

ALAIKA, AMADEUS AND CLYDE

The Atlas Bay Clan has been full of surprises recently. One of those was actually quite sad, as my camera trap footage revealed that one of Alaika's cubs must have died. She also moved away from Jungle Den and up to date, I was not able to find her new den site, despite visiting all den sites that are known to me in her area. She might have lost her other cub, too, but I'm monitoring the entire clan's area with camera traps and hope to find out more soon. Amadeus, a young male of the Atlas Bay clan was captured on a camera trap at Van Reenen Bay in December 2013, about 80 km south of his clan's range. I have not picked him up on any of the local camera traps or at Van Reenen Bay since, indicating that he is either looking to join another clan or starting to live a nomadic live-style.



Alaika with her remaining cub



Amadeus captured on camera trap at Van Reenen Bay



Clyde two days before his death (photo: Stephen Jewitt)

The biggest surprise however was Clyde's history. I had still seen him alive shortly after our aerial telemetry downloads in July 2013. There was no indication that he was unwell at that point and although we did not manage to get a VHF signal for him after our sighting in July, I was not worried. The Atlas Bay clan members are difficult to track as the terrain is very mountainous. I was planning the next remote data download for January 2014 and on one of our tracking drives, we picked up his signal. Once the signal was strong enough, I triggered the remote data download. However, something did not seem right. While approaching him with the vehicle the signal never changed to an activity signal, which usually happens once the hyena moves its head when it becomes aware of movement around it. I therefore decided to walk towards the signal, as I already suspected that the collar might have fallen off or that Clyde had actually died. The collar's VHF pulse rate usually changes to a unique mortality rate, but whenever the collar is moved again, it starts sending a regular VHF pulse rate. Dead animals are often moved by other predators and this was unfortunately the case with Clyde. I found his remains quickly and with this we unfortunately had to face the fact that he was dead. But the timing of his death was even more puzzling. I had done a remote data download in the middle of July 2013 and two days before his death towards the end of July, I saw him, seemingly in a good condition and I had no reason to be concerned. The analysis of his GPS data revealed that he hardly moved during the last two weeks of his life, but went to the Atlas Bay seal colony the day before he died. We have no idea what caused his death, but I have sent samples to a vet lab to test for diseases and I will keep you informed about the outcome.

TALKS AND RADIO INTERVIEWS



Interview at O-Radio (photo: Ursula Witbooi)

I've been extremely busy with PR work recently. On my visit to Oranjemund, which was long overdue – I think I have been there last six years ago – I was invited to give a talk to the public, to students of the public and private school and to give an interview on their local radio station O-Radio. Jack, our new PhD student joined me on the trip.

Sarah, Jack and myself also went to the Large Carnivore Management Association of Namibia meeting in Windhoek, where both, Sarah and Jack, had the chance to present their PhD projects. Sarah's project is near the end of the data collection period and she had amazing results to present.

The Namibian Environment and Wildlife Society (NEWS) donated money towards the purchase of camera traps (see last newsletter) and I therefore was invited to give a talk at the Scientific Society in Windhoek. The talk was very well attended and lots of fun. I also took the opportunity to repeat the evening talk the next morning for Nature Conservation students at the Polytechnic of Namibia, also to advertise the project as a possible partner for internships, Honors and Masters degrees.



NEWS presentation (photo courtesy of NEWS)



School presentation in Oranjemund (photo: Ursula Witbooi)

OBELIXA'S NEW DEN (DENS)

Obelixa's collar battery was flat from January this year so that I was unable to track her movements. I knew that she had moved away from the natal den, but there did not seem to be any activity at the plant or Green Valley den either. Luckily, Jack and I managed to do a remote data download of Balu, one of the young males of the E-Bay Clan. His movement data indicated that Obelixa might use a den that we had not been observing before.



We set-up a camera trap at the den and also other remote camera equipment, as NHK Enterprises from Japan were back in the area to try to get hyena denning footage. The remote footage showed that Obelixa's cub was indeed in the den. Obelixa went to the den three times that night and two other collared hyenas showed up, too, Wallace and KC Sowande. They seemed to have a fight in front of the den, similar to what we observed when we were darting them in March 2013.

This new den is in an area, where Obelixa had been spending a lot of time resting in the past. I therefore decided to map the larger area around the den. To my surprise, we found three additional dens very close by. All sites showed signs of recent usage and once Inga comes back to start with data collection for her Masters thesis, we will set-up camera traps at all these sites.

Our darting season starts in the middle of March and we will try to fit a new collar to Obelixa.

