Newsletter

Issue 47 September 2014

SEARCH FOR AMADEUS - SARAH

In late July I was lucky enough to go flying for aerial telemetry for the second time. This time the mission was to find Amadeus, a male hyena missing in action since December 2013. The afternoon flight went from Luderitz, over Wolf, Atlas and Elizabeth Bays and then down to Bogenfels Arch and then inland. It was an extremely hot day and we had no luck finding Amadeus, who could have been resting under some rocks blocking his VHF signal meaning we could not pick it up from the plane, alternatively he could just not have been where we were looking – the mystery of missing Amadeus continues...

Bogenfels Arch from a "different" angle

vast saltpans near Bogenfels

To all Oranjemunders and visitors to Oranjemund, we need your help – Amadeus might be in your area!

Some of you might still remember that Darwin, a young male brown hyena that was collared around E-Bay, went missing in action a few years ago, too. After many fruitless telemetry drives and two extensive aerial search flights, we were ready to give up, when we received a sighting alert from Hohenfels about a collared brown hyena. And there Darwin was: enjoying his new environment along the Orange River. Amadeus was last seen around Bogenfels, so he was on his way south and there is a good chance that he may be in the Oranjemund area. So please, keep an eye out for him and e-mail, phone us or alert Namdeb Environmental Section whenever you see a brown hyena, especially if it is collared – that could be Amadeus!

DIAMOND ROUTE CONFERENCE and TSWALU KALAHARI RESERVE

Sarah is going to give a talk at the annual Diamond Route Conference in Johannesburg in October. She is going to introduce our study at Tswalu Kalahari Reserve and it is planned to present the first results.
Sarah and Inga travelled to Tswalu Kalahari Reserve to help the team on site to set-up 22 camera traps to amongst others monitor brown hyena and other carnivore occupancy. First data will be collected from August until October with the second monitoring period planned for early 2014. Some cameras are malfunctioning and we have to replace those, but otherwise everything seems to run smoothly, mainly thanks to the great collaboration team at Tswalu. We
would like to thank Gus von Dyk, Dylon Smith, Duncan MacFadyen, Doug and Zandri.

SARAH – HUMAN WILDLIFE CONFLICT STUDY

The human-wildlife conflict study field work ended in June, and what a sad ending this was. On my last weekend at Namtib we received a call from a local farmer telling us he shot a spotted hyena he believed had killed one calf and injured on his farm, and asked if I would like the dead hyena for samples. All the while whilst driving to pick up the hyena, I was thinking "Please don't let this be a hyena I know", the farm was close to my study sites and the potential was there. Within minutes of arriving I checked the dead hyena and was partially relieved to find this was a sub-adult female I did not know. However it is still extremely difficult to see such a beautiful animal killed at only at such a young age. Frieda and I took the hyena back to Namtib where we took samples, did a stomach content analysis and buried it. We are just grateful the farmer made the call, the samples we took will be used in the study. This only goes to the real consequences of human-carnivore conflict in Namibia, an issue which needs resolution through non-lethal methods.

BIODIVERSITY ACTION WEEK

The 22nd May marked the International Day of Biological Diversity and the Brown Hyena Research Project was invited by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism to work with the Luderitz High School learners for the occasion. During the week running up to Biodiversity Day the team worked with the learners teaching them about carnivores, in particular the differences between coastal and inland animals. Eric Murray taught the learners about coastal jackals and brown hyenas and the importance of the seal colonies to these species, whilst Sarah Edwards and Frieda Shikongo taught about inland carnivores and the human-wildlife conflict issues many carnivores face on farmlands.

The teaching at the high school was very interactive with the learners handling brown hyena and jackal skins, using a camera trap works and playing games based on what they had learnt. The learners were even able to go on a field trip into the Sperrgebiet to Wolf Bay to see (and smell) a seal colony. Not only was this the first time the children had entered the Sperrgebiet, for most learners it was their first time seeing a seal.

The International Day of Biological Diversity was celebrated at the Nest Hotel, where 200 people attended a day of events including performances and presentations. The Luderitz High School learners split into two groups, one focusing on coastal carnivores, and the other on inland carnivores to give performances. The learners were asked to come up with their own concepts and masks; the coastal group demonstrated jackal predation on seal pups, with a brown hyena stealing the kill, whilst the inland group showed how using a shepherd and dog to protect sheep can protect them without having to kill carnivores. Both performances were enjoyed by all, with much ad-lib from the learners, including the line "look after my goat, or I will eat your dog" bringing the house down. The team would like to once again thank the learners for working so hard all week, especially on their performances at the Nest Hotel – we couldn't be more proud of you all!


Coastal jackals


Lüderitz High Schoolers celebrate after their performance


Representing farmers across Namibia

THOMAS – LATRINE AND PASTE MARK SURVEY STUDY

The past seven months has been a time of continued growth for my academic career in the research field of natural resources management. A significant part of that growth was through the support and guidance of the BHRP staff and Phd students who gave their time because of their personal commitments to research and conservation of the brown hyaena.

