

ELIZABETH BAY CLAN CAPTURE

I was very excited to start with this year's capture season, as a lot of my old team members returned: Dr. Kirk Suemeyer from the Kansas City Zoo in the States, Yennifer Hernández, my friend from Uruguay and Inga Jänecke, who had done her internship and Bachelor's thesis with the Brown Hyena Research Project. New to the team was Elsa Bussièrre, a PhD student at the University of Cape Town, who is studying brown hyenas in South Africa. I had also just purchased an Iridium satellite collar from Followit that was to be tested on brown hyenas for the first time.

We started at Elizabeth Bay this year. I knew where the hyenas were denning and that we had at least two adults in the clan that could be collared. While Kirk and I were setting ourselves up at the old casino in the ghost town the first hyena approached our bait. We were not ready yet to dart it though and the animal only left after it was dark again. We did not want to scare this or any other hyenas off the area by doing our practice shots after dark and therefore spent the entire night observing hyenas instead of darting them. But we were confident that they would return the next night. But nothing happened until midnight and we started to get concerned. Did we miss our only chance the night before? Finally at 2:00 in the morning, we had a hyena approaching the bait. To improve our darting success, Kirk had organised a ghillie suit to blend into the environment – and it worked! Although the hyena sensed our presence, it remained calm at the bait and Kirk darted it relatively quickly. We found it ten minutes later to the north of the casino. We had darted a three to four year old female in a fantastic condition. We fitted the Iridium satellite collar, took all measurements and samples and reversed her after 60 minutes. Later it turned out to be the same hyena that had jeopardized our previous nights darting attempt by coming to the bait too early...The Kansas City Zoo, who adopted this female, together with Kirk and his wife called it KC Sowande. Sowande means 'the wise healer sought me', which we all thought fitted well with Kirk ☺.



Fitting the Iridium collar to KC Sowande



KC Sowande waiting for us to set the bait up

On our return to the bait at the casino, we spotted another hyena at the bait. It was not all too disturbed by our arrival and we silently went back to our hiding places. We managed to dart Balu just 30 minutes after we reversed KC Sowande successfully. What a night! We fitted a GPS collar to Balu. He is a three to four year old male and seems to spend a lot of time together with KC. They might be siblings, offspring of Obelixa. And Obelixa obviously also made appearances at the bait. I think she could hardly believe it that she was not the target for a new collar this time. On night four, we were lucky again. We had one more GPS collar to fit to the E-Bay clan and a large male "Wallace" approached the bait early in the evening. He was approximately six years old and like all the animals that we had captured so far, in an excellent condition.



KC's Iridium satellite collar works fine. I receive up to four e-mails per day including her location and activity data. The collar battery should last between eight months and 2 ½ years – we obviously hope for the longer time period, but would be more than happy if the collar works until the end of next year.

Balu's and Wallace's collars should last until August 2015 with a best case scenario of January 2016.

So far, we received KC's and Wallace's VHF signal on several occasions (see below). However, we have not received a signal of Balu yet. I had some problems uploading a schedule for his collar when I initialised it and I'm concerned that the collar failed. I have regularly picked him up on the camera trap at Green Valley den, so at least we know that he is fine and that the collar is still fitted. Maybe I have just been unlucky in my location attempts in that he rests on the other side of Elizabeth Bay past the dune field. Gino will come for our aerial telemetry at the end of June and we should have an answer afterwards.

Thanks so much to Wilfried Ernie for providing bait for this year's capture season, to Nick Coetzer and his team at Namdeb for helping us out when our car battery was flat and to the Kansas City Zoo for supporting Kirk's travels once again.

Fitting a GPS collar (photo: Inga Jänecke)

INQUISITIVE CUBS AND NAUGHTY JACKALS



Yen and Inga ready for their night shift

We had some truly amazing experiences during this year's capture season. One of the best was our close encounter with Alaika's cubs. Our darting site at Atlas Bay was a bit tricky, as it was in the open and there were not many hiding possibilities. Therefore we dug a little trench, just big enough to fit one person in. Yen volunteered to do the first night assistance to Kirk, who was hidden approximately 20 metres away from the trench. The rest of the team waited with the vehicles ½ km away, ready to move in once a hyena was darted. We were not called though the entire night and thought that there were possibly no hyenas around. To our surprise we were greeted by a smiling Yen and her words "the hyenas tried to eat me...". Well, the two cubs and some unknown adults were around that night and the cubs started to investigate the visitors and nibbled at the sleeping bag. After all, these cubs must be half sibs to the subadults that raided our camp and destroyed two tents at Atlas Bay in 2010.

Inga and I also still experienced such nights out at Atlas Bay with the cubs coming close, we were guarding our sleeping bags though. It is so amazing to hear them sniff and see them move their heads up and down, an experience none of us is ever going to forget.

