



Newsletter

Issue 25 March 2009



TONY'S LAST DAYS NEAR WOLF BAY

Two years ago, we rescued a brown hyena at the Marco Fishing fish factory property in Luderitz. Tony wandered around the property and couldn't find her way out, so we sedated her, fitted her with a radio collar and released her near Agate Beach. She was already an old hyena and we did not expect her to live for much longer. But she proved us wrong: first, she moved into the Wolf Bay area, which was actually her home (so we released her in the wrong area), and then she surprised us with moving large distances ranging from the Kowis Mountains to the north, and south to the Atlas Bay seal colony. However, by the middle of last year, her movements became a lot more restricted and we mostly found her around the Kolmanskop ghost town or close to the Wolf Bay seal colony. Since the end of last year, quite a few Namdeb employees reported seeing her close to the main road that leads to the mine at Elizabeth Bay. I finally received a phone call from the Northern Area Environmental Officer, Cynthia Gomez, at the end of February. She reported that Tony walked along the main road and that she was in a very poor condition. I immediately drove into the area to find her. Tony was still walking along the road, when I arrived there, but settled shortly afterwards in a little gully next to the road. She was really in a bad condition: she was visibly thin, disorientated and one could not find an area of her body that was not injured. I spotted lots of pressure wounds, but also many bite wounds inflicted by other brown hyenas. The wounds were deep and some looked septic. She also seemed to be blind, as she did not respond to my presence and her eyes were bluish grey.

I spent a bit of time with her. It was a very hot day and the resting site that she chose was exposed to the sun, but she was too weak to move any further. Once I was convinced that she would not move anywhere else and therefore would not be in danger of being hit by a vehicle, I returned to town.

I went back the next morning and already received the collar's mortality signal on my way to the gully and was therefore prepared to find her dead. She had only moved a few metres from the resting site she had chosen the previous day. It looked as if she died that day, judging by the amount of decomposition when I found her. I was relieved that she had died and that she did not have to suffer any longer.

There are no other animals collared in the Wolf Bay area at present, but we will concentrate our darting and collaring efforts for this year in that area.

Thanks to...

Cynthia Gomez and Gary Grey for reporting her on that day. Also thanks to all the other Namdeb personnel who reported seeing her during the last few months of her life.

Tony searching for a resting site in the gully next to the main road



AGATE BEACH FEMALE KILLED ON ROAD

Unfortunately I have to report another road-kill. The remaining breeding female of the Agate Beach Clan was killed on the road in Luderitz, right next to the breweries building. She was possibly foraging around the prison, as we know from our GPS data that quite a few hyenas find food there. I haven't done the necropsy yet, but it looks as if she was lactating or pregnant when she was killed by a vehicle. Remus, a radio-collared male of the same clan, and a cub were also killed on the road during the past few years.

WEB PAGE

Our web page is on and running again. There are a few additions: You can download the newsletters, but also other project reports and publications. I also added a 'News' section, where I will try to enter news on a more regular basis. However, this section does not replace the quarterly newsletter. Another new feature is a page that describes our past and present study animals. I also added a page regarding our budget and needs for 2009, so please have a look and see if you may be able to help us to organise some of these items.

URGENT EQUIPMENT NEEDS

We urgently need to purchase at least three more camera traps. Our old camera traps are not working any more and since they are old models, we can't purchase replacement parts. I need to do a proper abundance estimate for the Van Reenen Bay and Wolf Bay areas and also need to start with the Human Wildlife Conflict study on farmland – these are the projects where the camera traps are needed.

We are also still looking for a tent for our upcoming capture season.

SPERRGEBIET NATIONAL PARK

It finally happened: The official launch of the Sperrgebiet National Park took place at Kolmanskop at the beginning of February. It was a very well organized launch and everybody who participated in the planning of the Park was really excited and proud to have contributed. Our Environmental Information Centre at Kolmanskop was open the entire day and we many of the invited guests visited the Centre.

