Wildlife Vets Namibia August 2023 Edition 65

NEWSLETTER AUGUST

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Dear clients,

Summer is slowly approaching, and the first trees and bushes started flowering already! In this newsletter, we explain the behaviour flehmen. Then, we would like to take you along our latest Angola game translocation, and we give a short summary on our new article '*Practical game count (game census) techniques*'. Last month we told you about the visit of Dr de la Rey of Rhino Repro, he is SA's expert on animal reproduction. We hope he will visit Namibia soon again, should you be interested, kindly contact us. Kind regards, the Wildlife Vets Namibia team

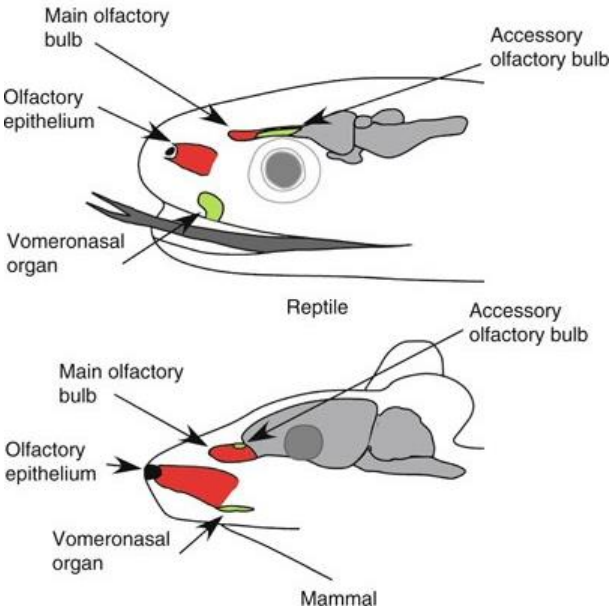
THE FLEHMEN RESPONSE

The flehmen response, or simply said flehming, is a behaviour which is performed by most hoofed animals and felids. Animals curl up their upper lip and expose their teeth, while inhaling through the nostrils. This behaviour is all about smells.

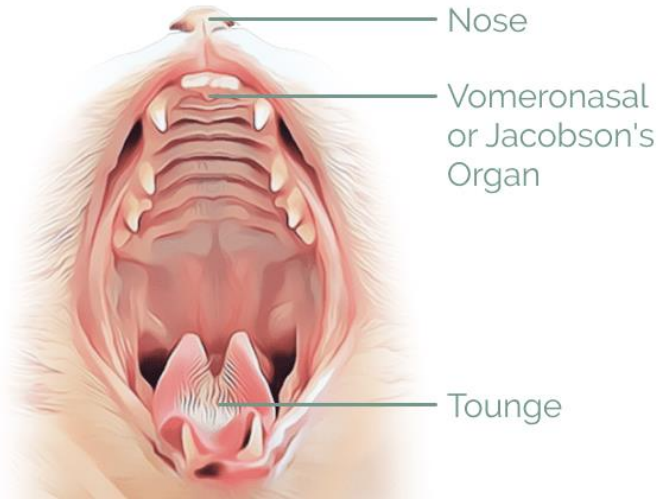
Flehming causes the ducts in the mouth and nasal passages to open, thereby allowing scent signals (pheromones) to be transferred to, and analysed by, the vomeronasal organ (VNO). This organ is also called the Jacobson's organ.

The VNO is an olfactory chemosensory organ located between the roof of the mouth and the palate. The animal conducts this behaviour to decode important information, such as sexual and reproductive status, dominance and identity. Strange smells can also lead to flehming.

Sables displaying the flehmen behaviour © M. Bijsterbosch



The vomeronasal organ in mammals and reptiles © A. Martínez-Marcos & M. Halpern



Location of the vomeronasal organ in a cat. The flehmen response is simply what enables cats to send the new scent through the vomeronasal organ for further analysis © Hepper.com

ANGOLA GAME TRANSLOCATION

A few weeks ago, we took tsessebes and giraffes to a reserve in central Angola, a trip of more than 2200 km! Previously we introduced game into this area, and now it was time to introduce a new species; the tsessebe, and bring more giraffes to supplement the existing population and enhance the genetic diversity. If you rather watch then read, here is the link to our video 😊

We started with the capture of the tsessebes. A bull, a young bull and cows and heifers were dart immobilized from the car. The tsessebe is a funny species, once the drugs start working, they come towards sounds. We clap hands for example, and the tsessebe walks towards the clapping. Then we grab them by the horns, and walk them to the car. From there, they were loaded onto the truck. The adults had their own compartment, while the youngsters were crated together. To prevent injuries, they got caps on their horns. These caps will come off by themselves. Next, the giraffes! They were dart immobilized from the helicopter. Once down, the giraffes gets a mask, ear plugs, halter and rope. Then they receive an antidote, and get up. Since they can't see, they remain calm. We tap the hind legs with a big rope, and as this annoys the giraffe, it walks forward. This way we walk it straight into our field trailer, and from there it is transferred to the big giraffe trailer.




