

## THE DESERT ADAPTED MAMMALS OBSERVED ON A TRIP TO THE HOANIB RIVER BASIN, KAOKOVELD, NAMIBIA IN JULY 2018.

There can be few wildlife enthusiasts who have watched the outstanding documentary film 'The Vanishing Kings – Lions of the Namib' who have not have been inspired to visit the area in which this film was taken, the Kaokoveld region in north western Namibia. Briefly the film outlines the lives of 'The Five Musketeers' five young male Lions who were born into the harshest of environments imaginable, the youngsters of three Lionesses from the same pride, a pride which had survived for many years. The five young males were seen very much as being the future for this highly threatened subset of Lions, whose numbers overall appear to vary between 120 and 150 individuals. Male members of the group are in particular short supply so the future of the 'Five' was very much regarded as being crucial to the survival of this population of Lions who are truly desert adapted. Images of Lions taken against a background of sand dunes and shingle beaches appears strange when compared with the savanna grasslands we usually associate as being their home. These images and the film stirred in me a strong desire to observe these rare Lions in their Namib Desert habitat, one of the most challenging on the planet. (Genetically they are identical to the Lions found in southern and eastern Africa). From the start it became apparent that Lion sightings in the region are rare and we would be very lucky to have any success at all, it was a risk I was prepared to take. Following the terrible and scandalous demise of 'The Five Musketeers' (shot and poisoned mid 2017), it became apparent that very few sightings were being recorded in the Hoanib River Basin region which in recent years had become well known for good and reasonably regular sightings, in fact the BBC have used the area to shoot several of their outstanding documentaries. Eventually I managed to make contact with a lady in Italy who had stayed at Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp in July 2017 and had seen and photographed a male and female Lion relatively close to camp. She was very impressed with the locality and the quality of the camp, but was clear a Lion sighting was possible but not probable. As we were due to revisit Namibia in July 2018 three nights at this camp would be a vital element in our expedition planning. From her sighting to our departure very few Lion sightings were reported from the area around the camp. Another thing that drew me to the camp was that it was used by Dr. Philip Stander as a base for his Desert Lion Conservation work, although I was aware, he spends most of his time in the field, living in his trusty mobile office, so a meeting with him was also most unlikely. So Lions were to be the target species although I was very interested in the other wildlife found in the area. Clearly the very nature of the habitat (true desert), would make mammal sightings less common than in other wildlife locations but the unique nature of the environment would more than make up for that, I have a deep interest in deserts, the limited wildlife they support and the people who manage to exist in these extreme regions.

We flew in to Hoanib on a one hour flight from Doro Nawas, we were met by our guide Michael who proved to be excellent and drove us straight to camp, which also turned out to be excellent in every respect. Two bull Elephants were at the waterhole in front of our tent when we arrived and when they moved on several Angolan Giraffe arrived. The camp was positioned on a desert plain which had easy access to the Hoanib River Basin which was completely dry and acted as our main thoroughfare during our game drives. Trees and shrubs line the river's course and the banks varied from gentle slopes to high vertical sandy cliffs, which in many cases looked very unstable. Away from the riverbed the terrain immediately became mountainous with steep rock faces and lots of high sand dunes. The vegetation around the riverbed was very green, clearly there was an underground water supply. Earlier in the year the region had experienced unusually heavy rainfall and the Hoanib River had run all the way to the coast, which is not common. The only vehicles we saw during our stay was one from our camp and and two private self drive vehicles which were not allowed to enter the main concession area around camp.

