

DARTING SEASON 2014

This year's darting season presented a complete new challenge. Two collars had reached the end of their battery life before I could drop them off and we therefore had recapture Obelixa and KC Sowande to retrieve the collars and to fit new ones. This doesn't sound all too difficult, but to distinguish between the hyenas at night only by their stripe pattern on the forelegs is close to impossible. All we see is some green blur through the night-vision scope. At least Obelixa has some large ear notches that could help us with the identification, but KC Sowande did not and we therefore tried to memorize her stripe pattern. We captured Obelixa quickly and



Brown hyena at the bait at night – this is what we see



Jack, Sarah and Frieda with KC Sowande

changed her collar. This success was followed by some interesting, but difficult nights. We had up to three collared hyenas at the bait at the same time and no-one of us felt confident enough to identify them for darting. However, it seemed as if the hyenas were Balu, Wallace and KC, but who was who? We decided to take a brake and go to Atlas Bay to dart some uncollared hyenas – and our first capture was Alaika. We couldn't believe our luck: she had lost her collar last year and being the breeding female of the Atlas Bay clan, she is extremely important for our studies. All went well, but she did not show any sign that she was lactating and hence, my concern that she may have lost her cubs seems to have been confirmed. But with the newly fitted GPS collar, I had planned to track her movements and do an aerial data download in May. We captured another young female, Nymeria, in the same night and a middle-aged male the following night. It was time to go back to E-Bay to try and dart KC Sowande. In the meantime, each of us had copied KC Sowande's ID photographs on our cell phones, ipods etc. – and it worked. A quick check onto the screen and look through the night-vision and KC Sowande's ID was confirmed. Kirk darted her immediately, all went well and she is fitted with a new GPS collar. We also saw her mating with one of the males earlier in the season and with a bit of luck, she should have her first litter in June this year. I will keep you posted.

Thanks to the darting team Kirk, Jack, Sarah and Frieda. Thanks also to Wilfried Erni for providing the bait and for Juergen Syvertsen of the Luderitz SPAR for storing it.

SOUTHERN NAMIB CARNIVORE COALITION (SNaCC)

All of you know that the Brown Hyena Research Project has not only been involved in brown hyena research over all these years. Our objectives have always included the study and conservation of other carnivores and their habitats. This started on a broader scale with Sarah's PhD study, looking at human-wildlife-conflict along the Namib-Naukluft and Tsau//Khaeb (Sperrgebiet) National Park boundaries. We then collaborated with MET on the National Leopard Survey and Eric has just recently started his PhD on jackals in collaboration with the Brown Hyena Research Project. Therefore it was time to establish a new project under the Brown Hyena Research Project's umbrella – the Southern Namib Carnivore Coalition, SNaCC.

The Kansas City Zoo in the United States is going to collaborate with us by promoting SNaCC and facilitating fundraising opportunities. All SNaCC associated projects will in future report about their progress in this newsletter.



SNaCC logo designed by Eric Murray

AERIAL DOWNLOADS

Gino and I flew towards the end of May to locate all collared hyenas and to try once more to do aerial UHF data downloads. We quickly found all animals, except for Amadeus, despite searching for him as far south as Baker's Bay. I have the feeling that he might have moved even further south towards the Orange River and we may have to do another search flight in July. Other than him, all other hyenas were accounted for. We located them quickly, but the aerial UHF download doesn't want to work. The area is just too rocky and we don't have uninterrupted line of sight with the animal. After locating the animals from the air, we downloaded the data from the ground. On the first day, we managed to download Alaika and Nymeria. Alaika's data confirmed that she had lost her cubs – she is not visiting any den site at the moment. Sarah flew with

Gino on day two and we managed to download the new male's data afterwards. All a great success and all animals seem to be doing well.

NYMERIA

Just as this newsletter was ready for distribution, we received the information about a roadkill of a collared brown hyena between Kolmanskop and the Elizabeth-Bay mine. Nymeria was killed on Friday, 13 June, at 18:38 h. It is a very sad day for us and I will analyse her data for the next newsletter to report more about her short life. She was three years old.



