

## A historic overview of giraffe distribution in Namibia

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### Introduction

Historic wildlife distribution in Namibia is often speculative with very little to benchmark this against. Early written records are limited to a handful of explorers/hunters/traders that focused mainly on personal trials, tribulations and anthropology while early academic papers are even more limited. References to wildlife encounters by early explorers are most often related to lion preying on oxen or hunting elephant for ivory and ostrich for feathers, commodities in vogue at the time. However, references to other species incidentally observed can be used to deduce their distribution. This note focuses on giraffe, a megaherbivore, once more numerous and widely dispersed in Namibia than today and which probably together with other large herbivores such as elephant and black-rhino were responsible for opening up areas now dense with bush.

The first reference to giraffe from Namibia was made by Hendrik Hop who ventured along the lower Löwen River towards Keetmanshoop who on 22 December 1761 mentioned that he crossed a plain covered in “*large herds of wild animals, viz rhinoceri, giraffes, buffaloes, kudus, gemsboks, stags and aurochs*” (Brown 2006). Other early writers who observed giraffe in the vicinity of the Orange River include Paterson (1790), le Vaillant (1796) and Lichtenstein (1812) (Shortridge 1934) although it is unclear where precisely these sightings were made although probably north of the Orange River (i.e. Namibia) as it is doubtful if giraffe range extended south of the Orange River (Bryden 1936).

According to Skinner and Chimimba (2005) giraffe formerly occurred in the northern and north-eastern parts of Namibia south to about 20° south on the Botswana border and westwards into the semi-desert areas of the Kaokoland in the north-west. In Namibia, Angolan giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis angolensis*) occur in scattered populations in the northern third of the country while the type locality of the Southern African/Cape giraffe (*G. c. giraffa* – now extinct in Namibia) was probably in the vicinity of Warmbad (southern Namibia), although the location was not originally cited (Griffin and Coetzee 2005).

Although this note relies heavily on anecdotal evidence and is not a comprehensive list of early Namibian explorers (and other publications), it can be viewed as a first step in attempting to identify the past distribution of giraffe in Namibia. The language and spelling of the explorers is used throughout.

### Explorers and/or Publications: 1856 to 1958

Charles John Andersson (1856-1867) was a Swedish explorer, hunter and trader as well as an amateur naturalist and ornithologist who visited Namibia between 1850 and up to his death in 1867 (Table 1). James Chapman (1859) was an explorer, hunter, trader and photographer who visited Namibia between 1859 and 1864 (Table 2). Thure Gustav Een (1866), a sea captain, worked and travelled in Namibia between 1866 and 1871 (Table 3). Frederick Courteney Selous (1880) was probably one of the most famous hunters and explorers of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, but only visited the Caprivi-Chobe River-area of Namibia during 1880 (Table 4). Eberhard Rosenblad (1894-1898) was an explorer who mostly travelled around with Axel Ericksson between 1894 and 1898, but does not make any reference to giraffe. Axel Wilhelm Eriksson (1865-1901) was a Swedish ornithologist, settler and trader who lived and travelled extensively throughout Namibia between 1866 up to his death in 1901, but did not make any reference to giraffe. Denys Reitz (1925) was a soldier, attorney, author and South African cabinet minister who visited northwest Namibia to explore this little known region during 1925 (Table 5). Captain Guy Chester Shortridge (1934) was a zoologist and later museum curator who collected mammals from Namibia between 1923 and 1924 (Table 6). Laurence George Green (1952) was a South African journalist and author (Table 7) while Rudi Bigalke (1958) was an academic and scientist – the first scientist employed in the Etosha National Park (Table 8).