However, as much as we guarded our equipment, while we were busy with one of the captured hyenas a couple of nights later, the jackals managed to grab one of the sleeping bags and had a down feather 'bath'.

FLORA AND FAUNA INTERNATIONAL, CHESTER

I was invited to give a talk about the Tsau//Khaib (Sperrgebiet) National Park and its hyenas at Flora and Fauna International in Chester. The Predator Conservation Trust in the UK had organised the talk and also did some fundraising during the event.

I had fantastic feedback and very nice conversations with audience members during the break. After the break we showed the Terra Mater documentary, which was very well received. Max also enjoyed watching his mom and 'her' hyenas, as he announced proudly, on the big screen.

ATLAS BAY CLAN CAPTURE

After we had fitted three hyenas at E-Bay with GPS telemetry collars, we tried our luck at Atlas Bay. This clan's members have always been more difficult to capture and its members are renowned for their ability to 'lose' collars, as the cubs seem to have specialised on gnawing on collars whilst playing or socialising. Nevertheless, we had three collars to fit and, as mentioned above, deal with the inquisitive cubs. The weather was also not very helpful: lots of foggy and moist nights.



Kirk was hiding inside a rather large, but small to 'sit in all night', tyre – at least the cubs and jackals were not able to get to him all too easily. Amadeus was our first capture after a long wait in night two. We first did not want to dart him, as he appeared to be quite small, but when we saw him together with the cubs, we knew that he was an adult. All in all a good capture and we saw another un-collared hyena later that night, but we had no opportunity to dart.

Max was joining us in the field for the next night. I had prepared a nice bed in the back of the car and had just put him in his sleeping bag, when I got the call that Kirk, Yen and Inga had captured a hyena. I was so excited, especially because I could finally show Max what his mom was doing all these nights out – Steve had a hard time explaining to him why Mama must go to the hyenas instead of staying at home...However I have seen Max more excited in a car wash than with a sedated hyena. He was keener on watching his good night video than standing outside with me in the cold. So much for my proud mother moment! Still, while we were preparing the bait for the capture, he told Inga that he also wants to do this when he is old – so not all hope is lost ☺.

But back to the hyena capture: This hyena turned out to be another young male, the same age than Amadeus, possibly a sibling, and we saw both of them together over the next few darting nights at the bait. We had one more collar to fit and I was really hoping to capture Helene, who was fitted with a collar in 2011, but lost it to the damaging teeth of the cubs a couple of months later. Luckily the following night was my night again to watch the bait, as we would have otherwise not picked up on a problem with Alaika's collar. Kirk and I were watching Alaika feeding at the bait and actually felt very relaxed being able to observe her and not having to dart her. She was moving a lot at the bait and I could see the little LED light of her collar flashing. At one point she was standing nicely sideways towards me and I could see that the LED light was flashing more frequent than it should. This was bad news. I radioed Kirk and told him of my worry and then asked Inga, who was with the rest of the team sitting in the car about half a kilometre away from the dart site, to check whether she could receive a VHF signal of Alaika and to let me know the pulse rate. Inga could hear a signal, which was bad news and the signal indicated low battery voltage, meaning that the life of the battery was due to expire. There was only one solution: to dart Alaika and replace the collar. Kirk and I were quite sad to have to dart her now and somehow Alaika must have sensed our change in attitude, as she started to be a bit

more nervous. It took us a couple of hours before we were lucky enough to dart her. It was a special moment for many of us. Alaika was the first hyena that Kirk and Yen ever captured and Yen gave Alaika her name. Inga used Alaika's GPS telemetry data for her Bachelor's thesis – so she is a good, old friend to all of us.



