



Gallo/Getty Images, Andreas Ferbrant



# ANIMAL ATTRACTION

The leggy supermodels of the African plains, giraffes are the most threatened large mammals in the world, writes PIPPA DE BRUYN, who tracked the gentle giants in Namibia and South Africa





For journalist Rebecca Davis, it all started with the giraffes. 'There are now so few giraffes in the world that almost all of them could fit into FNB Stadium in Jo'burg if they were human sized,' she announced at the launch of *Self-Helpless*, her hilarious book about the search for meaning and happiness in the absence of alcohol. 'Look at this magical, implausible creature.' Davis pointed to the baby giraffe projected on to the screen behind her. 'I admit I haven't taken any direct steps to prevent their extinction, but when the last one goes I

will feel a heavy sense of personal shame.'

I'm with Davis. The thought of a world without giraffes is depressing. But perhaps not surprising. Almost a third of all assessed species on the planet – a whopping 26,000 – are facing extinction. According to Yuval Noah Harari, author of *Sapiens*, we are ecological serial killers, frail-looking but deadly apes that have already unleashed two waves of extinction on the world, the first in the wake of the foragers, the next with the arrival of farmers. The current Third Wave Extinction is merely the final genocide of everything unfortunate enough to share the planet with us, bar that which we cannot eat, or pet.

It is question time and a man raises his hand. 'But why giraffe?' he asks. While Davis rifles back to the photograph of the cute baby giraffe I slink to the bar and quietly comfort myself with a glass of Sauvignon Blanc. Why giraffe? Because it's pretty, darn it; the leggy supermodel of the African plains. (Efficiency has no bearing on what we choose to love: I will happily squash a creature with 4,000 separate lenses in each eye, bringing its 20,000 wing beats per minute to an abrupt halt, yet gaze adoringly at the relatively clumsy hummingbird.)

Two weeks later I'm in the Kruger. Minutes from main camp we encounter a journey of giraffe. 'OMG,' I exhale with the reverence I usually reserve for lion and leopard. They gaze back, all long-lashed liquid eyes a-top those ridiculously long necks, implausible as rhino. 'So special,' I murmur, 'you know, given that they are on their way to becoming extinct.'

'Rubbish,' my guide snorts.

I assure him that this is a matter of record: in 1985, an estimated 155,000 roamed wild; the latest estimate is 98,445 – a population drop of almost 40 per cent, which is why the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) changed its classification from 'Least Concern' to 'Vulnerable' in December 2016. My guide remains incredulous. 'I'm not a scientist,' he admits, 'but in 20 years of guiding I have never noticed, not even the slightest decrease.' A few days later I am at Dulini. My guide there is equally scathing. 'The official giraffe number for Kruger is around 8,000, and I swear about 5,000 of them are right here in Sabi Sand,' he jokes.

'Who conducted this research? And where?' The Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF;

giraffeconservation.org) is based in Windhoek, Namibia. I try to time a trip to meet Julian Fennessy, the world's foremost giraffe expert and reputed 'giraffe whisperer', but he is in Niger, translocating a breeding herd of critically endangered West Africa giraffe from Kouré to the Gadabeji Game Reserve.

I meet his wife and co-director, Stephanie, in a café on Sam Nujoma Drive. She is brusque, businesslike. There is a lot of ground to cover. We start with Julian's current mission. Niger might be the second least developed country in the world, she explains, but after the West African giraffe population dropped to 49 in the 1990s, it became the first and only country in the world with a national giraffe conservation policy. This was developed with the support of



Andreas Fernbrant, Emma Wells

'In the past 30 years, giraffe have disappeared from seven African countries. Some subspecies are down to 600' Stephanie Fennessy

#### OUTSIZED

Giraffes have seven cervical vertebrae – the same number as humans – but each can be 25cm long. Valves and elastic-walled blood vessels protect the giraffe's brain from sudden blood pressure changes when it lowers its head to drink, and NASA has researched the vessels in giraffe legs to get inspiration for human space suits

GCF, which employs three part-time staff in Niger. The results are remarkable: the population has grown to 550, despite sharing grazing with the livestock of subsistence farmers in Kouré. If Julian can successfully translocate a breeding herd to the safety of the Gadabeji reserve, this recovery might be further assured. As Uganda Wildlife Authority warden Tom Okello states emphatically in the Sir David Attenborough-narrated *Giraffes: Africa's Gentle Giants*, a documentary about the GCF's translocation of 20 Nubian giraffes to a safer part of Murchison Falls National Park: 'You should not keep all your eggs in one basket.'