**Table 1.** Charles John Andersson (1856 & 1858):

Year	Area	References to giraffe
1856	Waterberg (north & west)	"...giving chase to a troop of <u>giraffe</u> , we..."
	Waterberg (north – Omanbonde River area)	"Game was rather scarce, yet I managed to bag a few red bucks ( <u>pallahs</u> ) and <u>koodoos</u> . Tracks of <u>giraffe</u> , rhinoceros and elephants were by no means uncommon..."
	Grootfontein (south towards Omanbonde River)	"During the day, we saw <u>vast troops of cameleopards</u> ..."
1858	Omaruru River area	"I was stalking some <u>giraffe</u> , and..."
		"I was riding leisurely along in advance of the wagon, hoping to fall in with some game, when, while passing through a thick brake, I espied a <u>giraffe</u> ."
		"...a sharp day's march, in the course of which I killed a couple of gemsboks, and saw, for the first time, a fair sprinkling of game, such as <u>giraffe</u> , gemsboks, zebras, springboks, etc."
		"At the fountain Ombolo (situated on the Omaruru River), which I reached on the third day, I found the country pretty well stocked with <u>giraffe</u> , zebras, gnus, koodoos, etc., and I had some very decent shooting. One morning I bagged a fine stag koodoo and two <u>giraffe</u> ."
	Omuramba-Omatoko area (south of Grootfontein)	"...and having come unperceived upon a herd of <u>camelopards</u> , I succeeded, after a short walk, in bringing down a good-sized bull."

**Table 2.** James Chapman (1859):

Year	Area	References to giraffe
1859	Otjimbingwe	"The country was much more interesting in every respect, <u>enlivened by giraffe</u> , springbuck, gnus, zebras, klipspringers, ostriches and pou."
	Gobabis area (7 days east of Gobabis – rocky terrain as opposed to sand east & south)	"Elands and <u>giraffe</u> are plentiful there, and elephants are occasionally to be found..." "Enjoyed an <u>exciting chase after giraffe</u> by the way, and reached Otjimbingwe on 14 <sup>th</sup> October."

**Table 3.** Thure Gustav Een (1866-1867):

Year	Area	References to giraffe
1866	Lower Swakop River area	"When Andersson and Galton undertook their first journey into Damaraland, they found rhinoceros and <u>giraffe</u> in plenty at the Swakop River, but now that it is fairly common for the natives to be supplied with guns, <u>they have quite disappeared from these areas</u> ."
	Omuramba Omatoko area (north of Omatoko Mt.)	"Now for the first time I saw herds of wild animals, antelope of several kinds such as wildebeest, hartebeest, gemsbok, and springbok in herds of hundreds. <u>Giraffe</u> and zebra also occurred, <u>although they were not as numerous</u> ."
1867	Throughout trip	"I was again back in Otjimbingwe by the middle of May [1867]. During this

journey much game had been killed, such as several kinds of antelope, and giraffe.”

**Table 4.** Frederick Courteney Selous (1880):

Year	Area	References to giraffe
1880	Chobe River area	<p>“Next day (September 6) we again kept on along the edge of the marsh, and saw much game – <u>giraffe</u>, elands, koodoos, impalas, blue wildebeest, tsessebes, wild pigs, and out in the marsh numberless lechwes.”</p> <p>“...and reached camp again a little before sundown, just in time to see three tall, graceful <u>giraffe</u> issue from the forest a little distance beyond...”</p>

**Table 5.** Denys Reitz (1925):

Year	Area	References to giraffe
1925	Khairos (Etosha National Park)	<p>“Again we passed elephant and I saw a few <u>giraffe</u>, while there were many gemsbok in the long open glades or ‘marambas’ as they are called.”</p>
	Khairos (5-6 days north to Otyitundua) area	<p>“The country improved as we went. The trees were taller, the grass more plentiful and to elephant and <u>giraffe</u> and oryx were now added herds of zebra and <u>koodoo</u> and springbok.”</p>
	Otjitndua to Ubombo	<p>We travelled in two days to Ubombo, across picturesque game-covered plains, with quantities of gemsbok, zebra and <u>giraffe</u>, and more elephant.”</p>