Once all the animals were captured, we drove non-stop to the border. Early next morning we were on the Oshikango, and then Santa Clara border posts. The border procedure is always a frustrating time... Since we had to wait a while on the Angola side, all the animals got food and water. We feel it is very important to provide good quality food and water on the trip, as we don't want the animals to lose body condition. The tsessebes got teff hay, and the giraffes lucerne and camel thorn pods. At the end of the afternoon we were cleared, and we finally headed into Angola!

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As we wanted to fuel up in Angola, we got a bit of a surprise… Chaos at the fuel stations! Fuel can be scarce in southern Angola, and a long row of cars and motor bikes was queuing up for petrol. Luckily the diesel-queue was not too long, but initially the diesel was also rationed. Fortunately, the fuel people were kind enough to give us more than enough fuel to reach Lubango. Due to this delay we did not get too far into Angola, before stopping to have a quick powernap.

The next morning we left very early. We made good progress, but some bad stretches of road forced us to drive very slowly. During the travel we regularly stop to check on the animals. Night fell once again, and we stopped for a few hours to get some sleep in. All the animals got food and water again, and now it was not far anymore until our destination!

We started driving again early in the morning, and by the end of the morning we reached the reserve. Now the best part of the translocation was about to start!

The best moment of any translocation is the moment when you open the doors and the animals are released. After weeks of planning, preparation and sorting out paperwork - finally, the animals are able to roam free, and enjoy fresh grass and leaves! We started with releasing the tsessebes. The adults were released one by one as they were in separate compartments, while the youngsters came out two by two. Some dashed out, others calmly got out, looked around, and disappeared into the bush. Next up were the giraffes. Three came out quickly, the last one got off at her own speed, and they quickly joined up. It is always such a great moment seeing the animals get off the truck in good condition!

We stayed a few days to check out this amazing reserve, and it's beautiful! We were lucky to see all the tsessebes the afternoon and the following morning. The bull joined up with two cows, and the youngsters were all together. The rest of the cows were still alone. We saw three of the giraffes in the afternoon, and a few days later they were all seen together. Mission accomplished!

A game translocation is not something one does alone – this truly is a team effort. We want to thank our drivers and animal caretakers Frederick, Romario and Ampie, and all others involved – from the Namibian and Angolese involved ministries and state veterinarians, those arranging permits, border officials and of course to the Namibian game farmers that supplied these animals. A special word of thanks goes to the owner and team of the reserve for their support and trust in our services!

Thank you – Baie dankie – Obrigado!

Click here to watch the video of the translocation!

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PRACTICAL GAME COUNT (GAME CENSUS) TECHNIQUES

We have uploaded a new article to our website, about practical game count techniques. Below you can read a short summary of the article, the full article is available online.

Game management is a vast topic that includes many different aspects. One of the most important aspects of proper game management is to keep healthy and balanced (sex and age) herds of animals in such numbers that the habitat thrives. Especially on game farms, the early recognition of trouble ahead is very important to avoid serious damage to the veld.

A game count, or more correctly, a game census[1], enables you to determine trends in animal population density, farm stocking rate and the condition of your veld.

A reliable count (census) is one of the important cornerstones of effective game ranch management.

By doing game counts, you gather important information on:

- Numbers of animals in different species
- The spatial distribution of game species on a farm
- Trends in game numbers (some species may be thriving while head numbers of other species may be declining – why?)
- Habitat health, esp. identifying problem spots

This information enables you to make sound management decisions. Is the stocking rate realistic when compared to carrying capacity of the farm?? Should I harvest game? Can I add game? Which species do well, which don't?

For effective game management, and especially to establish trends in populations, **a thorough (ideally aerial) game count should be conducted annually or biannually**. This ideally should be done before considering harvesting large numbers of animals. It often happens that a farmer 'sells' more game than he or she actually has...

