

# **NAMIBIA JULY 2017**

## **IN SEARCH OF THE SOUTH-WESTERN BLACK RHINOCEROS**



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In early July 2017 we visited Namibia for the first time, this year's target species was **The Rhinoceros** so it seemed a logical choice although other destinations were considered. In particular we were drawn to the opportunity of observing and photographing free roaming, desert adapted **Black Rhino** at **Desert Rhino Camp, Damaraland**. On our travels so far we had only observed one Rhinoceros, an **Eastern Black Rhinoceros** in the northern Serengeti N.P. in July 2015, and that had been from a considerable distance.

Our itinerary involved mainly flying between locations. We started in the south in the **Sossusvlei** area, then visited the **Palmwag Concession**, followed by **Ongava Nature Reserve** (near **Etosh N.P.**) and finished at **Okonjima Reserve**. However the highlight of our trip undoubtedly was our two night stay at **Desert Rhino Camp**, famed for its **Black Rhino** tracking activities in the **Palmwag Concession**. We flew to the camp airstrip from **Kuala** via **Swakopmund** and changed aircraft at **Door Nawas**, the flight took about three hours in total. We were met at the airstrip and driven to camp, en-route we had a great sighting of a small herd of **Hartmann's Mountain Zebra** (*Equus zebra hartmanni*), a subspecies we had not observed before. (see image below).



## **THE CAMP & THE RHINO**

**Desert Rhino Camp is an excellent camp in every aspect, the tented accommodation is very comfortable and of a very high standard. The food at all meals was excellent. The camp is situated in a wide valley and consists of just eight tents (16 clients) with wonderful views towards The Etendeka Mountains. The camp is remote and offers a very unique wildlife viewing experience. The camp is owned by Wilderness Safaris, who by reputation appear to set very high standards with regard to all aspects of managing their camps. The area around camp is described as semi-desert and the scenery is to say the least absolutely stunning. Never having visited Namibia neither of us was prepared for just how beautiful the geography of the country is.**



**The image above would be representative generally of the desert habitat we explored within the concession and around the camp during our brief stay. The only negative comment I would make about camp is that a new airstrip has just been completed which in my opinion has desecrated a significant swathe of pristine desert habitat, why it was needed I am not sure, the one presently in use seemed perfectly adequate. Wilderness Safaris are currently working very successfully with the Save the Rhino Trust to protect and monitor the rhino population in a vast area in the concession. Since this partnership was further developed in 2012 on this site (original partnership started in 2003) no rhino have been lost to poaching and the population has remained stable at around 16 individuals for several years. As we were only at the camp for two nights our only full day would prove critical in locating, observing and photographing, hopefully at least one rhino. The sub-species found in this area is the South-western Black Rhinoceros , *Diceros bicornis bicornis*. After dinner I spent some time with one of the StRT trackers and he seemed fairly confident that we would find a rhino the following day, but would only commit himself to a 50% chance of success.**

**In reality however the success rate is significantly higher than this. I was beginning to wish we had decided to stay three nights thinking this would have given us a better chance of success.**

**The tracker told us that several years ago a female rhino had been attacked by a lion(s) and despite veterinary intervention died of her wounds, her calf is still alive today and she was to feature in our sightings the following day. The rhino monitored by the team have all been de-horned, although since I returned home I have been made aware that rhino with natural horns are regularly sighted inside the study area. This could well indicate that the population periodically increases which would be a very positive development for the future genetic wellbeing of the rhino.**

**Tracking the rhino involves a very early start, the trackers leave camp about an hour before the clients depart. They proceed to the appropriate waterhole to check for spoor and then track the rhino until they are in a suitable area for safe observations to take place, then they contact the guides. The rhino visit a waterhole most days, early in the morning. The area monitored by StRT is vast and is divided into four zones, only two of which are visited each day, thus providing some degree of privacy for the rhino.**



**The image above is of a typical waterhole , this one is fed by an underground spring and apparently never dries up. At the time of our visit the region was experiencing severe drought.**

## **THURSDAY 8TH JULY - THE FULL TRACKING DAY**

**We climbed out of bed at 04.30, coffee was delivered and we made ready for a 05.30 start, the trackers were heard leaving at 05.00. Leaving camp we headed for zone 1 which on the map looked quite a drive from camp, as the sun began to rise it became apparent just how special this place really is and it was so quiet. After about 40 minutes we dropped into a dry riverbed with sparse vegetation and surprised two**

**giraffe quietly feeding. The giraffe found here are Angolan Giraffe (locally extinct in Angola), *Giraffa giraffa angolensis*, yet another new sub-species for our records. We watched them feed for a while hoping the light would improve and then moved on. We drove further into the desert for about an hour and a half but saw very little wildlife, this being true desert habitat wildlife sightings tend to be sparse, we were here however for one main species - Black Rhino.**