**Table 6.** Shortridge (1934):

Year	Area	References to giraffe
1934	Kaokoveld (northwest)	<p>“The number of Kaokoveld giraffe has been estimated at about 200 head, which may be approximately correct. They occur mainly in the east-central and eastern portions of that territory – from about Fransfontein (latitude 20 approx.) in the south, to some ten miles south of Ombathu in the north. According to native information, giraffe do not extend west of the Zesfontein-Kaoko-Otavi Line, nor along the valley of the lower Kunene.”</p> <p>“In the Kaukaveld giraffe chiefly inhabit brak-pan country, and have been seen between Dusche and Tsau-anadum.” (Wilhelm)</p> <p>“Giraffe (or indications of giraffe) were observed close to Kamanjab, Otjitemba, Qoabendus, Ombombo, Otjitunda, ten miles south of Koako-Otavi, and between Otjipongo and Ombathu.”</p>
	Outjo area	<p>“A few giraffe wander fairly frequently from the southern Kaokoveld into the north of Outjo District – to within less than ten miles of Outjo Town.”</p>
	Etosha Pan area	<p>“Farther east, a few periodically visit the western and south-western parts of the Namutoni Game Reserve.”</p> <p>“Giraffe occur to the south and south-west of the Etosha pan.” (Nelson)</p>
	Ovamboland	<p>“Small parties of giraffe trek through western Ovamboland fairly regularly, but, perhaps owing to the Owambo hunters, they seem seldom to remain long.”</p> <p>“The occasional visitations to eastern Ovamboland may be from southern Angola.”</p> <p>“Giraffe are found sparingly in the extreme eastern and western portions of Ovamboland.” (Hahn)</p>

Grootfontein District (northeast)	“Giraffe have a wider, far more scattered, range in this region than in the Kaokoveld. On this account, even a rough estimate of the numbers that inhabit Grootfontein District is speculative. It is doubtful, however, if the whole of the north-east carries more giraffe than the Kaokoveld. In the south, giraffe range within 50 miles of Grootfontein Town; a family party of three was twice seen near Fockshof; troops of from three to five (or oftener fresh spoor) were observed along many parts of the Omuramba-Omatako – most commonly between Numkaub and Ssannukannu. Giraffe are said seldom to wander south of the line Neitsas-Guntsas, and are not found in the south-west – between Grootfontein Town and Namutoni. In the south-east – towards the Bechuanaland Border – they are reported to range sparsely as far south as latitude 22, and, according to native information, may sometimes be seen on the sand-plains far east of the Waterberg. Giraffe are not common in the Grootfontein sand-veld; only a few small parties were occasionally seen. There are none in the south-west – although natives assert that they existed there formerly.”
Omuramba-Omatako	
Waterberg area	“In the Kungveld they were only met with in the west – along Omuramba-Omatako (around Leopard’s Kopje, etc.). (Wilhelm)
Caprivi (now Zambezi, east of the Okavango River)	“A giraffe was observed on the east side of the Okavango near Bagane (a few miles below the Popa Falls), quite near the river in almost swampy country.”  “In the central Caprivi – between the Okavango and the Chobe – giraffe are fairly plentiful; in the eastern Caprivi they are present on the northern border, but there are not many there today.” (Balme)  “They are not uncommon in the Hukweveld.” (Wilhelm)  “Giraffe occur in the Caprivi, and in the eastern parts of Nagamiland around Mababe.” (Neale)  “In the country between the Chobe and the Zambezi the giraffe is found in the neighbourhood of Linyanti; but it is not nearly so numerous there (in the eastern Caprivi) as on the other side of the former river. Immediately north of the Zambezi it is unknown.” (Selous)

N.B.: Balme, Hahn, Neale, Nelson, Selous, Wilhelm – references included in Shortridge (1934)

**Table 7.** Lawrence Green (1952):

Year	Area	References to giraffe
1952	Kaokoveld area	“At least a thousand <u>giraffe</u> enrich the Kaokoveld landscape.”  “Down the lower Hoarusib, among the stunted ebony trees, <u>giraffe</u> are really common. An official told me that a troop of a <u>hundred giraffe</u> once ran ahead of his motor-lorry down the mountain pass to Sanitatas water-hole.”  “Early hunters took heavy toll of the <u>giraffe</u> in South West Africa, for hide was then in demand for long whip-lashes. Not even their protective colouring could save them. In the Kaokoveld the <u>giraffe</u> has found sanctuary.”
	Outjo District	“Telephone and telegraph wires in parts of the Outjo district have had to be raised to prevent collisions. In the past <u>giraffe</u> have become hopelessly tangled and chocked to death.”