RODIN'S VERY INTERESTING LIFE

This page is dedicated to all the failures that we had to deal with since the beginning of this year. Yes, it did not start too well, but as usual, I try to see the positive sides to it, too. Well, to start, I need to tell Rodin's story. The data that we had downloaded of Rodin's collar in December was very interesting. He started to move out of his usual home range towards the north, nearly reaching the Van Reenen Bay seal colony, which had been Ray's home in the past. Needless to say, I was very excited about what the next data download would show. Then, in January I received a worrying photograph of Rodin taken at Bogenfels: his collar looked damaged. Some cables were exposed and I feared that we would not be able to locate him, in case the VHF unit was destroyed. Gino and I did our best on our first day of flying to locate him, but no luck. This obviously enforced my thought of having to deal with a damaged collar. However, we did not give up and tried to locate him the next day. To our surprise, we received a very strong VHF signal close to Pomona and finally found him resting under a nice overhang just east of the Van Reenen Bay seal colony. We were so happy and triggered the download. Suddenly after 10 minutes of download, the data transfer was interrupted. First we thought that he moved deeper into the cave, which caused the transmission to stop, but we flew past the resting site and could see him looking at us, so there had to be another reason for the failure. Gino and I decided to fly around the area for another 20 minutes to check whether the VHF signal starts transmitting again once the download time had past. Nothing. There was not much time to decide what to do and will all the knowledge of having seen the damage on the collar on the photograph and the sudden loss of transmission, we decided to drop the collar off. Once we had triggered the drop-off, we received a clear recovery VHF beacon. What was happening?

There was not enough time to recover the collar on the same day, so I drove to Van Reenen Bay the next morning. I found the collar easily, as Rodin was so kind to leave it behind – this does not always happen, as some hyenas like to carry the collar around with them for a bit longer. Well, while I was tracking the collar to retrieve it, the VHF signal also suddenly disappeared again. Therefore I could not wait to see what the data looked like, as I expected to have to deal with a serious collar malfunction. But: the data that I downloaded at home was the most perfect data set I ever retrieved from a collar. No missing fixes, nothing to indicate what was wrong. The VHF signal also seemed to be fine and the exposed cable was not a real reason for concern. Also, the data showed that Rodin had left his home range around Dreimasterbay and started living around Van Reenen Bay from the end of December onwards. I felt so sad about triggering the drop-off, as Rodin's further movements would have been so interesting and exciting.

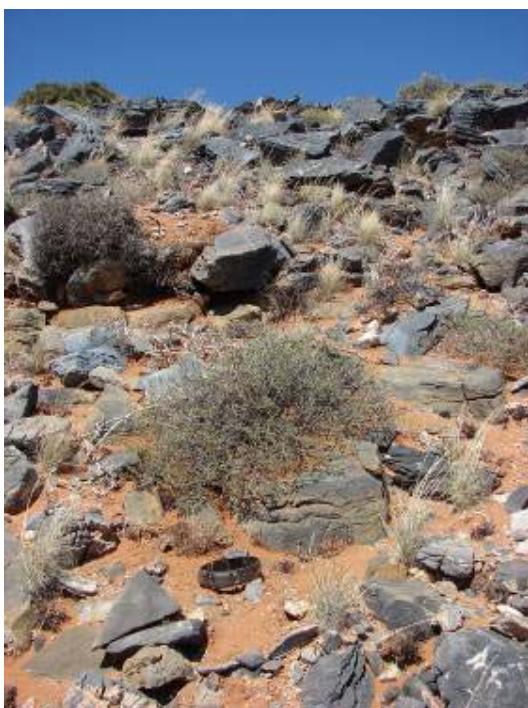
The only explanation I have for the weird VHF transmission mystery is that we always had to deal with interferences with other radio signals in his study area, but never to that extreme. I think that nothing is wrong with the collar and that the other VHF interferences caused the loss of transmission. Well, not much that I can do about it now, but this was quite a blow for the project. It will be difficult to re-capture him, as he is quite skittish when it comes to approaching bait – well, for a good reason, as he knows that he will be poked by a needle if he does so. But who knows, maybe we will be lucky this year and fit him with another collar with a different frequency to avoid problems with interferences.

In the meantime, I will try to organise funds for camera traps to place at Van Reenen Bay. I hope that he will settle in that study area and that he does not move even further north. I will report more about his movements since the beginning of this year in our next newsletters, as I have good time now to analyse our GPS data sets.



