

Beneath the Sand: A photo journey of our year in Namibia

The Stories behind the Photos

Larkin, Kelly, and Tristan Powell

Our family lived in Namibia during 2009. We traveled from Nebraska, USA, where Larkin teaches wildlife ecology and management courses at University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Our trip was funded through a Fulbright Scholar award. These photos were taken during personal and research trips throughout Namibia, Botswana, and Zambia; research trips were funded by The University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Research Council, The Grassland Foundation, and the World Wildlife Fund. Some photos were also taken during student excursions funded by Polytechnic of Namibia, where Larkin taught courses in the Department of Nature Conservation. We are grateful to Dr. Mark Pegg for his initial interactions with lecturers at Polytechnic of Namibia, which eventually led to our application to spend a year of our lives in this unique country.

Thank you to Dee Ebbeka for her assistance with our display.

Namibia is a country of high diversity. Biologically, diversity is enhanced by a wide gradient of annual precipitation which ranges from 20-50mm in the south and west to over 700mm in the northeast. Culturally, Namibia has at least 8 major native ethnic groups (San, Himba, Caprivian, Damara, Herero, Kavango, Nama/Hottentot, and Owambo), and the country has been under Dutch, German, and English influence. The anecdote that Namibians like to share is that their country has 2 million people, 2 million cattle, 2 million goats, and 2 million sheep.

Namibia (formally South West Africa) has been an independent country since 1990. At Independence, Namibia created several "communal conservancies," which are government-owned areas where indigenous people can live. Members of conservancies, which are mostly located in the northern 1/3 of the country, make decisions about how to use natural resources of the conservancy, including water, grazing areas, plant resources, and wildlife. Some private farmers have created "commercial conservancies," which mimic the landscape-scale management of wildlife resources on the communal conservancies. Namibia enjoys high population levels of species, such as elephants, cheetahs, leopards, and giraffes, which are often assumed by Westerners to have largely disappeared from the African landscape.

Our family enjoyed exploring Namibia, and we hope you enjoy this selection of photos that we believe exemplify the diversity of people, landscapes, and biological resources that is Namibia.



1

Desert chameleon, NamibRand (Larkin Powell)

Chameleons can focus separately on two different objects with their distinctive eyes. We enjoyed watching chameleons change color as they walked through different habitats. They walk exceedingly slow as they cross roads, and are very easy to capture.

Social weaver, Farm Namtib (Larkin Powell)

These colonial birds live in group nests, made of grass, that can have up to 300 individual nests. The nests can be 20 feet wide, and farmers have been known to dislodge the nests from trees during droughts to use as straw fodder for cattle.

2

Lilac-breasted roller, Etosha National Park (Kelly Powell)

Namibia is home to an amazing diversity of birds, and this is one of the most beautiful. They are quite common in Etosha National Park because they enjoy grasslands dotted with small trees, where they perch to watch for their prey, which can include insects, lizards, scorpions, snails, and even small birds. They nest in natural cavities in trees.

Secretary bird, Etosha National Park (Kelly Powell)

This unique bird-of-prey gets its name from the group of feathers atop its head which resemble the quill pens tucked behind a secretary's ear. They hunt on foot, and their long legs allow them to tackle snakes and other small animals.

3

Dorian (an AIDS orphan), Windhoek (Kelly Powell)

Namibia's overall AIDS infection rate is around 25%, and the rate is higher within many indigenous groups. The result is a country with a life expectancy of 53 years. Many children are left with no parents or one or two parents, and children are born with AIDS. Many charities provide orphanages. Kelly continued a relationship of Fulbright families with the Orlindi orphanage in Windhoek by visiting weekly with activities for the children, and Dorian was one of her favorites. He has AIDS. Some of the older boys at Orlindi participated in the baseball team at Tristan's school, which Larkin helped coach. They usually came without any shoes. But, boy, could they hit the ball!

Melvin and Saraleen, roadside stand near Brandberg (Larkin Powell)

We met Melvin and Saraleen as we traveled through the communal conservancy area of northwest Namibia. They were sitting in the shade of a road-side sign, and they offered necklaces and small quartz crystals to tourists traveling down the road. They walked about 2 miles to come to the road, depending on tourists to provide water during the day. They obviously were not attending school. We passed this area several times during the year, and we always anticipated whether we would see our friends beside "their" sign.