**Table 8.** Rudi Bigalke (1958):

Year	Area	References to giraffe
1958	Tsumeb/Grootfontein/Outjo/Gobabis areas	"On farming land, giraffe were recorded from the Tsumeb (64% of the farms), Grootfontein (17%) and Outjo (25%) districts..."
	Caprivi	"...and from the last farms in Tsumeb and Grootfontein districts northwards to the Okavango river and eastwards into the Caprivi."
	Etosha area	"...and Game Reserve II..."
	Ovamboland	"In Ovamboland the species is said to occur towards the borders."
	Gobabis area	"...and from one farm in the eastern part of the Gobabis district."
	Kaokoveld	"The species is widespread and numerous throughout the Kaokoveld, except in the coastal desert,..."

### Discussion

When Andersson travelled from Walvis Bay to Otjimbingwe in 1856, he encountered giraffe in the lower reaches of the Swakop River, ten years later – 1866 – Een states that they had been extirpated. Giraffe, although not common throughout central-northern Namibia (as deduced from the references consulted) were nevertheless regularly encountered and hunted for food.

The presence of giraffe south of Windhoek towards the Orange River is difficult to determine as none of the references consulted covered these areas, although not expected to be as common due to marginal habitat; less open surface water and more open areas making it easier to pursue and hunt them.

The role giraffe had in regulating bush thickening (encroachment) in Namibia is not expected to be as significant as elephant and black-rhino albeit difficult to determine. However, the aim of this note is not to determine the causes of bush thickening<sup>1</sup>, but rather to provide a historic overview of references to giraffe made by early explorers (and other authors) encountered up to ~150 years ago. The presence of giraffe from approximately 23° south, northwards throughout much of central-northern Namibia, indicates that sufficient fodder (mainly browse) was available to maintain such large browsers (including elephant and black-rhino) and that central-northern Namibia was not an open grassland with sparsely distributed trees as popularly believed.

<sup>1</sup> References to historic bush thickening in Namibia are presented elsewhere (Cunningham In press).

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## Going to new length: A 'One Plan Approach' for giraffe

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Giraffe conservation collaborations between the wild and captive worlds have been less of a 'One Plan Approach' and more of an 'Unplanned Approach' to date. Whilst the *in situ* and *ex situ* giraffe worlds have been working together on projects and often looking towards the same ultimate goal, it has not necessarily been undertaken in a formalised way. The time is right to help nurture this approach and the Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF) is taking the lead to engage EAZA (and AZA) colleagues as a first step.

In May 2014, EAZA held its biennial conservation forum in Leipzig, Germany, and a month later hosted a combined TAG Chair meeting in Alphen aan den Rijn, Netherlands. GCF's Dr Julian Fennessy spoke about the future of giraffe in the wild and those held in captive collections – with the input of Paul Rose – at both meetings, with the aim of establishing closer links between *in situ* and *ex situ* worlds. This information, from two seemingly world-apart areas of giraffe biology, were brought together to sow the seeds within delegates' minds on the feasibility of a more integrated approach to managing and conserving and the giraffe into the future.

The giraffe is often termed Africa's forgotten megafauna and despite being one of the more charismatic of herbivores, its numbers are declining in the wild. The management of captive giraffe, and especially the good management of endangered subspecies, such as the Rothschild's giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis rothschildi*), enables a strong conservation link to be built between

field workers and zoo-based staff, scientists and conservation biologists. The zoo world recognises the conservation potential held in the captive population of Rothschild's giraffe and therefore greater collaboration between the zoo world and the wild world can bring benefits in securing a future for this well-loved, but poorly understood creature.

A key aspect of a giraffe 'One Plan Approach' is the way in which links can be established between those in zoos and those out in the wild. The current captive giraffe population is relatively substantial. And the large audiences that zoos reach has a multitude of conservation, education, financial and advocacy benefits for those attempting long-term conservation strategies for the giraffe. The sliding scale of management suggested by the IUCN's 'One Plan' initiative that promotes an integrated conservation planning for specific species would be of great benefit to both captive and wild giraffe.

Captive giraffe are great ambassadors for their wild cousins. Genetic purity and well-managed breeding herds enable the 'Ark Paradigm' of the modern zoo to be fulfilled. It has been shown with other large ungulates that reintroduction of populations extirpated from native rangelands is possible, and ultimately successful, by using captive-bred stock. Protection of the giraffe's habitat, work with local communities and engagement with those that live alongside wild giraffe herds enable long-term preservation of the ecosystem that the giraffe needs. Explanation of the threats to giraffe as well as raising