Rodin's collar at the resting site

HOW CASPAR MADE US WORRY



Rodin was not the only hyena that gave us trouble since the beginning of this year. When we went out to locate Caspar at the beginning of March, we suddenly received a mortality signal of his collar. Well, it was to be expected that he dies at one point, as he was already about 12 to 14 years old when we captured him in December 2006. Still, it was quite a shock. We downloaded the data to get an exact GPS position of his whereabouts and spent quite a lot of time circling around the area to maybe see his carcass. But nothing, although we were flying on a pretty low altitude. Unfortunately the collar/carcass was in the middle of nowhere and there were no roads nearby. So we were really not sure how we would ever retrieve the collar. We searched the whole area for an old 4x4 track, but nothing. So I already prepared myself for a long walk (the closest road we could find was 12 km away from the GPS position of the collar). This does not sound much, but it is a desert and you have to walk over dunes and mountains to reach the point, so 12 km can become double or triple the distance. Luckily, Trygve (Chief Warden of the Park) heard about our predicament and offered his help. So just two days after we did our aerial tracking, we were able to drive into the area to retrieve the collar and carcass. I still kept my hopes up that the collar just dropped off and that Caspar would be well and alive.

As soon as we came closer to the area, I received the VHF signal, but it wasn't a mortality signal any more. This also confirmed my fears that Caspar was dead, as other scavengers sometimes feed or move a carcass, which makes the collar send a normal VHF beacon again. Once we arrived close to the recorded GPS position, we hiked up the mountain and found the collar immediately, however, no Caspar in sight. What a relief! The collar dropped off. The collar belting was only held together by a 5mm thin strip of material and it looks that while Caspar was moving down the path on that mountain, the collar just slipped off. So: Caspar, the 'friendly ghost' became a ghost once more. After the bad news with Rodin's collar, I was relieved to have the good news that Caspar is still alive, at least as far as we know. Sure, it is sad that we can't follow his life any longer, but the collar battery would have expired in the middle of this year in any case, so this involuntary drop-off is not all too bad.

Thanks to Trygve for helping to retrieve the collar. Thanks to Steve for joining us on the trip. It was really amazing to see such a remote and pristine area of the Park. Also thanks to Gino for again doing absolutely perfect tracking flights – although this time my stomach was extremely unhappy.



Again: Can you spot the spotted hyena?

I actually need more than one page to report about all of this year's failures. Well, Oona is well and alive, but her collar is not. When we flew in February, we received the collar's recovery signal between the Tiras Mountains and the dunes, quite close to the 707 road. This usually means that the collar dropped-off, that the battery voltage is low or that there is some other sort of damage to the collar. We determined the position of the collar quickly and decided to land on the road, walk to the dunes and retrieve the collar. But we needed a good GPS location first, as I did not bring my handheld directional antenna to help finding a collar. Therefore, we circled around the dune in question many times, using different gain settings on the receiver. We finally thought that we had a pretty good fix, but decided to fly very low around the dune again, just to make sure. Suddenly, Oona jumped out of a bush, on top of the dune, collar still attached... Just imagine we would have walked into her arms, trying to find a collar. These animals are so well camouflaged, I just wonder why she did not jump out of her resting site before. Well, we obviously did not land and walk to the dune, but instead triggered a download. But, once we had a look at the data, it became clear that the collar's GPS recording function is not working any more: no data was collected since the beginning of December 2008. I quickly phoned Televilt in Sweden to find out if they can make sense of this failure. They had a look at the technical file that is also transmitted: the battery voltage was still fine, but there is definitely an external or internal failure. However, we decided to leave the collar on and use it in the meantime as a VHF collar. This was a good decision, as we found Oona again on our March aerial tracking flight near a nice water filled rock pool. We will continue tracking her and will try to replace her collar soon. Only then will I send the collar back to Televilt, so that they can have a proper look at it to find out what the problem is. It has rained a lot over the past few months and I think that Oona took more baths' than 'necessary', so maybe the unit just got moist and the electrics failed. However, I will keep you informed.

OONA'S COLLAR

FUNDRAISING AND DONATIONS

Christine Lindner donated N\$ 1000 to the Brown Hyena Research Project. We also received a donation of € 50 from **Nils Schultze**. **Chris Voigts** and **Louise Yates** donated N\$ 250 to the project.

Nicole and Adam Baden-Clay adopted Caspar and also joined me on one of my field trips to Wolf Bay.

Chevron Namibia renewed their annual fuel donation of N\$ 15 000.

Chris Bird designed our new Hyena Research Logo. Thank you very much.

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

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Thank you very much for your support!