Inga, Max and Elsa preparing the bait



A successful capture season



The happy team (Inga, Ingrid, Yen, Elsa) with Alaika

INGA JÄNECKE

After the darting season the main things you are waiting for is to get the signals of the newly collared hyenas and to be able to download the data from the collar. Until you get the first signal or download a lot of questions are going through the mind “do the collars we fitted really work?”, “are they hyenas still in the area?”, “did we collar nomads?”, “what is the hyenas home range looking like?”, etc. To answer all these questions it was the task of us volunteers to try to get signals of the hyenas and to try to make downloads. Every time we drove out into the Sperrgebiet we couldn’t wait to turn the receiver on and listen if we would hear a signal. The first couple of times we couldn’t hear any signal but we didn’t gave up trying. Just during the fourth time that we drove out we heard a weak signal of Lhb36m around Atlas Bay. We got out of the car and hiked on the top of a hill. Although the signal wasn’t strong enough to do a download it was a great feeling to at least be sure that he is still around. This made us really confident that the work and patience we invested in the darting was worth it. A couple of days later we had another feeling of success. When we drove to the southern end of Elizabeth Bay to check a possible den, we got the signal of Wallace. This time we were really lucky and got a strong signal. So we dared to get all the download equipment together and start hiking towards him. The signal became stronger and stronger; therefore we tried a couple of times to trigger the download. Unsuccessfully. We didn’t give up and approached very careful towards the hyena as we knew he must be close to us. We started walking in a gully and suddenly startled as something big jumped up next to us and kept on running. When we realized that we just disturbed Wallace resting in this gully, he was already far away from us. We could only see his shadow moving further and further away from us and hear his signal getting weaker. Although we were not able to do a download on this day it was great to see that he was doing so well and that he handled the darting without any problems. We only got his signal again about 3 weeks later around E-Bay. It was a strong signal again and we tried to trigger the download, but due to strong wind we were not able to do the download. Nevertheless it was good to see that he is still around and that we didn’t scare him off. The only other newly collared hyena we heard until now was Alaika. As it is always with her, if you don’t have the download equipment with you, you will hear her signal. So unfortunately we didn’t do a download of her yet. From the other hyenas we haven’t heard the signals yet. Nevertheless we were able to identify some of them on the camera trap images from Elizabeth Bay and Atlas Bay which shows us that they are still around. Although we were not able to do a download of the all hyenas yet, we are really positive that we will get our first downloads and lot of new data, soon!



SARAH EDWARDS HUMAN WILDLIFE CONFLICT STUDY

Since the last newsletter the summer heat at the farms has dropped and we’ve been enjoying some cooler days. The carnivores have also been taking advantage of the weather and I’ve captured many more leopards, jackals and honey badgers in the day time on camera trap, although the hyenas are still only appearing at night. In fact the last month has seen an increase in leopard photos across Namtib, Klein Aus Vista and Tsirub. At Tsirub a female was captured who hadn’t been seen on camera trap since November, she even appeared at one camera trap less than an hour after I had replaced the batteries, and her spoor has been reported crossing my vehicle tracks.



We’ve also seen the return of the spotted hyenas on Namtib, with two individuals at the main cattle trough in the last week of May. The hyenas bought their usual path of destruction with them, managing to rip a carpet rub station off the tree. I am planning a night vigil at the trough to see if I can get some identification photos as the hyenas have proved quite interested in late night activity there. The jackals at Namtib have been breeding and had pups with them from late April onwards; Thorsten spotted a family group of nine individuals playing amongst the cattle one late afternoon and five have been captured at once on camera trap. One member of the jackal family also encountered one of the enormous lappet faced vultures at the trough in May. The vulture was bigger than the jackal, although these two scavengers are probably used to one another.



Brown Hyena Research Project

I started small mammal trapping at the end of April to look at changes in abundance of small mammals throughout the year. Small mammals are an important food source for many of the focal carnivore species such as jackal, caracal and African wild cat. Throughout the trapping two species of gerbils were caught, mainly the brush-tailed hairy-footed gerbil. One night it seems the jackals discovered the traps and carried one off around 300m from the trapping grid. Luckily no damage was done and the trap was found the next day. I also had problems with an unknown species removing my pitfall trap I was using to capture invertebrates, another important food source for many of the carnivores – this project could also look at research-wildlife conflict!



Last month Inga, Yen and I set up 10 camera traps around the Luderitz peninsular where the density of hyenas is known from Ingrid's work. It is hoped to use the photographic rate of a known brown hyena population to estimation the density of brown hyenas from photographic rate at the farms. Brown hyenas do have unique markings which would allow us to work out how many individuals are present on each farm, however the hyenas are often moving too fast and we only get blurry photos which cannot be used for identification. Already we got a nice photo of Alaika, one of Ingrid's collared animals. It seems the Luderitz brown hyenas are more active in the day than the ones on the farms; this could be due to the persecution from farmers.

Winter is now fast approaching and we had the first cold weather front on Namtib with plummeting temperatures, mist and even a little rain. We are all hoping for some winter rain as summer brought very little. As a result some of natural springs in the mountains at the farms are dry this year, meaning species that depended on them will be forced to use the troughs provided for cattle, sheep and game, potentially bringing carnivores into conflict with farmers. The human-carnivore conflict study has now been running for a year and this would not have been possible without huge amounts of support from Ingrid, Go Green and the farmers, so a big thank you to all. I am looking forward to the next year, although maybe not another winter in a tent!

FUNDRAISING AND DONATIONS

Christine Wulff-Swiegers from **Klein Aus Visa** sponsored N\$ 1500. We will use this donation towards our aerial telemetry flights.

The **Predator Conservation Trust** in the UK also contributed with £ 1100 towards our annual aerial telemetry costs and we managed to raise £ 500 at the **Flora and Fauna International** talk in **Chester**.

Der **Interessen-Verband der Auslandsjäger** renewed their annual donation of € 1000.

Dr. Kirk Suedmeyer raised US\$ 120 through T-shirt sales.

N\$ 264.13 was collected at our slot tin at **Lüderitz Safaris and Tours**.

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