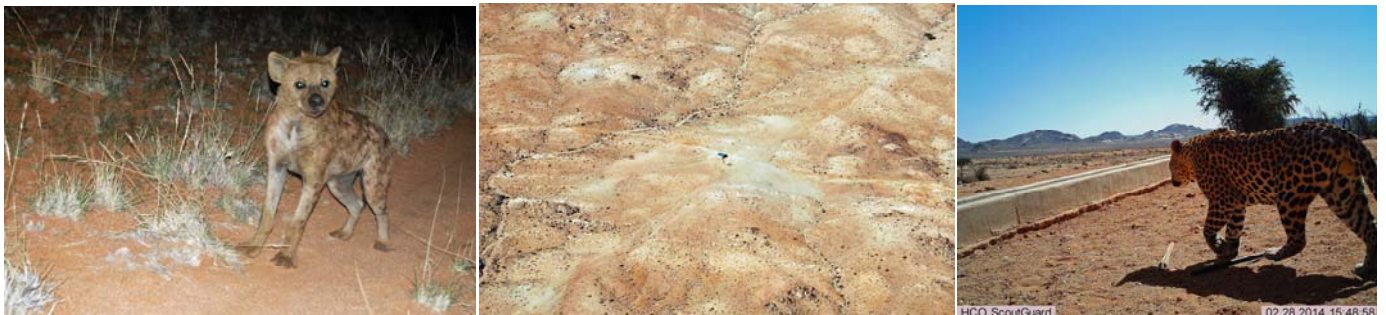
SARAH – HUMAN WILDLIFE CONFLICT STUDY

Field work for the Human-wildlife conflict study is coming to an end, and even in this late stage new and exciting results are still coming. In April we captured the first cheetah and caracal for Gunsbewys, a farm bordering the dunes of the Namib-Naukluft National Park. Finding a caracal in such an open habitat was unexpected and to get another location for cheetah this late in the project was a real bonus. Young brown hyenas were also captured for the first time on the Klein Aus Vista study site, which are presumed to be around 12 months old.



Since the last newsletter the project has been using camera traps to monitor scavenging activity at two cattle carcasses on Namtib, which gave some very interesting results. As expected both black-backed jackal and spotted hyena turned up pretty quickly, with the hyenas making short work of the carcass. Once the hyenas and jackal activity had died down, bat-eared fox, Cape fox and even aardwolf were recorded at the carcasses. Both spotted hyena and bat-eared fox were captured rubbing against the cow and rolling in the smelly liquid underneath the carcass. Such behaviour is thought to occur in social species, making the animal smell more interesting to its social group, gaining more attention from them.

During the time when the carcass was still being eaten by the hyenas, we went out there at night to see what was happening. The first night as we approached the water trough a spotted hyena came running towards the car and started sniffing all around. The hyena then started eating the insects that were attracted to the car headlights. Investigating behaviour went on for the next hour, with the hyena following the car every time we tried to move away, at one point she even lay down in the road in front of us. A few nights later we were lucky enough to hear the hyenas whooping and then saw two individuals, who spent half an hour playing around the car – chasing, wrestling and rolling around – we presume these were young animals.



In May I was lucky enough to go up in the plane to locate some of the Sperrgebiet collared brown hyenas from the air for downloading the collar data. I was extra excited to be taking off from Aus, which meant I could fly over two of my study farms; Klein Aus Vista and Tsirub. Due to Gino's flying skills I was even able to see one of my camera traps at a water trough on Tsirub before we flew into the fog over Luderitz. Seeing the farms from the air reminded me how large and arid these areas are and how difficult life must be for farmers and carnivores alike. This really has been one of the highlights of the year for me and something I won't forget.

Whilst travelling between the study sites, we started finding dead black-backed jackals hanging on the fences having been shot by farmers. During farmer questionnaires jackal was the least tolerated carnivore species, often being shot on sight by farmers. Many farmers believe jackals to be a major threat to sheep, whilst others reported using proper mitigation methods such as shepherds and kraals removes such a threat. Whilst it is extremely sad to see jackals hanging like this, both hair and tissue samples can be taken and used to see how much domestic livestock is in their diet using stable isotope technology.

Work has now began to start taking all camera traps, rub stations and hair snares down across the study sites, as well as packing up the base camp at Namtib. At this time I would like to thank all study farm owners, research assistants, Nedbank Go Green, MET and Ingrid for their support during the last two years. I shall be moving to Luderitz to start a year of analysing data and writing up the PhD thesis in June. Whilst I shall no doubt miss living and working on the farms very much, at the same time I am excited to continue working with the Brown Hyena Research Project helping Ingrid with the day to day running of the project from Luderitz.



FRIEDA – HUMAN WILDLIFE CONFLICT STUDY



Working for BHRP is a great opportunity and I enjoyed every second of it. I have been here for a period of 5 months from January and will go till June. During those 5 months I learnt a lot from the project itself but more especially from my mentor, Ms. Sarah Edwards. She played an important role in my life, through motivation and guidance. She took time from her busy schedule just to go out with me and watch the spotted hyena, of which I only know from looking at the images from field guide. People say that they are unattractive creature. The moment I had my eyes on them, I fall in love with them. They are so adorable and incredible, especially if you look at them from one side and when they bring those ears forward a bit. That night was the most awesome night in my history and I hope for more nights like that. How many of you have you seen a brown hyena, 10 feet from you and actually touch one? I'm proud to say I got the chance to work with few of them in the Sperrgebiet National park for 2 weeks. During those 2 weeks of darting, I also got to work on the famous Alaika. How does it feel? It felt as if nothing else in the world matter but those guys and touching them was even incredible, my heart was filled with joy.