Like many other students perusing their honour degree in the field of Natural Resource Management (Nature Conservation) at the Polytechnic of Namibia, I opted to focus my research project on the Brown hyaena (Parahyaena brunnea) in the Tsau Kaib National Park (Sperrgebiet), a population currently under various threats.

My study aims to seek better understanding on whether brown hyaena's latrines and paste marks are associated with specific habitat, vegetation and/or landscape features on which they are found? These interactive linkages if proved to exist would be of great importance to enforce appropriate conservation strategies that will help to sustain viable population of the brown hyaena.

I must acknowledged that I am excited and inspired by the opportunity to work with such dedicated staff and PHD students of the BHRP. The research we are engaged in is crucial for biodiversity of this country. (By: Thomas T. Neema, Student, Polytechnic of Namibia)


Latrine depth and circumference


Paste mark


Plant size being measured

ARJUN

An exciting part of my work here at BHRP has been collecting data on the vast number of brown hyena skeletons the project has. Once fully decomposed, their skeletons are exhumed and kept safely for future use. Currently, myself and Kyle have been doing an inventory of each skeleton by seeing which bones it has or is missing. It has been quite a challenge to learn the different names for bones and how to recognize them by shape – especially those confusing carpals and tarsals! However, we have finally managed to successfully piece together and identify every bone in a hyena's body, so most of the work now is involved with seeing what is there and what is missing. As many of these hyenas are the unfortunate victims of car accidents, bones are often fragmented or missing. Furthermore, individual variation in the number of ribs and caudal (tail) vertebrae make it hard to know whether a hyena was just naturally born with fewer or extra ribs/vertebrae or if such bones went missing at some point while the hyena's body was buried.

Another aspect of this side project is focused on literature research. This has been relatively difficult because there are very few papers that include hyena osteology. However, analogous publications on dog skeletal structure are quite informative and helpful. Since the ultimate goal of this study is to produce a publication on the

dimensions and structure of brown hyena skeletons, veterinary journals seem to have a wealth of information that can be useful for our purpose. We are trying to find a good “model” paper that can guide us towards figuring out how to structure a publication focused on this topic. We’ll take all the help we can get!
While the skeleton work is definitely a long-term project, we are both glad to be taking part in its infancy stage and hope to set a useful, successful platform for future volunteers and students here at the project. A good way of doing this has been to take photographs of the different bones and label them correctly to help piece together this puzzle. This serves as a reference for us right now and will hopefully do the same for others in the future. We are both curious to see how this turns out in the future.

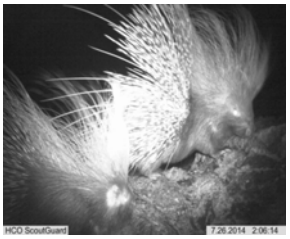
INGA – DEN ACTIVITY STUDY

My three month in Luderitz passed by really fast, and while writing this article I am already back in Germany. During the three month it proved again that setting up camera traps in a way to receive as many good and usable data as possible is not as easy as it may seem. Even if a good spot is found in the beginning it does not mean that the camera trap will work perfectly there. With every check of the camera traps you will figure out things that need to be changed a little bit. That the angle in which the camera trap is facing is not ideal, and it needs to be adjusted a little bit. Furthermore there might be moving vegetation or heating up ground triggering the camera trap so that the sensitivity needs to be changed. And and and... By now I can proudly say that all camera traps are set-up nicely and that only minor changes need to be done if necessary. I already got some nice data showing food provisioning and I also got nice ID shots of the different hyenas. Nevertheless IDing the hyenas is quite a challenge. Sometimes it takes a while and a lot of comparing with the ID pictures (taken during darting) to come to a conclusion. And although sometimes it seems to be obvious which hyena is visible on the picture on the first look a second look or opinion can change your mind completely. Therefore the IDing is a long process with going back and forward between the pictures all the time. Nevertheless sometimes we are lucky and it is easy to identify individuals as nomads, as they have some obvious scars.
Apart from the camera traps it is also important for my study to look at the GPS Telemetry data to know if a den got active in the meantime. Therefore I spent some time in the field to find and download KC as well as Obelixa. Especially KC played hide and seek with us. Since she was collared begin of this year we hardly got a signal from her although we got her frequently on the camera traps. Therefore it became more and more important to find her because we started wondering if her collar was not working properly or if she was already denning and deep inside a natal den most of the time. On one day I was out in the field and climbed up a hill to see if I had any hyenas close by when I got a weak signal from KC which disappeared regularly. I could not believe my ears and thought it was an audible Fata Morgana. But I was convinced that I heard her signal, therefore I started hiking towards the direction her signal came from, but as soon as I was on the planes again I could not hear anything. Just on the next ridge which was a couple of hundred meters away, I was able to hear her signal again. I was really lucky that from this point her signal got stronger and stronger and I was finally able to trigger the download. The data revealed that her collar was working nicely and that she was not denning yet. In comparison to KC Obelixa was a lot easier to find and download. Nevertheless her data gave us a bit of confusion as there were three new spots indicating that she might be looking for a new natal den. As I am depended on having camera traps at all den sites where the hyenas might move to, I had to drive out to the field and check these locations. It turned out that at all locations were only resting sites in the middle of vegetation and therefore no reason for me to start worrying.
Until now I am really happy with where this study is heading to and I cannot wait to come back in January to go on collecting the data on my own!
At this point I have to thank Ingrid again for giving me the great opportunity to write my Master thesis about the denning behaviour of the brown hyenas and for her constant support!!! Furthermore thank you to everyone on site for continuing to collect my data while I am away!