Obelixa at the new den, looking at the remote camera (photo: NHK Enterprises)

NEDBANK GO GREEN VISIT

Rector Mutelo, from Nedbank Namibia, visited the Brown Hyena Research Project for two days to look at the success of the projects that the bank supports. We went to Klein Aus to meet with Sarah on day one. She showed us her camera trap set-ups, hair snares and rub stations. We were also trying to capture leopard in that area and could show Rector one of the box traps, too. On day two, we went to E-Bay to check our camera traps and to explain our plans for the hyena density and distribution modelling study. We had a great time – including a close encounter with Wallace, a male hyena of the E-Bay clan and a visit to the Atlas Bay seal colony. Thanks so much to Rector for showing such interest in our project and we hope to be able to plan another Go Green visit again in future.



ROADKILL

We unfortunately have to report another road mortality on the road between Luderitz and Aus. A young female brown hyena was hit and killed by a vehicle on 8 March. Willem Swiegers and Norbert Klosta reported the animal and Sarah and I went out immediately to retrieve the carcass. It was none of our study animals from E-Bay or Atlas Bay and a quick scan of the stomach contents revealed no marine food, indicating that the animal belonged to an inland clan.

SARAH – HUMAN WILDLIFE CONFLICT STUDY

The start of the rains in December saw a carnivore baby boom. We were delighted when the Namtib hyenas bought their cub, which looked to be around five months old, to the trough for the first time in mid December. One of the leopards at the northern site was also captured with three young cubs which have been seen on camera repeatedly since and seem to be growing fast and showing lots of interest in the camera traps. We also captured baby aardwolf on Gunsbewys and even a young striped polecat on Namtib.



We have been intrigued to see the range of carnivore behaviour captured at a camera trap near a large tree on one of the farms. At this single site we've had a large male leopard rolling in the sand, a female leopard reaching on her back legs to sniff a high up branch, a cheetah sniffing and then scent marking the tree with urine and a jackal sniffing the tree. We have installed a rub station on the tree, which will hopefully induce rubbing behaviour allowing us to collect carnivore hair samples left behind. Hair samples will be then used for stable isotope analysis of diet.

The rains have transformed many of the farms into areas carpeted with lush green grass, and this also seems to have affected the movement of game and subsequently the carnivores. Since December, we've recorded four new locations for leopards, three of them in open plains habitat where leopards would not normally be expected. The greatest surprise was after 11 months of camera trapping finally getting a leopard on Gunsbewys. This farm is the most arid of all the study sites, with no mountains and very few trees in an area bordering the sand dunes of the Namib Desert; this is just going to show the value of long term surveying for showing seasonal changes.

Brown Hyena Research Project

We have also captured more cheetahs on the farms, with a new group of four individuals on the northern sites. This brings the total to ten individuals in the area since June last year.

In January camera traps were set up at offal pits on the farms; areas where offal, skin and bones from slaughtered domestic livestock and game are taken to. At the Tsirub offal pit, we've had brown hyenas, jackals and Cape fox visiting. So far three individual brown hyenas have been identified, with a least one individual visiting the pit every other night. This will be important data when looking at the dietary analysis; it looks like the offal pits could represent important permanent food sources for the scavengers.



The final small mammal survey is currently taking place, with the Cape short-tailed gerbil being captured. Small mammals are likely to form an important prey base for many of the smaller carnivores and therefore it is important to understand seasonal changes in small mammal abundance and its affect on the carnivores. The farmer questionnaires have started, and are already giving interesting and valuable data on the human-wildlife conflict situation in the area. Many farmers are reporting a good diversity of carnivores in the area, with both cheetah and spotted hyena moving on and off the farms throughout the year rather than being resident. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all farmers who have given up their time to answer my questions.

Work at Namtib started on a permanent base camp, which will no doubt be very much appreciated during the cold and often very windy winter months. I would like to thank Linn and Thorsten from Namtib Biosphere Reserve for their generosity - next step, installing the swimming pool! I would also like to thank Ingrid for her continuing support, the farmers with whom I work with, Nedbank Go Green for financial support and Rector Mutelo from Nedbank for taking the time to visit the project in January, and to Frieda the project's new research assistant for all her hard work so far.