Because hyena are active at night, we had to work at night and sleep during the day, just like them. During that time when we sit in the trench waiting for the hyena to show up, Sarah gave me some study on the stars as you can see them clearly at night on a full moon. I'm not a shame to say I knew nothing about them, but now I can tell you a thing or two about them. I'm really grateful and proud of myself, all thanks to Sarah.

Biodiversity week, during this week I get a chance to work with the Luderitz secondary school learners. I gave them a power point presentation on the inland carnivores. I help in preparing them for a play, of which they did amazing job and they were awesome plus they enjoy themselves.

In a period of 5 months I came to see 5 carnivores of which bat-eared fox, aardwolf and jackal were one of. A group of 5 bat-eared fox was resting under a tree at Tsurub and two aardwolves were fighting in the middle of the road on our way from Lüderitz to the farm. It is all coming to an end now, it is sad but all good things do come to an end at some point.

I would like to take this opportunity to show gratitude to Dr. Ingrid and Ms. Sarah for a great opportunity they have given to me to experience the life in the field and working with the carnivores. THANK YOU!!!!

TSWALU STUDY



Sarah and I travelled to Tswalu Kalahari Reserve in April to discuss the possibilities of a collaboration to study brown hyena and other large carnivore abundance there. We met with Gus van Dyk, the General Manager, to tell him about our ideas and the Brown Hyena Research Project's proposed involvement. It was absolutely great and we all felt that there are fantastic research opportunities. Our collaborative project is going to start in August, when Sarah will set-up 22 camera traps in the reserve. We will keep you posted about this project once it is up and running.

During our visit, we determined good camera trap sites, collected brown hyena paste marks for genetic analysis and set-up two camera traps at carcasses. One of the camera traps was placed at a feeding site and two hours after the reserve's conservation students dropped the carcass of an impala there, a brown hyena arrived. It took the hyena only one hour to bite off the entire hindquarters and carry them off. It turned out to be a resident animal that had already been photographed in the area in 2012.

ERIC – THE JACKAL PROJECT

The coastal nightlife begins to awaken with the chime of twilight as the crescent moon peeks over the purple horizon. The wind that has been howling all day dwindles to a cool breeze until suddenly, there is calm – a calmness that reveals the starry night's symphony under way. The ocean provides a melodic rhythm as the crickets begin to sing, followed by the percussive pitter-patter of paws on the dunes which provide a muffled beat as a pair of jackals follows a brown hyena to the beach. The seals call, the porcupines stir, the geckos emerge – in the darkness, Van Reenen Bay comes alive.

My favorite part of this year's field season has by far been the project's camera trap methods and what amazing nocturnal behavior they reveal. Initially implemented in order to obtain jackal identification pictures, the camera traps have proven to be even more useful by aiding in on going brown hyena studies – as well as the sheer entertainment I get by seeing curious porcupines, rolling hyenas, and of course the always amusing jackals!



The camera traps don't just give us nice photographs – they give us valuable information about certain species, as well as specific individuals within those species. For example, let's look at these camera trap images from the last couple of weeks, all taken in the exact same location. At a glance, the first may come across as yet another striking pose from a beautiful brown hyena. However, what you may not realize is that she is actually leaving a paste mark on the grass just behind her. A sample of this paste was then taken and will provide us with the genetic information for this individual animal – an animal that we now are able to recognize from the unique stripe patterns on her legs. Moving on, the second photo shows us a lovely porcupine out for a midnight stroll. Though not one of the project's target species, the series of images taken during this event still reveal an interesting fact about the porcupine's foraging behavior. There were actually not one, but two adult porcupines foraging together. And finally, the last image reveals a picturesque pair of jackals having a bit of a nibble on an old seal hide. Again, all of the pictures taken of these two individuals give us not only identification shots, but also show us a sequence of dominant and submissive displays helping us to understand hierarchical relationships. I can't wait to get back to Van Reenen Bay and see what amazing photos we will have next!