On our first game drive Michael headed for a reported Oryx kill relatively close to camp where Lions had been seen a few days before feeding. On arrival we could not believe it two Lionesses were asleep near the kill, of which there was very little left. The adult Lioness was Xpl-69 (Floodplain Pride), she was 10 years old and was the daughter of Xpl-10 'The Queen', who had successfully held the pride together for many years and was an outstanding Giraffe huntress. She had obviously fed well and had a very extended stomach. The other Lioness was much younger about 2 years old and was known as 'Charlie'. Although she had fed she looked very thin and her ribs were clearly visible. She was one of four cubs born to another Lioness possibly one of Xpl-69's sisters who had died of her injuries following a fight with a Leopard, which she had killed. One of the cubs vanished during some subsequent floods but the other three appear to have teamed up with Xpl-69 who had shared her kills with them and led them towards a fresh water oasis where they became very successful bird hunters before tackling young Cape Fur Seals at the nearby coast. 'Charlie' had spent some time on her own during this period before being re-united with Xpl-69 a few days before we saw them, hence her condition. She had been feeding as well and during our observation period continued to take scraps from what was left on the carcass. The other two young Lions had remained out at the coast and we were very unlucky not to see them also. During our trip to the coast the following day we found good spoor possibly only 20 minutes old, but it was deemed too dangerous to continue to follow the fresh tracks on foot. We revisited the original kill site the following day and both Lions were still in attendance, but there was very little left of the carcass and it was clear they would soon move on, which they did the following morning, they were seen by workmen heading for the mountains around 07.00. At the time of writing this report (18/1/2019) all four Lions are doing well and 'Charlie' has put weight on and is still with her 'Aunt' who has proved to be a very good surrogate

mother. They have been associated with at least one more Oryx kill. The two at the coast are still feeding well on large seabirds and Seals. (pers.comms).



Xpl-69 on the right, both Lions are collared and are clearly well fed. The remains of the Oryx can be seen far left.





Xpl-69, an amazing Lioness.



'Charlie', all the better for a good meal but still very thin. Two years old, a significant amount of that time has been spent without her mother (died when she was one year old), with her siblings at the coast, with her 'Aunt' and on her own.

This subset of uniquely adapted Lions battle daily with the hardships that their chosen environment throws at them, extreme heat for most of the year (cold nights), lack of reliable drinking water, an arid and dry desert environment, difficulties to interact with members of their own species, human/Lion conflict which usually ends in Lions being shot or poisoned and the difficulty in securing regular prey. Suitable prey are not regularly seen in the Hoanib River Basin, with the possible exception of the Angolan Giraffe which during our stay was seen on a regular basis. I would be interested to know if they have ever been recorded taking small Elephants? Known prey include Giraffe, Oryx, Cape Fur Seals and large seabirds i.e. Cormorants, Flamingo. During our visit other mammals observed which could potentially be taken as prey were Kalahari Steenbok and Kalahari Springbok.

On our first full day in camp having been out since dawn, on our return to camp we had to take a detour to avoid a herd of Elephants who were in a narrow section of the dry Hoanib riverbed, we drove over a vegetated bank into a channel, which ran parallel to the main riverbed. It became clear that another vehicle was heading towards us, Michael immediately identified it as Dr. Stander's mobile office. (Land Cruiser). As we got closer he got out and we enjoyed a conversation with him for about 15 minutes, he was very interested in how the World Cup was progressing. He was on his way to resolve a Human/Lion conflict situation at a village further north. We talked about the deaths of 'The Five Musketeers' and he was amazingly philosophical and thought that some good had come out of bad and that the Namibian government were now much more committed to trying to ensure the long-term survival of Desert Lions. We talked about the body condition of 'Charlie' and he was optimistic that now she was back with Xpl-69 her future would be bright. After our guide took some images to record the meeting he excused himself and continued on his way. It was a great thrill to spend some time with the man who has single-handedly done so much to conserve this unique population of Lions. In fact without his work over many years it is likely that Desert Lions would now be extinct. Later back at camp we were talking to his partner (Emsie Vernay, who is conducting her own research into the Brown Hyaena in the area) and she indicated he had been devastated by the unnecessary deaths of the five young male Lions.

Prior to arriving at Hoanib we had spent a night at Camp Kipwe, near Twyfelfontein in Damaraland and had spent an afternoon tracking and observing desert adapted Elephants. This was another species we were keen to observe away from their customary savanna habitat in a desert environment. I regard the two herds we saw at Camp Kipwe



as being semi-desert adapted, as there is significant expanses of open savanna and vegetation in the area in which the Elephants are found, there is also however some true desert. The general conditions are nowhere near as extreme as those found in the Hoanib River Basin, where vegetation is only found along the river banks. We saw two herds at Kipwe (n=18 & 5), this included individuals of both sexes and all ages. There are apparently around 800 desert adapted Elephants in Namibia. All the Elephants we observed at both locations tended to be smaller (possibly by around 20% of their total body mass when compared to specimens of a similar age found in savanna locations, my own personal impression) and generally had much smaller tusks.



