wrong frequency. We really hope that we can find a solution soon and will keep you informed.



“737” near his resting site (P. Sander)

Thanks to Peter Sander for all his help and time he spends on this project. Also thanks to Flip for helping us out, to Steve and to all the other people that got involved finding a solution.



BROWN HYENAS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

I was invited to give two talks at a conference about African wildlife at the Zoo Dvur Kralove in the Czech Republic. The talks went very well and it was extremely nice to finally meet Gus Mills there, who was also giving talks. After all these years, we only had email contact and never managed to meet and finally have to meet far away from our Namibian and South African homes. During our stay, we had the opportunity to visit the zoo in Dvur Kralove and the Prague zoo. Both zoos have brown hyenas. There are two brown hyenas in Dvur Kralove, brother and sister that were hand reared at the Prague Zoo in 1997. The zoo in Prague has six brown hyenas, but they are not breeding at the moment.

It was a weird experience to see brown hyenas in captivity, but I learned a lot from the zoo visits and have a better understanding about the care of carnivores in general in captivity.

Thanks very much to the organizers of the conferences. It was very well planned and it was definitely an interesting visit.



Halenge near Baker's Bay (B. Clarke)

HALENGE IS STILL AROUND!

It's been three years since we dropped off Halenge's collar. Since then I haven't seen him again and not one of the hyena sightings that were reported and where people had taken photographs were of him. Therefore it was the greatest surprise, when Andrea Pulfrich reported the usual hyena sightings near Baker's Bay and when I finally got the photographs of one of the sighted animals from Barry Clark, to discover that one of the animals was Halenge. He looks in a good condition, although he has a lot of scar tissue around his neck and a growth that looks like an abscess on the neck, too.

After seeing the images I remembered that the camera man, who was filming in the Baker's Bay area in December, also got footage of a hyena, where I think it was Halenge. I'm still waiting to see the footage again to do a proper ID.

However, it is great to know that Halenge is still around. I know that I will spend a lot of time in the area between July and November and I really hope to see him, too.

Thanks to Andrea and her team for always recording and reporting hyena sightings and thanks to Barry for sending the images.

- The Brown Hyena Research Project attended several workshops: the CEPF/SKEP five year assessment workshop in Cape Town, the Sperrgebiet National Park business plan and tourism development workshop in Luderitz and the Kolmanskop Museum workshop, also in Luderitz.
- Trygve Cooper invited me again to join him and a group of Oranjemund business people and Namdeb employees at Gabusib to talk about brown hyena conservation in the future National Park. We unfortunately did not manage to find Caspar for a data download, but half of the group were lucky to see a brown hyena in the Klinghardt Mountains (I missed it completely...).
- Unfortunately I have to report a brown hyena cub roadkill again. The cub was killed just outside Luderitz on the tar road and we believe that it might be one of Minerva's cubs. At present I'm testing a whistle device on my vehicle, which hopefully alerts wildlife from a greater distance that a car is approaching. If the system works, Namdeb might fit these devices to their vehicles and one could possibly also convince some other people in town to use them.



FUNDRAISING AND DONATIONS

We received a very generous donation of N\$ 4800 from the **Beppo Family**. This donation will go towards our darting expenses. We will be out in the field between July and November and hope to fit eight to ten more collars.

Mrs Betsy Fox, formerly from the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, donated night vision binoculars to the project. We will test them during our darting trip soon.

Our project proposal to **SKEP** to study brown hyenas in the Aus area was approved and we have already ordered two GPS collars. We hope to study the interspecific relationship between spotted and brown hyenas in this area.

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

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|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------|-------------------------------|--------------|
| Namdeb Diamond Corporation | Luderitz Bay Shipping & Forwarding | Andrew Cunningham | Ronel v.d. Merwe | Luderitz Backpackers | Beppo Family |
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If you would prefer to do a bank transfer, the details are as follows:
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ADOPTION AND DONATION FORM

Post form to Brown Hyena Research Project, P. O. Box 739, Lüderitz, Namibia or
e-mail to strandwolf@iway.na

- Adopt/Sponsor a brown hyena for one year (N\$/ZAR 1500-00, Euro/US\$ 250-00, £ 150-00)
- Become a friend of the Brown Hyena Research Project - annual fee: N\$/ZAR 500-00, Euro/US\$ 50-00, £ 35-00 discount for members from Namibia (60%) and other African countries (30%)
- I would prefer to donate N\$/ZAR, Euro/US\$, £

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Thank you very much for your support!