

TOSCA AND HER CUBS

It's been many years since I was lucky enough to be able to observe hyena cubs at a den site. Most active den sites were quite inaccessible and all habituated breeding females died in the meantime and I had a new task ahead with Tosca. Since Tosca moved from the Luderitz Peninsula into a 'new' area, the study site around the Wolf and Atlas Bay seal colonies, I did not want to risk disturbing her and her cubs at the den site by my presence. Therefore I decided to set two camera traps up close to the active den. Hyena, jackal and also springbok activity was high in this area and I needed to check the camera traps every two weeks to download images and to replace the batteries. To my surprise I was greeted by one of the cubs during one of my camera trap checks at the end of September. The cub was very inquisitive, but stayed close to the den entrance, just in case.



Cub at the den



Camera trap images of two cubs and Tosca (wrong date/time stamp)

I couldn't believe my luck. The cub looked to be around five to six months old, but it was difficult to judge from a distance. I observed the cub for quite some time and took care not to disturb it while downloading the camera trap photos – not that the cub really cared much about my presence. It finally started resting in front of the den and I decided to go back to the car to drive back to the office to have a look at the camera trap images. I was sure that I would have fantastic images and also video footage, as one of the camera traps was set to take short, 15 seconds, video clips. And I was right: I got amazing shots of adult brown hyenas and also of the cubs – it looks as if there are actually three cubs around, but I need more images to verify this. The greatest images were of Tosca, carrying seal pups back to the den on a regular basis – what a good mom. I also got images of other adult hyenas and still have to analyse and compare the images with the ID catalogue, as I hope that one of these adults is actually Alaika, the hyena that lost her collar a few months ago.

I downloaded Tosca's data for the last time at the end of October. By that time, Tosca had moved her cubs to another den, about 200 metres away. This den had last been used around 1991/1992 when a documentary of brown hyenas was filmed around Luderitz. The den was called Jungle Den, possibly because it is in very dense vegetation. Tosca's next download is planned for January next year and I hope that she will leave her cubs at the Jungle Den for a bit longer.

WOLF BAY FEEDING ECOLOGY STUDY

The last time we collected data about brown hyena predation and seal mortality at a Cape fur seal colony was during the pupping season in 2004/2005. Therefore it was time to do a follow-up study. We were lucky and secured funding from NACOMA to carry out this study during this year's pupping season.



Hyena predation at the seal colony

We struggled a bit to find a volunteer for this study, but finally managed to find help from the Polytechnic of Namibia. They send a student, Johannes Enkali, to Luderitz. When Johannes arrived, the seal pupping season had already started and we only had a few days time for training. Since the middle of November, he is out every day for 9 to 10 hours to collect seal mortality data. I will report about the results in the next newsletter.

ANOTHER BROWN HYENA ROADKILL

Another road kill unfortunately happened again at Haalenberg. I only heard about the road kill five days after it had happened and by that time any sign of the hyena had vanished. The driver did not stop and therefore could not give any information whether the animal was an adult or cub or whether it was fitted with a collar. Aerial telemetry is only planned for January 2010 again and we will know then, whether all collared animals are still accounted for.

OBELIXA AT THE GHOST TOWN

Obelixa gets better and better with her disappearance acts. I tried to find her to download her data several times, but never received a signal. Again, I was getting concerned that something had happened to her, but her home range includes a large area where there is no access possibility by road and I already thought I had to wait to find her until Gino would come for our next the aerial telemetry flights. However, I tried to find her one more time and luck was finally on my side. Obelixa was finally back at the Elizabeth-Bay ghost town, resting next to a ruin very close to the beach. I triggered the download and went to the ruin once the download had finished. First, I saw two jackals and suddenly Obelixa jumped out of her resting site. She still looked as fat as the last time that I had seen her, but she definitely moved with a lot more enthusiasm than before. I was convinced that she must have given birth somewhere and could not wait to get back to the office to have a look at the data. I was sure that I would discover the location of her den site. Unfortunately the data gave no indication that she was indeed breeding, so whatever caused her lazyness earlier this year will remain a mystery...

Obelixa's next download is also planned for January. So far she has not been foraging at the Atlas Bay seal colony, but she may use this food source during the seal pupping season that started in the middle of November. However, she might also find enough seal carrion along Elizabeth-Bay beach, as quite a few dead seal pups from Possession Island are washed up at this beach. However, if she does forage at the seal colony, she would have to pass Tosca's den site area, where we actually captured and collared Obelixa in May this year, and this could give us some interesting data. I will definitely keep you informed.