INGA – DEN ACTIVITY STUDY

End of May it was time for me again to say goodbye to Europe and to come back to Namibia for three more months. This time the aim of my stay is to start with the data collection for my Master thesis. I will look at the activity at brown hyena den sites. This includes first of all looking at the solid food provisioning to cubs by their mother and the rest of the clan members. Secondly determining the peak activity times at the den and looking if there are differences between the number of visits by the mother and the rest of the clan members. Finally I will look at the moving behavior of the clan members; so determining how long it takes the rest of the clan to detect the new den site used by the mother and her cubs. To get appropriate data to answer these questions Ingrid, Arjun and I set up camera traps at 18 den sites in the last couple of days. These den sites are made up of natal- and communal den sites of Alaika's as well as Obelixa's clan. Especially a couple of den sites of Alaika I mapped during my Bachelor data collection in 2012 and therefore I am really excited about these one. In general I cannot wait to get the first pictures next week and to see what is going on at the den sites right now. We obviously know pretty well which den sites are used by brown hyenas at the moment as all adults are collared and we regularly get their GPS telemetry data. But as we also know from other camera traps some dens are used by other species too while the brown hyenas are not occupying them. While setting up one of the camera traps at a den site a small porcupine approached us to get back into its den. Luckily the parents were not around so we could just move away from the den entrance and enjoy watching the small porcupine walking back into the den (my first sighting of a porcupine in the wild!).

Now that my data collection has started I have until end of August to collect the data myself and enjoy the field work that is connected to it. Unfortunately I will only be able to come back in January to do the final data collection as I have to go back to Europe to follow lectures at University. In the mean time the other volunteers here will go on checking my camera traps. And I already know that I am going to be so excited on the days on which I know they are driving out and checking my camera traps and that I cannot wait for them to send me the pictures!!!

.ARJUN - VOLUNTEER

Hello! I just joined the Brown Hyena Research Project last month as a volunteer to help out Ingrid and her graduate students with their projects. My goal right now is to gain field research experience to help prepare me for graduate school. With Ingrid leaving for Germany soon, there is lots of work to be done both in the field and office and I'm glad to help out in any way I can.



I've been fascinated by carnivores since a very young age and have been hoping to study them for years. After graduating from university last year, I spent seven months working in the Okavango Delta, conducting behavioral research on the large carnivores in the area. It was there that I really developed my fascination with hyenas – in that case, the spotted hyena. While hyenas were not the focal point of that project, I still really enjoyed setting up camera traps, identifying individuals and relished the few moments I had with them in person (assuming they didn't run away immediately!). I left Botswana in December and reached out to Ingrid to see if I could branch out and work with brown hyenas next. I've known about BHRP for years, and with my career goals finally coming to fruition, I was eager to get to Namibia. So far the experience has been incredible. From setting up camera traps, hiking kilometers through the desolate yet stunning Sperrgebiet landscape, and even seeing a handful of brown hyenas in person, I could not have asked for a more valuable and exciting way of conducting fieldwork. One event that really stands out to me involves my first brown hyena sighting. A couple of weeks ago, we received strong resting signals on the receiver from Obelixa and Wallace while driving to set up camera traps. While driving along the road, the signals got stronger and stronger, and both appeared to be coming from the same location just beyond a small ridge. We got out of the car to see if we could get a visual on them, as it is quite rare to

get a male and a female resting together – perhaps they were mating? With Ingrid leading the way, we tiptoed barefoot over the rocks and sand, crouching carefully and attempting to minimize the noise. Ingrid kept checking the signal to ensure that we did not disturb them, as Wallace is notoriously skitty. We crept up a small ridge and I could feel my heart pounding. Slowly, we made our way up the ridge to get a better view of the clearing below. Suddenly, a large brown blur came bursting from a gully under the ridge. It took me a second to realize it was a brown hyena – Wallace! He kept running and running at a remarkable speed, turning around after several hundred meters to get a better look at us. Seeing we were still there, he kept going and we eventually lost sight of him as he disappeared across the horizon. But the best part was yet to come.

While the excitement of that sighting was still sinking in, another brown hyena emerged from the same gully, but much more slowly and more relaxed – the famous Obelixa! I remember reading about her in the newsletters from years past, so to finally see her in person was amazing, with her characteristic ear notch. She slowly walked away, but not before generously slowing down just enough for me to snag a picture of her with my iPhone (it didn't turn out too badly considering how much my hands were shaking!). I spent the rest of the day replaying the encounter in my head. It was truly an unforgettable experience and I feel very fortunate to have seen such a rare and intriguing large carnivore in the wild – two at the same time, in fact! While it lasted perhaps only a minute or two, I'll always remember what happened that morning.

FUNDRAISING

We are urgently looking for contributions towards our aerial telemetry expenses (N\$ 10 000) and Lithium batteries for camera traps (N\$ 7 000), as we had unforeseen high expenses for both of our project vehicles. They needed major repairs and without these vehicles, the project is standing still. Please contact us if you can contribute or know of a potential supporter. Thanks 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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Predator Conservation Trust UK
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