**Angolan Giraffe.**

**We eventually stopped near a rocky outcrop to try to locate some hyrax when our guide received a message from the trackers, they had visited the waterhole in zone 1 but no spoor had been located, they were heading back in our direction and intended to try zone 2. Were we about to be very disappointed? They passed us in a cloud of dust, we followed. We drove over a large ridge and onto a plain, in the middle of which the tracker's vehicle was seen, stationary with the bonnet up and three trackers busy in the engine bay. When we arrived they explained they had sighted some rhino spoor, stopped and then been unable to re-start.**

**We decided to take breakfast, they poked about under the bonnet with the electrics and the engine eventually started to show signs of life and fired up. They then turned their attention to the spoor and decided to proceed on foot each departing in a different direction. After a long wait one tracker was seen running up an incline about 1/2 mile away, (through binoculars) he was clearly seen to be following a rhino which was well in front of him and accelerating away. He eventually gave up the chase and headed towards our vehicle, we drove over and picked him up. We then drove in the direction of the rhino which by now had vanished into a narrow valley with a low ridge in front. We kept to the opposite side of the ridge and drove to a position in advance of the rhino's intended path. We left the vehicle, walked about 200 yards and took up position behind**

**an euphorbia bush. After several minutes the rhino came into view heading straight towards us. At a distance of about 50 yards, it must have got our scent, it stopped. turned and headed away over the ridge we had just driven around. We, led by a tracker walked in single file around the ridge for about 1/4 of a mile before it was again sighted on the top of the ridge. We approached to within 100 yards and stopped, it watched us for a while and then cautiously walked past us, picked up speed and trotted away into the wide valley below. I was amazed at just how quickly such a large animal could move. We decided not to follow, as we had already spent 30 minutes observing her at relatively close range. We did however watch her moving about in the valley below for a further 20 minutes. The trackers recorded the sighting and her condition was rated at 4.5 out of 5, apparently only those found in Etosha N.P. where water and food can be abundant score 5. This rhino was a female and was the daughter of the rhino mentioned earlier that was killed by lions. She was de-horned in 2014 and had a V-shaped identification notch cut into her right ear. She was between 6-7 years old and in**



**2016 was seen on average 2.5 times per month in the study area. I can only say that the experience of following and being in such close proximity to such a rare and magnificent animal will remain with us forever, and the fact that she was totally free roaming made the sighting even more special.**

**It was by now midday so we retreated into the valley, found a tree for shade as it was getting quite warm (25°C) and started to set up for lunch. One of the eagle-eyed trackers spotted a Horned Adder, (*Bitis caudalis*) near the tree and offered to move it, but it was decided to leave it in situ as it was calm.**

**After lunch we decided to drive slowly back to camp and to try and locate some Mountain Zebra, however halfway back our guide received a message that another rhino had been spotted, back in zone 1, a long drive from our present position. He gave us the options, back to camp or try to find the rhino. No contest, off we set. At around**

**14.30 we entered a narrow valley and the rhino amazingly was located about 100 yards in front of us feeding. We decided not to get out but just to sit and watch it behaving completely naturally and to take some images. We sat and watched it for 20 minutes . It was a male 27 years old (de-horned) and is probably the most frequently sighted rhino in the concession. (see cover image). Then just as we were about to leave our guide spotted yet another rhino walking up an incline well behind the male, it was a female born in 2012, which had only recently become independent.**



**Young female South-western Black Rhinoceros. (Taken from long distance).**

**The male became aware of her presence and slowly moved away in her general direction, she continued the climb occasionally stopping to feed, we decided to leave them in peace and headed for camp arriving back at 17.30 having spent 12 hours in the desert (paradise) and observed three Black Rhinoceros.**

## **THOUGHTS**

- 1. There is little doubt that without the partnership between Wilderness Safaris and StRT this population of rhino would probably be extinct. This is an excellent example of wildlife tourism having a positive effect on the wellbeing of a vulnerable species.**
- 2. Having witnessed several wonderful wildlife spectacles, this experience has to be right up there as one of our most memorable to date.**
- 3. A visit to this camp is well worth including in any Namibian itinerary. We have no links whatsoever with Wilderness Safaris and this was the first time we had visited one of their camps. We were possibly lucky, so would recommend a three night stay to be on the safe side.**
- 4. At no time during this activity did we feel that the wellbeing of the rhino was being**

compromised, the tracking was conducted with complete empathy for the species.

**OTHER MAMMALS OBSERVED DURING OUR SHORT VISIT:**

**Gemsbok (lots), Springbok (lots), Hartmann's Mountain Zebra (2 herds, 18+), Banded Mongoose (5+), Black-backed Jackal (3), Spotted Hyena (2), Greater Kudu (4), Angolan Giraffe (5), Southern (possibly Damara) Ground Squirrel (4).**



**Two of our trackers, the unsung heroes. Thank you.**



**Gemsbok herd.**

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