THE CAMERA TRAP GALLERY

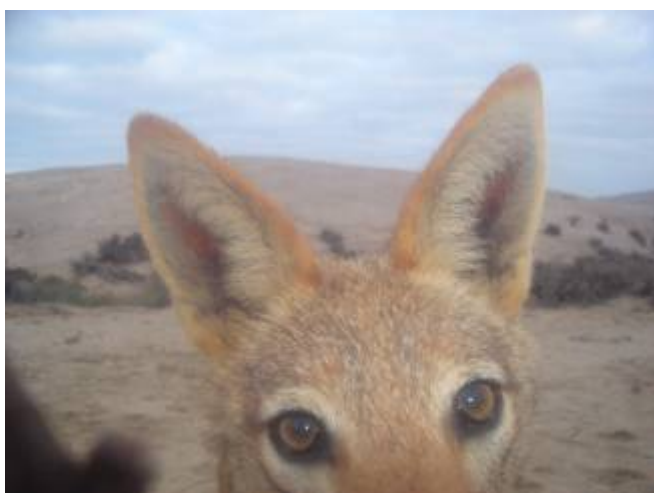
Atlas Bay Camtrak trap images:



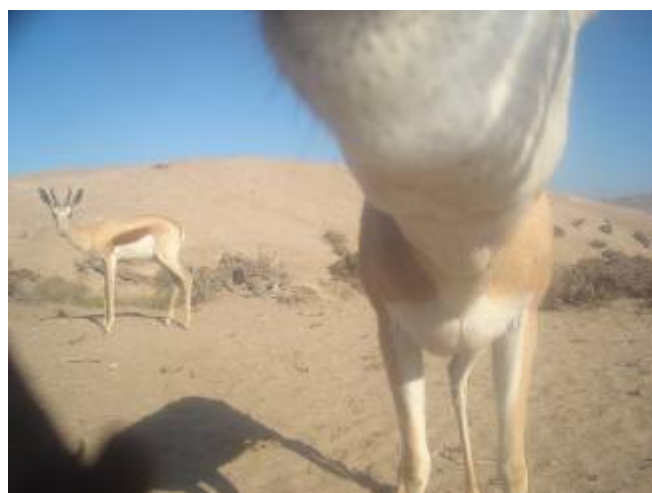
Adult and cub playing



More playing while the jackal is watching...



The jackal is still curious.



Springbok also want to investigate...

My Brown Hyena Research Project Experience

My name is Yennifer Hernandez, I'm an Uruguayan wildlife biologist. Thanks to an invitation from Ingrid Wiesel, I have the unique opportunity to collaborate with her in the Brown Hyena Research Project with base in Lüderitz, Namibia.

Well first let me tell you that reach Lüderitz was already an extreme adventure! In April 29 of 2009 I travel by bus and boat from Montevideo, Uruguay capital city to Buenos Aires, Argentina. Once in Buenos Aires, I took a South African Airlines flight to Johannesburg, South Africa. From Johannesburg, I took a second flight to Windhoek, Namibia capital city. I spend a night in a hostel and the next morning I took a "bus" (was just a truck!) to Lüderitz in the company of almost 17 Namibian citizens, yes 17! After more of 12 hours of travel I reach the Lüderitz city! I spend a night in the Kapp's Hotel (thanks to a lovely lady, Angelina!).

In the morning of the May 2 and after an amazing breakfast I start the searching of the Dr. Ingrid Wiesel house and lab. On the way... I ask a lady for the "Hyena Lady" (that is the nickname of Dr. Wiesel in Lüderitz) house and his address, the name of this lady was Silvia and what a coincidence! I was going to live in a boat house next to her house. She shows me the "Samaki" my house for the next three months, the house was made from the rests of two boats. You can believe this?



Well, where I was?...Yes! After meet my neighbourhood and house, I finally reach the "Brown Hyena Research Project" lab. My first welcome was the barking of Sabi, Mac and Siggy, Ingrid dogs! I was so nervous, but I try to make the better impression possible and I introduce myself (with my petty English) to Ingrid and Steve (Ingrid Husband). After a lot of barking...I receive a lot of love from the dogs. During my stay in the project I fall in love with these three furry friends'!

After all this and a brief description of our planned activities in the field with the hyenas, I receive the indications of Ingrid for packing the Toyota trucks with all the equipment for the field season. The objective was, in theory, very sample catch the hyenas and put the GPS radio collars. Obviously than in the field ...this is not such easy....

