



# hanging with hyaenas

Her camp in the wilds of the Caprivi Strip may be primitive, but Lise Hanssen's research into hyaenas is providing invaluable information about the habits of these and the other wild carnivores that roam this spit of land in north-eastern Namibia. **Fransje van Riel** spent a few days with this indomitable woman to see what makes her tick.

TEXT BY FRANSJE VAN RIEL

**L**ise Hanssen's research camp is, at best, basic. A large olive-green tent, a work surface with two cooler boxes that double as chairs and a metal table with one small gas stove just about sums it up. The river, which is home to hippos and crocodiles, functions as her bath and provides her with water for drinking and laundry. Her toilet consists of the nearby bush and a spade.

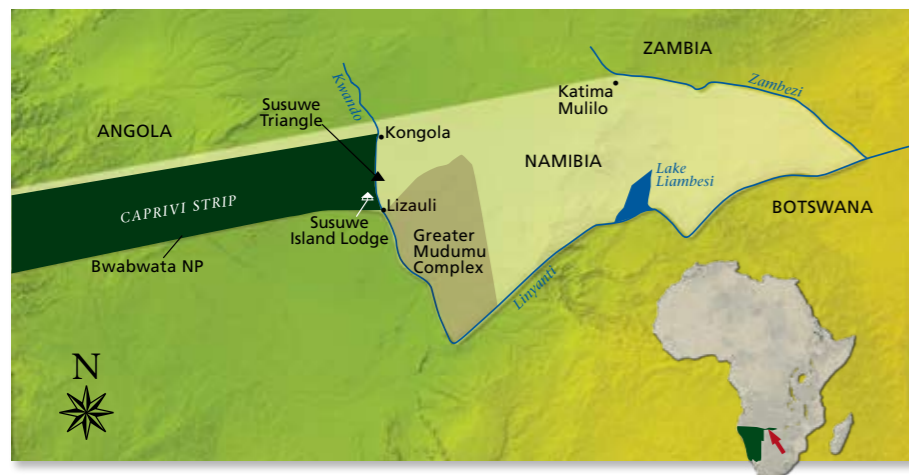
Nevertheless it is here, on the floodplains of the Kwando River in Namibia's Caprivi Strip, that Hanssen has made her home. Some 20 years ago, when she was just 21 years old, she turned her back on life in Cape Town, at the southern tip of South Africa, and headed for Namibia, armed only with a fierce determination to rescue and release cheetahs and leopards that had been trapped on commercial farmlands.

Her first 15 years there were spent driving the length and breadth of the country as she transported leopards in the back of her *bakkie* (van) to secure their release back into the wild. Although the work was fulfilling, she says, 'At times it was heartbreaking. I saw the best and the worst in people.'

Moving into the world of carnivore ecology and conservation, Hanssen went on to study Namibia's wild cats, collecting blood and tissue samples for disease and genetics studies. In early 2007, sponsored by the UK-based Predator Conservation Trust (PCT), she visited the Caprivi to assess the feasibility of a full-time research study on spotted hyaenas. The project was approved by Namibia's Ministry of ▶



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TOP A herd of elephants moves through the lush Caprivi vegetation.

PREVIOUS SPREAD Young hyaenas. Siblings will start to nip and gambol with each other within hours of birth to establish rank.

Environment and Tourism (MET) and, armed with an additional grant from the PCT, she established the Caprivi Carnivore Project.

Although the whole of the Caprivi is her stamping ground, Hanssen's greatest success has emanated from the triangular Susuwe area, which falls within the recently proclaimed Bwabwata National Park. There, in late 2009, she darted and marked no fewer than five individuals from one spotted hyaena clan in just six weeks.

'It was amazing; the hyaenas played cat-and-mouse with me for more than a year,' she says as she drives me into camp. 'One evening, three of them pitched up at the baiting tree (furnished with sedative-laced pieces of meat), but two disappeared into the night without taking the bait. The third hyaena ate a few pieces, but took off before I had a chance to aim the dart gun. It was very frustrating and I started to doubt whether I could ever pull it off.'

Later that night, with Hanssen's partner Peter Alexander, who is here on a visit, we leave the camp to conduct more fieldwork. The headlights probe the darkness as we rattle along the dirt track and onto a gravel road where we pass many traditional huts and a lively gathering outside a local shebeen.

Soon we turn left onto the tarred Trans-Caprivi Highway. Crossing the Kwando River, we arrive at a police checkpoint, where Hanssen shares a few amicable words with the uniformed guards before being waved through. 'Working alongside the local communities is half the battle,' she says.