FRIEDA – HUMAN WILDLIFE CONFLICT STUDY



Hey I'm Frieda Shikongo, graduate in Natural Resource Management (Nature Conservation) from Polytechnic of Namibia. Why BHRP? After 3 years of study I thought why not take a break and experience how things are done in the field and use it to my advantage. So I did just that and here I'm. Basically I'm helping Sarah with her PhD, by accompanying her in the field and collecting data captured from the camera traps and enter them onto the computer. Also collecting hair samples from hair snares and rub station. It is fun when it's not hot and raining, and I enjoy every moment of it. As I get to see all the remarkable pictures of the carnivores and other games, which sometimes I do come face to face with some of them. The most important thing about being out here is that I get to meet different people. People that care and want to conserve nature and its biodiversity. The living condition is very simple but amazing plus its quiet.

JACK – BROWN HYENA MONITORING PROJECT



February and March have been eventful months for the 'Brown Hyena Study'. I have been busy hiking to find potential sites to set up our camera traps. The camera traps are made up of a camera with an infrared sensor that subtly takes photos of animals as they walk through the infrared beam. They're a really nice way of monitoring hyena non-invasively and will form the basis of the study. The trick is to find a good spot to rig them up. Hiking to find these places is thirsty work but the landscape is stunning and it's so exciting to get images of Brown hyena once the cameras are set up.

This study currently focuses on two neighbouring hyena clans. The images we get of these individuals will provide vital information about how we can monitor them effectively. As you can see from the photo below we are already getting some great results from the cameras that Ingrid already has currently set up.

The project is off to a strong start but it hasn't all been plain sailing. Somehow I managed to get the project vehicle stuck in a sand dune. Being from the UK, I'm not used to having issues with sand dunes and so it was very embarrassing having to call for help before my days work had even begun. Fortunately, the cavalry was not far away and Heinz Mans and his son fished me out in no time at all. Thanks again fellas! They were absolute legends and I would have had a hard time getting out without their help.

In addition to work related directly to the 'Brown Hyena Study', it has also been a great experience assisting Ingrid with other activities including a live interview with O-FM Radio and working with various TV companies, such as NHK Enterprises and The BBC's One Planet. Ingrid, little Max, Sarah and I also recently travelled to Windhoek to attend the Large Carnivore Management Association Namibia meeting. The meeting was a great success and I am sure many new and exciting collaborations are to come as a result. We will keep you posted!



Well that's about it from me until the next newsletter but I would like to finish by thanking Ingrid for her ongoing support and the people of sunny Lüderitz for being so welcoming once again as I settle back into the swing of things here. I can't get enough of this place and it feels like home from home for me, even when I am attacked by sand dunes! I would also like to thank the Nedbank Go Green Fund, Namdeb, the Namibian Environment and Wildlife Society, NHK Enterprises and the Ministry of Environment and Tourism for their contributions and support for this study.

ERIC – THE JACKAL PROJECT

I've just returned from another incredible trip to Van Reenen's Bay Seal Colony where I continue to study black-backed jackal hunting behavior. The jackals here cooperate in large groups to hunt the seal pups once they become too large to take down on their own. Our primary objective at the moment is to determine if these 'packs' are made up of only related individuals or a mixture of related and unrelated individuals. In order to answer this question, we must obtain genetic samples from jackals within the same hunting group. I have constructed a hair-snare trap to collect a hair sample that then excludes additional animals from entering. The animal is lured in by bait, but to obtain it, must first pass a trigger device which closes the door. It can then back out, but not go back in. This design gives us the guarantee that the samples received came from only one jackal. But who? A camera trap is also placed at each hair-snare, which then takes pictures as the jackal enters. Their unique tail patterns, as well as other markings, will allow us to identify the animal and therefore its associated hunting party. Over the course of the project, we hope to collect individual genetic samples from all members of multiple hunting groups in order to test their relatedness. Surprisingly enough, I returned from my trip with a hair sample from a very curious brown hyena, but none from the targeted jackals. However, the trial was not completely unsuccessful. Our main concern was that the jackals would not enter the traps at all; this was not the case. They had absolutely no problem entering the traps and triggering the mechanism, but the collection mediums we chose within the traps failed to obtain the hair. Our plan is to make the traps narrower so the jackal is forced to rub along the snares on each side. We are still extremely positive that this will be a great way of gathering the samples we need. We will make it work!



FUNDRAISING AND DONATIONS

Christine Lindner and **Tony Edmunds** supported the project with N\$ 1000. Thank you very much for your support.

NHK Enterprises donated US\$ 3000 after filming brown hyenas in our study areas.

Nedbank Go Green Fund approved our proposal and is going to support the project with N\$ 156375. These funds will be used to model brown hyena density and distribution in Namibia.

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