After setup the first camp in Wolf Bay, we receive the arrive of the wildlife vet, the Dr. Kirk Suedmeyer. He works for the Kansas City Zoo, U. S. A. With his help we catch our first hyena in our first night of the 2009 field season. Was in the Lüderitz Peninsula and we name the hyena "Alaika", was a young and beautiful female. Let me tell you that my

first impression when I saw this animal walking like in zig-zag, since she was not very decided to take a piece of the bait (a dog carcass), was that I was seeing a shaggy ghost.

Once Kirk darted the hyena and I have the breathtaking opportunity of put my hands over this amazing predator, I have no words to describe the felling. You must be there to know it. A powerful and almost mythical predator right there, sleeping....When you see his massive jaw muscles and canines, the long mane and striped legs you realize that this carnivore has not parallelism in the all world, is unique. You find feline and canine characters mixed up in this fantastic creature. All the problems that I pass to reach Lüderitz suddenly pass away, I was touching a Brown Hyena possibly one of the last ones in the Lüderitz Peninsula. That is priceless!



The next morning we travel to Wolf Bay, we select as our darting site the Greenhouse gully located north of the Wolf Bay seal colony. Once there we put the bait (a lot of Donkey meat), Kirk and his darting gun expend the night in the darting site, and Ingrid and I waited inside the Wolf Bay observation hut. Finally we listen the precious words, "Ingrid, I catch a hyena". The first hyena caught in Wolf Bay, was "Tosca" an older breeding female from the Lüderitz Peninsula Clan. After this we move the camp to Tsaukaib mountains but we didn't have a catch there, but we saw a lot of hyena activity and even a big individual next to the bait. The landscape was astounding; some places can be described like as Tolkien describes the Mordor lands in the Lord of the



Rings, other ones like the Colorado deserts of the U. S. A. Sometimes was so silent that place, that was possible hear a needle fall.

Our third camp was placed on Atlas Bay; there in a deep gully we capture "Obelixa", a young female. This lady after being darted and collared late at night, in the morning she visit the bait again in the company of a couple of black backed jackals.

I have some words about the jackals...after being working in my country with foxes when I meet the jackals in the field, I fell a kind of special connection with these canids. They are so clever and cute. I remember some nights at Atlas Bay, I was sitting next to Kirk in the darting site, and these curious predators get so close to me, sniffing me at less than half a meter. In Atlas Bay, I meet a pregnant female, she visits the camp everyday at 8 am, and she even stole a sponge that I was using to clean the dishes. I almost make my PhD field project with these clever carnivores. Maybe in some years I could return to work with the jackals..... They really catch me!



After the "Obelixa" catch we return to the Peninsula, there we try to catch a hyena to put her the new GSM collar, we use again the leftovers of the dog carcass and we add some new bait, this time a Springbok. We succeed! And we catch "Minerva" another old female of the study group of Ingrid. Sadly the collar was not very good! But we have the opportunity of visit his den site!

When we finish the field season at the end of May, we say goodbye to Kirk, since he return to U. S. A. I stay with Ingrid helping her with the data processing and sometimes I create more problems than solutions. But she a tremendous patient person, she teach me how to use informative programs like Arc View, Ranges and others. These ones are vital tools for anyone that is going to take a wildlife field project by his own. I really appreciate the help of Ingrid in this subject. In the field she teach me about how to follow the tracks and trials of the animals, and also how to behave when I'm face to face with a wild carnivore for my own and the animal safety.

In this experience, I must say that I also make new friends in Lüderitz: Ingrid, Steve, Elizabeth, Silvia, Paul, Ingrid (Paul wife), Andy, Siggy, Sabi and my old and loved Mac.

Between the field season and a lot of lab work, Ingrid invites me several times to I visit the home of the famous Namibian wild horses: Aus. There, I meet a cheerfully couple, Christine and Piet. And also Carina & Ibrahim the horses of Ingrid and Christine. We have the chance to cheer a nice riding afternoon, and several days in the astounding Aus surroundings.

The "Brown Hyena Research Project" was not only another field experience for me; I must confess that when I was writing these words I left some teardrops over my keyboard. I hope comeback someday to this enigmatic place, the Lüderitz Peninsula and Sperrgebiet National Park, to visit my two and four legs new friends.

FUNDRAISING AND DONATIONS

Brian and Linda Rogers and their friends from the UK donated N\$ 200 to the project.

NACOMA is sponsoring the Wolf Bay seal colony feeding ecology study and contributed N\$ 19250.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR SUPPORT!

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Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!