



Diary of a female cheetah release & tracking, 29 March 2009

After a nine hour journey from N/a'an ku sê to NamibRand and one last night in the transport cage at Gorrasis, our female cheetah tasted freedom again. At 8am on Sunday morning, she shot out of the cage into a paradise of game. Project manager, Cila, writes about the next few days of tracking the cheetah...

Just before we released her, we placed the cheetah's cage next to the waterhole to allow her to smell the water and took the cover off the cage to enable her to take a good look at her new environment. After 15 minutes allowing her to absorb what was going on around her she was released back into the wild again.



The animal's health and ensuring their stress levels return to normal is paramount therefore we monitored her from a very safe distance with the telemetry equipment.

The day after the release we found very fresh tracks on the road coming straight from the direction we had left her. She kept mainly on the road, occasionally straying into riverbeds and it was very easy for us to track her for quite some time. We lost the tracks for a while, but managed to pick them up again later in the afternoon. The signal was weak, but at least we knew where she was. We kept signaling from Gorrasis in the evening where we continued to pick up weak signals and managed to work out in which direction she was moving.



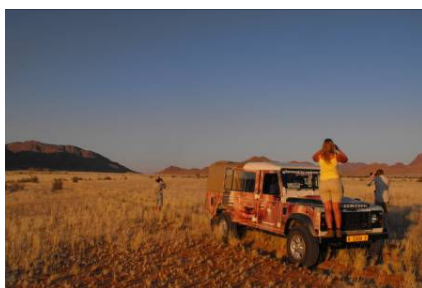
At about 6am on Tuesday morning we were still getting signals from the house. We headed off in the direction of the strongest signal which gave me a very good idea of how to sneak up on her; I had been lucky enough to have sightings there of the first group of cheetahs we released in the same area. Shortly before 9am we spotted her sitting under a thick green bush, hiding in the shade. There was springbok really close by but she made no attempt to hunt. She stole an occasional glance at them and spent the rest of the time sleeping. It was a very hot day with plenty of flies bothering both her and us; she was constantly flicking her tail and twitching her ears. Other than that she was really looking relaxed and well.

Wednesday morning kicked off early again. We signaled from the house and she was gone. We decided to head towards Ysterwielnek where we picked up her track coming down the road, leading back to Schaffberg where

she was released. Once again she made life easy for us by sticking to the road. We kept signaling until suddenly we had strong signals. We were standing up high on a dune with the car. Bernd, one of our research volunteers, saw a big herd of springbok dashing down the mountain in all directions. I grabbed the binoculars to take a closer look and got a good view of our cheetah coming down the mountain. She was clearly carrying something and focusing in I could see it was a fawn. We wanted to see her eating her meal and tried to sneak up on her. We climbed a little koppie but did not realize how close we were and unfortunately we scared her. She did not run away but we discovered she had left her food untouched when we returned much later that afternoon. I will make sure we never make that mistake again.



Thursday morning saw us returning to the same area. We again clear signals from a different place to the day before and decided to approach at an angle which would give us more cover. As we drove down the road we saw her tracks leading away from the scene of yesterdays kill. We were very interested to see what happened to the kill overnight and all had our ideas about what we may find. We were very surprised with what we did find as when we got to the spot where she left the kill, it was gone. Martin noticed drag marks leading away; we followed them and found the half eaten fawn. It was amazing. She had clearly gone during the night to enjoy her catch and had eaten both the back leg and the front. She had only eaten the meat and a bit of the ribcage. The intestines were left neatly in a pile. Together, the tracks found and the state of the carcass was enough proof that it was our cheetah who had eaten the fawn. The competition is so fierce in the reserve that if it was spotted by hyenas or jackals they would have devoured it completely in one night. This was fantastic news.



Friday, early as normal, we found signals again in the direction of Schaffberg towards the dunes. She was still moving as it was early and not yet too hot. We followed her all the way into the dunes where she stayed for the rest of the day. We noticed a big bush nestling between two little dunes. We could not see the base of this bush but our strongest signals came straight from that direction. She must have been there enjoying the shade of the bushes.

As for us, we were very happy. We had a great time tracking with two sightings and had seen her hunt. We could not ask for anything more for our perfect week.