Julian and Stephanie, who have a tail hair from the first giraffe they tagged in their wedding rings, met in Namibia in 1999. Both worked for the Desert Research Foundation; Stephanie, who has an MSc in environmental engineering and sustainable infrastructure, on the interaction between community, livestock and wildlife. Having spent countless hours collecting data on desert-adapted elephant and giraffe interaction, Julian decided to complete his Masters on the subject. 'But when he started looking for existing research, he found very little on the giraffe.' Stephanie shrugs. 'No one had given the giraffe much attention.' Having discovered the holy grail of scientists –

uncharted subject matter, and a bizarre gap in the conservation market – Julian was advised he should consider upgrading his degree. This he duly did, spending another two years in the field before graduating with a PhD in biological science from the University of Sydney in 2005. Employment offers in Australia and East Africa followed, but none utilising Julian's speciality. Then, in 2008, he was approached by an investor who wanted to donate a sum of money to the WWF, specifically for giraffe research. 'We told him there was no way to ring-fence this.'

'No one puts money into a private bank account, so we decided to set up a non-profit charity, and launched GCF. For the next four years we worked on it in our spare time. In 2002, we had been asked to collect DNA samples of wild giraffes for an American zoo programme, at the time the first scientific collection of genetic data. We revived this programme in 2012, and the Senckenberg BiK-F in Frankfurt agreed to analyse the samples. The results have been very interesting indeed.'

It was the botanist, physician and zoologist Carl Linnaeus – a Swede who incidentally never set foot in Africa; 'too hot', the reputed excuse

– that classified the tallest living terrestrial animal as one species, *Giraffa camelopardalis*, in 1758. But when Julian studied the genetic data, the differences were such that he co-authored a paper, published in *Current Biology*, proposing that there were in fact four separate species. It's a hypothesis that has been hotly contested in the fractured and fractious world of conservation academia, and while the Fennessys are sticking to their dartguns, for now the Linnaeus classification – one species; nine subspecies – still holds in the IUCN. What is not contested is that the giraffe is in trouble, and that it was Julian, co-founder and co-chair of the IUCN SSC Giraffe and Okapi Specialist Group, who signaled the alarm back in 2016.

'To put some perspective on this, there are about 400,000 to 450,000 elephant in Africa – more than four times the number of giraffe. In the past 30 years, giraffes have disappeared from seven African countries. Some subspecies are down to 600. This makes it the most threatened large mammal in the world.' According to the research, more than 50 per cent – around 52,000 – of all giraffe are found in South Africa. Namibia's population is smaller but also growing, particularly in the northwest, where GCF has collaborated with safari outfit Natural Selection to open a camp in the remote ☺



LAT / LONG: 19°20'51.6"S 13°12'25.5"E

valley where Julian first started his research. Guests at Hoanib Valley Camp assist in data collection, and 1.5 per cent of the camp's turnover is invested in GCF. But it is still early days (the camp opened in May last year) and Steph's sense of urgency is palpable. 'GCF is a science-based organisation that has been working across 14 countries for more than two decades. We are still learning about giraffes' grazing range, their social and familial bonds, their lifespan. But we cannot keep researching – by the time we know enough it may be too late. Our focus is increasingly on the endangered populations occurring in East and West Africa. We work closely with wildlife authorities and governments, and have pioneered translocations to develop satellite populations. This is expensive. GCF innovations such as World Giraffe Day [21 June, longest day/night of the year] and Adopt-a-Giraffe programme are attempts to diversify income. At this stage the Hoanib Valley Camp does more to raise awareness than money. You are going there tomorrow?' Stephanie looks wistful. 'You are going to love it. It's located in one of the most special places in the world.'

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'This is a long way to go for a corpse,' grumbles the New Yorker, by his own admission not a patient man. We are gliding through the Hoanib riverbed, following up on a report that came through last night of a dead giraffe near Dubis. There was rain two weeks back and thick flakes of clay coat parts of the riverbed; for a minute the rich, dank smell of mud perfumes the air, the reed-fringed banks an outrage of green against the barren brown wall of rock.