In addition to the dart gun and tranquillising drugs, she has brought a big piece of meat she'd purchased the day before. It's been steaming in the hot sun ever since to get 'really juicy'. 'The stench is bloody awful but it really does the trick,' she says with a grin. 'The hyaenas love it; they can smell rotten meat from miles away.'

She tells me that the problem affecting the long-term conservation of the Caprivi hyaenas, as well as other, larger carnivores, is mainly conflict with livestock farmers in the conservancies in the east of the region.

'The social structure of hyaena clans is highly complex,' she continues as she slows the vehicle and turns onto a sandy track. 'The group's survival depends on its strictly female hierarchy. Moms give birth to two cubs that are milk-dependent for a year, so they invest heavily in their offspring. Each female plays an integral role and the loss of just one individual can contribute to the demise of the entire clan.'

We're heading towards Susuwe Island Lodge which, according to Hanssen, offers the most beautiful tourist accommodation in the area. She grins, recalling how she was once forced to call the lodge to ask for help after her vehicle got stuck on the road. We bounce along the elephant-dung-littered route through the mopane forest and emerge into a clearing, where we come to a stop at the base of a many-branched tree.

Casting her torch around the site, Hanssen gets out and walks to a remote camera that is secured to a tree stump. She opens the padlocked metal cover, retrieves a memory card and pops it into the laptop on the ledge of the bakkie. 'It's always exciting to see what's been around,' she tells me as the photographs start downloading, revealing two previously uncollared hyaenas.

When Hanssen is not in the field, she strings the meat just beyond the easy reach of the prowling hyaenas so that any visitors attracted to it are captured on camera at five-second intervals. During the past few months, six different hyaenas have frequented the site, and all were photographed on a regular basis, leading her to conclude that they belong to the same Kwando clan.

She replaces the week-old, rather leathery bait with the fresh meat and scatters a few smaller pieces laced with a powerful sedative around the base of the



FRANSJE VAN RIEL



TOP Hanssen takes blood samples from CCC-5, a young female.

ABOVE, TOP LEFT Data from the GSM-collars are downloaded to a laptop computer.

ABOVE, TOP RIGHT TO BOTTOM A selection of images taken by remote camera at the baiting tree. The photographs are currently on exhibit at Grande Provence Heritage Wine Estate in Franschhoek, South Africa. For more information, visit [www.grandeprovence.co.za](http://www.grandeprovence.co.za) or call +27 (0)21 876 8600.



SUZI ESZTERHAS

## Spotted hyaenas at a glance

**Size** Shoulder height about 85 centimetres.

**Weight** 60 to 80 kilograms.

**Social system** Spotted hyaena society is highly structured and dominated by females, with groups comprising up to 100 individuals. Communal dens are occupied by the cubs only, although sub-adults of both sexes may visit. Adults are not able to fit inside the tapered dens.

**Reproduction** After a 90-day gestation, females give birth to one or two cubs (above), each weighing about a kilogram. Newborns have open eyes and fully erupted canines and incisors – these are used in battle with their siblings to establish dominance. Cubs remain at the communal den until they are eight or nine months old.

**Hunting** Known as 'nature's garbage removers', hyaenas usually hunt by charging into a herd to scatter the animals, then chasing down a weaker member. Their large, bone-crushing jaws make short work of all parts of their prey.

tree. After that, it's back into the vehicle, which she reverses 20 metres. We wait.

Alexander sweeps the area with a red-filtered spotlight and picks up a pair of eyes in the distance. Excitement flares briefly, then subsides when Hanssen announces, 'No, it's a springhare.'

The silence is broken only by trumpeting elephants and the splashing of snorting hippos in the nearby river. The minutes become hours. Evenings such as these are all too familiar, she tells me. 'I failed time and again for more months than I care to remember,' she says as we eventually call it a night and collect the untouched meat. 'It was only when I changed tactics that things finally started to happen.'

The breakthrough she's referring to occurred on April Fool's Day 2009. 'That's when I finally captured and GSM-collared my very first hyaena; a young female, CCC-1. I'd finally struck gold.' (Global System for Mobile Communication [GSM] collars track animals via the Global Positioning System, better known as GPS.)

But her elation gave way to disappointment when the collar, set to transmit CCC-1's positions five times every 24 hours, failed to download the data via the cellphone network.