There are many different techniques of counting game. In our latest article we concentrate on game count techniques that are practical for our Namibian setting. **Accurate or exact** game counts on large areas are near impossible. Rather than knowing the exact number of animals you have, focus on obtaining **repeatable counts (estimates) in an area to** act as a reliable foundation for habitat and population management.

The suitability of each game count technique varies between:

- Game species to be counted (some game not easily seen from the air...).
- Terrain and type of habitat (size of the area to be surveyed, topography, accessibility and vegetation).
- Season (e.g., waterhole counts are useless in the raining season or in areas with constant running rivers).
- Available budget and manpower.
- Purpose of the game count (e.g. to obtain a rough idea of animal numbers or to try and get accurate numbers needed to establish the value of game on the farm for consideration in a farm sale).

Elephant herd on an open plain and a lonely kudu bull hiding in a bush – this bull will be easily missed on any game count! © U. Tubbesing

[1] *A census is the procedure of systematically acquiring, recording and calculating population information about the members of a given population.*

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Game counts are best done when the visibility of the game is optimal. This will vary between species and habitat types. For example, on open plains, animals will contrast nicely against a low stand of green grass following the first rains of the season, whereas sparse leaf cover on trees in late winter will increase the visibility of game in densely bushed areas.

In summer, game counts are best avoided during the heat of the day, i.e., between 10:30 and 15:00, when the animals are inactive and rest in the shade of trees. In winter animals tend to be less active early on a cold morning. Mid-morning and early afternoon are thus optimal times to conduct counts during cold winter months.

Aerial game counts are best conducted in winter till early spring, when leaf cover on most trees should be at its low, thus optimizing air to ground visibility!

In our article, which you can download here, we will go deeper into the different game count techniques, such as:

- **Aerial game counts** – Helicopters and fixed-wing aircrafts are commonly used to count game, and are a useful way to obtain fairly reliable information on game on your farm. In large areas this is usually the only practical and realistic way of counting animals.
- **Known groups** – Certain species, such as wildebeest, zebra and giraffe, tend to form fairly constant groups. By repeatedly monitoring and recording the number of animals, sex ratios and age classes of individual herds, a fairly accurate count of and knowledge of their habitat preferences can be obtained.
- **Road strip counts** – In a road strip count a vehicle is driven along a selected network of roads. The data obtained can then be converted to animals counted/ ha.
- **Spotlight census techniques** – The so-called "spotlight census technique" commonly described in American game management literature basically is the same as the road strip count, BUT counts are conducted at night with the use of spotlights. One can drive around with vehicles and spot the animals, or one stands on a fixed spot (more useful for rivers; spotting hippos/crocodiles for example).
- **Waterhole counts** – Waterhole game counts are ideally suited to obtain data on population demographics (sex and age ratios) of various species, which are not as easily obtained by the other census techniques. This information, when extrapolated to the total population "counted", will yield vital information guiding game management strategies for various species.

Click here to read the full article

Although aerial counts might be relatively expensive, they are less time consuming than any of the other techniques. Depending on the terrain and species density, about one hour is needed to cover 2,000-3,000 hectares. Flight/ferry costs can be greatly reduced if farmers in the same area plan and do game counts or game capture operations at the same time © Simon Wildlife Services

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VISIT DR MORNE DE LA REY – RHINO REPRO

In the previous newsletter you could read about the work that Dr Morné de la Rey did on some Namibian rhinos who never calved before. He checked several cows for pregnancy, and for some cows that were not pregnant, he initiated an Ovum-Pick-Up (OPU) procedure. This basically 'resets' the hormone system. A needle is inserted in the follicles and all material (egg and fluid) is sucked out, and the follicle is flushed. By emptying the follicles, the ovaries are downregulated, and their response is to create a flush or hormones. In 14 to 28 days the cow should come on heat. He is also able to check rhino bulls for fertility, whereby he collects and checks the sperm.

We hope that Dr Morné de la Rey soon can come again to Namibia, and we would like to ask you if you, or farmers you might know of, are interested in a visit from Dr de la Rey? The more farms that join in, the cheaper the travel costs are for all. Feel free to contact us for more information.

1st photo: Dr de la Rey checks the ultrasound and carefully positions the needle to suck and flush out the follicles. His assistant, Carla (on the left, holding the tubes), controls the sucking and flushing. 2nd and 3rd photo: Taking sperm samples from the rhino bull. A first for Namibia!

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