Obelixa's cub at Green Valley Den


A sub-adult at Small Cub Den in the Wolf Bay area


One of our most regular visitors at den sites


Porcupines using the den site

KYLE

As a brand new member of the Brown Hyena Research Project and a first time visitor in Africa it's been a very exciting month. The field work has been instructional, eye opening and given me a chance to see some classic African wildlife up close. The powerful Oryx, slinky Jackals, vibrant flamingos, and skittish springbok all become more vivacious and animated than they ever were on Animal Planet or behind bars in the zoo.
Trekking through the arid, sand swept landscape of the Kolmanskop, Rotkop, and Bogenfels areas I've managed to see almost all the charismatic local wildlife: Ostrich, Springbok, Jackals, Cape fur Seals, Klipspringer, Oryx. Really, it seems, everything except the Brown Hyena. A cruel irony. Understandably, field work carried out during the day doesn't mix well with sighting an already elusive and nocturnal animal. I was slowly coming to terms with the fact that I might not even see a Brown Hyena in my short three month stint with BHRP.
In late August, a routine camera trap check in the Kolmanskop area turned into one of my most exciting experiences with the project to date. It was a camera check like any other at Green Valley Den, one of the den sites prevously used by Alaika and Obelixa's klan. The telemetry receiver hadn't picked up any signals. The coast was clear. No hyenas in the area. My hopes dashed again. Walking through the thick, thorny vegetation that gives Green Valley Den its name towards the latrine site I kept my eyes on the small, worn path in front of me, trying not to walk straight into any brambles.
It must have seen us before we saw it. There it was watching us intently with the innate curiosity young animals posses. Ears cocked forward and upright the cub's head peered out over the top of a bush only about 15m away. I was taken entirely by surprise, the sudden appearance only further fueling my awe. After a few tense but amazing seconds of eyeing one another, we backed away from the cub, likely one of Obelixa's, heading back out of the valley so as not to disturb it. Practically stumbling into that cub in the middle of the desert will undoubtedly be a highlight of my time with BHRP.

ERIC – JACKAL PROJECT

At the end of July, I unfortunately had to leave Lüderitz and return to the United States for coursework. I hated leaving such a beautiful place, wonderful people, and of course, my jackals. The good news is that I will be back in January for another half-year stint of research! And believe me, I'm counting down the days. Before I left, I set up a couple camera traps at potential jackal den sites. Without knowing if the dens were active or not the previous year, it was very difficult to decide which sites to actually leave the cameras. Well, the first round of images have come in from a really amazing place I call Gully Den – and we have jackal activity! It's too early in the season to know if they are actually going to use this site to den and rear their pups come October, but it is still very exciting to actually have captured images of jackals at this particular location. Time will only tell! Fingers crossed…

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THE PROJECT NEEDS…

- We are looking for contributions for the refurbishment of three GPS telemetry collars
- Contributions to vehicle and fuel expenses

If you are interested in supporting the project, please e-mail strandwolf@iway.na or hyenaconflict@gmail.com

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

Namdeb Diamond Corporation
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ESRI
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Erich Looser
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Kirk Suedmeyer
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Windhoek Optics
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NHK Enterprises
Tony Edmunds

Contact Details
www.strandwolf.org
www.facebook.com/BrownHyenaResearchProject

P. O. Box 739
Lüderitz
Namibia

Dr. Ingrid Wiesel, cell: +264 812003429, strandwolf@iway.na or tsaukaib@gmail.com

Sarah Edwards, cell: +264 818388662, hyenaconflict@gmail.com

DONATIONS:
Brown Hyena Research Project – Nedbank Namibia
Bismarck Street, Lüderitz, 9000, Namibia
Lüderitz Branch, Branch Code 461610
Cheque Account
Account number: 11010015024
Swift code: NEDSNANX
BIC: NEDSNANXXXX
IBAN: 46161011010015024