Our guide, Mwezi, identifies the small jewels that cross our path – two Madagascan bee eaters, a flock of pale-winged starlings, high

### COMPATRIOTS

**Arid for at least 55 million years, the Namib is the world's oldest desert - annual rainfall averages 5mm to 85mm. Desert-adapted lions have made provision for this and can go for up to two weeks without drinking water**



above, an Augur buzzard – then slides the Cruiser to a halt. Two elephant bulls, sparring. 'Arnold and Oscar,' he says quietly. 'Born in 1985 and 1996.' He reads out the GPS co-ordinates for me to capture. The two bulls flap their ears, dust drifting as they mock charge and tussle with each other's trunks. It's a bit like watching Ollie Reed and Alan Bates wrestling in *Women in Love*.

'Giraffe, 12 o'clock.' I am delighted. Do they have names, I ask. A kind man, Mwezi does not laugh, just gently points out that about 5,000 desert-adapted giraffes roam this valley.

Embarrassed, I change tack. Is it true, as Adam Rutherford claims in *The Book of Humans*, that when male giraffes start necking they are engaging in sexual behaviour? I expect Mwezi to snigger, but he nods. 'I have seen giraffes do this for hours. They say it is done to show dominance, but there is much friendliness.'

When we finally find the dead giraffe it's impressively ghoulish, the soft flesh on its face and tail chewed off by hyenas. Mwezi pulls on a pair of latex gloves, takes a blood sample, measures the ossicones, takes photographs. He hopes we will be able to identify the giraffe back

in camp, where there are hundreds of photographs on file. Cause of death? Mwezi shrugs. It looks to him like it fell, then struggled to get up. We take our agility for granted.

On the way back to camp sharp-eyed Mwezi spots a movement in the bush. A tawny-eyed lioness, her gaze regal, is sprawled in the shade. We stop in the baking heat to experience the full-frontal awe of her, when another lioness comes padding across the riverbed. By sheer luck we have run into two of the 150-odd desert-adapted lions thought to live in this arid 52,000km<sup>2</sup> rangeland. 'Listen, she is calling her cubs,' Mwezi whispers, and sure enough, the two appear next, trotting across the riverbed. Nervously they stop to peer at the vehicle; their mother watches, impervious to our presence. Mwezi tells us that their father was killed two weeks ago – poisoned by livestock farmers. One of seven killed since 2016, he was the last male in the valley. 'Maybe a nomadic lion will come, looking for new territory. But as long as the farmers do not receive enough compensation for their livestock, the poisoning will continue.' We watch in silence as the lionesses clamber up a steep rock face to scan the valley for prey, their noble golden heads outlined by the sun.

On our last night we elect to stay in and watch the light soften the valley directly in front of Hoanib Valley Camp. In a country not short of spectacular locations, this one is pretty hard to beat: six enormous and elegantly appointed tents arranged in a semi-circle on either side of an elevated mess tent, all discreetly tucked into the shadowed lee of a rocky mountain. Before us the valley lies dusted in gold, fine threads of grass pixilating into a furry carpet out of which mounds of metamorphic rocks rise, striated with quartz, mica, feldspar. It is a fiercely mineral world, Namibia, and its stark beauty touches some primal chord in all of us. As the valley softens into darkness we sip our wine around a burning fire, smoke curling up into the pinpricks of light. My mind keeps turning back to the lionesses, their hunt for life in this barren land. The wine loosens my tongue. I finally ask whether the desert lion is not more deserving than the giraffe, given the limited conservation resources. The question is met with howls of outrage. It seems it is not just Rebecca Davis who admits that 'the imminent extinction of other, less majestic creatures left me cold'. Someone says the giraffe is her spirit animal, and we must each look after our own. I wander away from the fire, but not too far, fearful of getting lost. Peering dimly at the ground, I encounter a dung beetle. It moves unerringly, rolling its turd in a straight line across this vast gravel plane, navigating its way by the light of the stars. It has a job to do, and it knows the way. ■



British Airways flies daily to Windhoek from Jo'burg.



### Hoanib Valley Camp

From R8,800 pp, pn. For African residents, rates start from R3,960 pp, pn. For last-minute travel within 30 days, from R3,500 pp, pn. All rates fully inclusive. [naturalselection.travel/camp/hoanib-valley-camp](http://naturalselection.travel/camp/hoanib-valley-camp)

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