A mature bull Elephant secures some vegetation in the dry bed of the Hoanib River, extreme desert conditions begin at the sandy riverbanks behind the tree and continued for hundreds of miles in all directions.

The Elephants that survive in this area I regard as being truly desert adapted. We regularly saw a herd of ten that included females and some youngsters but not as young as two very young calves we saw at Camp Kipwe. There were also three large bulls in this area, who appeared to spend most of their time away from the main herd on their own. When we were observing the main herd one individual ('Kinky Tail') became very irritated with a Francolin in a bush and eventually turned her anger on us, chasing us down the riverbed for about 200 yards. Michael said this was the first time he had ever seen any of the Elephants in the area show any aggression. This particular herd of Elephants appears to be very safe from poaching and continues to be regularly and extensively monitored by scientific staff. The desert scenery around the Hoanib is absolutely spectacular, unique and of outstanding beauty, a truly wonderful location in which to observe some fascinating animals and birds.

Our afternoon/evening game drive on this day consisted of a return visit to the Oryx kill to see if the two Lionesses were still about which they fortunately were so we spent another hour in their company during which time they remained as yesterday, totally immobile. That would be the last time we would see either of them.

The other large mammal commonly seen in the area is the Angolan Giraffe, they were seen in significant numbers on every game drive usually relatively close to the riverbed or actually in it and again it seemed strange to see a familiar savanna mammal set against a backdrop of desert habitat. The Giraffe found in the area is the Angolan Giraffe a subspecies of the Southern Giraffe. They are a favoured prey item for some of the Desert Lion prides. Xpl-10 'The Queen' was regularly along with some of her pride responsible for Giraffe kills. Xpl-69 mentioned in this article probably has been responsible for Giraffe kills and has certainly been seen in pursuit of Giraffe. Whilst out on a game drive we actually came across a Giraffe sat down under a tree it is the first time I have ever seen a Giraffe sat down. At the time of our visit the Elephants and Giraffe were well catered for with regard to a reliable supply of food. One Giraffe we saw had a very unusual facial deformity but appeared healthy and was observed to be feeding



well. Giraffe numbers in the area are very stable. On the day we drove out to the coast (the following day) we navigated the riverbed at 05.30 for a time in darkness, Giraffe were frequently spotted resting under the taller trees.



An Angolan Giraffe moves to find food, note how green the shrubs along the riverbank are, the images were taken in the middle of the Namibian Winter. This is not a wildlife rich area but good sightings are possible of several desert adapted mammals. It is very much an area for the specialist enthusiast but we found it just as enjoyable as some of the more wildlife rich areas we have visited. Our Lion sighting(s) was/were undoubtedly the highlight of the visit and we realise fully just how lucky and privileged we have been not only to enjoy the wildlife but stay in such a wonderful desert environment. (Thank you, Wilderness Safaris, Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp was excellent and your support to Desert Lion Conservation & The Brown Hyaena Project is to say the least impressive).

#### OTHER MAMMALS SEEN DURING OUR 3 NIGHT STAY:

Kalahari Gemsbok/Oryx (several, small herds), Kalahari Steenbok (1), Kalahari Springbok (1), Cape Fur Seal (several thousand at the coast), unidentified large rodent (1).

#### SPOOR IDENTIFIED IN THE AREA:

Small cat (Wildcat or Caracal), Black-backed Jackal.

#### NOT SEEN BUT POSSIBLE:

Brown Hyaena (apparently not uncommon), Cheetah (very rare), a sighting was recorded two weeks before our visit. Black Rhinoceros, a couple staying at the camp had a sighting but had been very lucky and left camp very early that morning (04.00) presumably in the direction of Desert Rhino Camp. (Palmwag Concession).

FOOTNOTE: Just published and makes interesting further reading about the Lions highlighted in this report. Stander P E (2019) Lions (*Panthera leo*) specialising on a marine diet in the Skeleton Coast National Park, Namibia. *Namibian Journal of Environment*. Vol 3. A: 1-10.

John Weir. 30 January 2019.