'It was frustrating because the collars are highly specialised and expensive,' she tells me. 'And taking into account the amount of time it had taken to capture CCC-1, I felt quite despondent. Either she had ventured out of cellphone range, or the device was faulty.'

The only solution was to recapture CCC-1 and fit her with a new collar. However, when Hanssen eventually managed to dart the female five months later, she discovered that the earlier collar had rubbed a raw wound on the side of her neck.

'I decided not to replace it but instead to notch her ear so that she could be identified easily. I also noted that she had put on a lot of weight – at least 10 kilograms – and that she was lactating. That meant she'd borne cubs in the interim.'

The collar was promptly taken to Katima Mulilo, some 120 kilometres away, and placed on the roof of the local garage to gain an uninterrupted connection with overhead satellites and retrieve the five-month-long data. It revealed that CCC-1's home range stretched across 375 square kilometres, with three main areas of concentration, indicating possible den sites.

'I tracked these during the day and found two inactive dens, although it appeared that these were still visited regularly, judging by the amount of hyaena spoor in the immediate vicinity.'

The third, however, located in an area of thick mopane forest, proved to be the active den. 'It was an incredibly exciting moment,' Hanssen reveals. It also heralded the beginning of a successful period in her research.

'I darted CCC-2, a young fluffy male on 10 September. He was the cutest thing I'd ever seen. He was too small to be collared, so I notched his ear, which unfortunately bled so much that I nicknamed him Vincent.'

Two nights later a large and wary female approached the bait. 'She ate the sedative-impregnated pieces of meat, but took a full hour to show any effects of the drug.' Eventually the chance came to dart her. 'I pulled the trigger just as the spotlight illuminated her; 10 minutes later she was down. She was a huge female, 70 or 80 kilograms,' Hanssen tells me. CCC-3 was promptly collared, ear-notched and measured. 'To my surprise, she was much younger than her size indicated,' Hanssen says. 'Although she hadn't yet reached her prime, she had already produced a litter of cubs.' CCC-4, a large male weighing 55 kilograms, was collared in mid-September.

It's our second night in the bush, and this time we're in luck. A herd of elephants has crossed our path, and in their wake we see a lone hyaena near the trap. We watch with bated breath as the carnivore nibbles on the drugged meat and starts to weaken. It stumbles. Hanssen steadies her grip on the dart gun and takes aim. Within 10 minutes the hyaena is out for the count. CCC-5 is a young female in less than good condition. She is skinny and has an appalling bite wound on her neck.

Hanssen works fast. She tops up the tranquilliser, takes blood samples and measurements and notches CCC-5's right ear before spraying it with a topical antiseptic to ward off infection. Photographs are taken and information entered on a chart. There is not much she can do about the wound, as it appears old and no longer septic. Not wanting to irritate it, Hanssen decides against collaring and returns to the vehicle to watch the animal as it comes round and lopes off into the bush.

'Everything I have learnt about myself and my capabilities has been revealed through my work with these hyaenas,' she says. 'It's been a long and at times arduous road, but I couldn't wish to be in a better place.'

Hanssen's care for the animals is apparent. She readily admits that her endeavours to conserve the Caprivi hyaenas and to change people's perceptions about these intelligent, caring animals has probably been the most meaningful contribution she has made to conservation. And it's due in part to her selfless work and efforts that we are afforded an insight into the lives and habits of these fascinating predators. ■

*NOTE: Just one day before packing up camp for the rainy season, Hanssen captured and collared CCC-6, effectively leaving just one member of the Kwando clan untagged.*

## discovering more

To find out more about the **Predator Conservation Trust**, visit [www.predatorconservation.com](http://www.predatorconservation.com) or e-mail [info@predatorconservation.com](mailto:info@predatorconservation.com). To support the Caprivi Carnivore Project or obtain information about Lise Hanssen's corporate talks, e-mail [fransje@vodamail.co.za](mailto:fransje@vodamail.co.za) or call +27 (0)82 567 3545.

## infotravel

The author flew to Katima Mulilo via Windhoek courtesy of Travel Associates, Sense of Africa and The Safari Court Hotel. For information about travelling to Namibia or special return packages offered to the Caprivi Strip, including two nights in Windhoek (with breakfast), return flights to Katima Mulilo, all transfers, and three nights at Susuwe Island Lodge, call Travel Associates on 0860 40 0500 or go to [www.travelassociates.co.za](http://www.travelassociates.co.za). Contact Susuwe Island Lodge at +27 (0)11 234 9997 or visit [www.islandsinafrica.co.za](http://www.islandsinafrica.co.za)

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