4

Wild horses, edge of Namib desert near Aus (Kelly Powell)

Sometime during the early 1900's horses escaped from someone in southwest Namibia and formed a feral herd. There is a large debate about the source of the horses (perhaps from German military, perhaps from local farmers). Genetic tests recently revealed they are most probably descendents of horses from a group of 1700 horses housed with the South African military in this area during the early stages of WWI. The Ministry of the Environment is in the midst of controversial decisions regarding the horses, which live in a very dry, fragile area; there are concerns that the 100-150 feral horses compete with native grazers.

Black-backed jackal, Farm Namtib (Larkin Powell)

Jackals are the 'coyote' of Namibia. Farmers dislike them and build jackal-proof fences to keep them out of very large areas. However, some farmers told us that when they stopped shooting jackals, they noticed that the number of poisonous snakes on their farm decreased (jackals were eating rodents, which had been attracting the snakes).

5

Cape cormorants on an oyster nursery, Walvis Bay (Larkin Powell),

Namibia is home to a fledgling oyster industry. The waters of the harbor in Walvis Bay are very productive, filled with plankton and algae that are boosted by oxygen and nutrients brought to Namibia by the cold Benguela current. However, temperatures are not conducive to oyster reproduction, so aquaculturalists must hatch oysters in on-shore facilities and then transfer them to nurseries such as the ones shown here. At the end of each rope is a basket holding up to 10,000 tiny oysters. When they reach dime-size, they are transferred to another facility where they are grown to sale size.

Dusky dolphin, Walvis Bay (Larkin Powell)

Sightings of dolphins and whales along the Namibian coast are enhanced by the nutrient-rich Benguela current. But, the odds of seeing dolphins or whales on a given day are still fairly uncertain. We got lucky on our first harbor tour and had the fun of watching about 3,000 dusky dolphins in the harbor.

6

Boys and their donkeys, Palmfontein on Ehirovipuka Conservancy (Larkin Powell)

Donkeys are the most dependable mode of transportation in the communal areas of Namibia. As we arrived at the home of a Polytechnic student, Uapii Kasahe, many of his friends came out to meet us. Tristan was given a ride on a donkey to welcome us to the area, and the boys had fun showing him how to guide the animal.

Parked under the tree, Erwee on #Khoadi //Hoas conservancy (Larkin Powell)

We were fortunate to be introduced to a group of Himbas by our friend, Uapii. We paid them the equivalent of US\$40 to perform some songs and dance for us. We also danced and sang for them! They told us they were very hungry and grateful for the money, and the group immediately sent some of the young men to the closest store to purchase groceries (about 15 miles). We met up with them at the store later in the day, and these are their donkeys, hitched 4-wide.

7

Himba woman, near Kamanjab (Kelly Powell)

The Himba are probably one of the most well-known ethnic groups in Namibia because of the women's appearance. Women cover their bodies with "otjize," a mixture of butter fat and ochre. Hair is braided and covered with the mixture, as well. The Himba farm with cattle and goats, and a common cattle kraal is in the center of a ring of mud/dung huts. The women do not bathe; instead, they use powders of various plants to cover odors. Women change their hairstyle and their jewelry as they reach womanhood and become available for marriage. This Himba woman (15 years old) is of age to be married, but the lack of a headdress indicates that she is not yet married.

Himba children, Ehirovipuka Conservancy (Kelly Powell)

Our friend, Uapii, took us to meet his 'neighbors' on a communal conservancy. Uapii is Heraro, and his neighbors are Himbas. This group of young people posed for us in front of one of their huts. You can see several symbols of maturity in the group. Young toddlers have single braids if they are female; male toddlers (like the smallest child in the photo) have shaved heads. The young girl with the double braids is indicating that both of her parents are alive (one braid for each). If she had braids in the back, it would indicate that grandparents are alive. The girl on the right with the white belt is indicating that she has started menstruating, but she is too young for marriage. The girl on the far right, with a belt made of shells, is available for marriage, and the girls to the far left, with elaborate belts of leather and metal beads, are married.

8

Shepherd boy, Ehirovipuka Conservancy (Larkin Powell)

Children grow up quickly in Namibia, and Herero children begin shepherding duties when they are less than 5 years old. This young boy will follow these goats while they are out during the day, in a landscape that includes hyenas, lions, and leopards. We asked other shepherds about their sticks, which they constantly carry with them. They replied, "This is for the leopard." Let's hope this young shepherd doesn't need to use his stick!

Cattle kraal, Damaraland (Larkin Powell)

The Herero people are cattle farmers, and proud of their cattle. In fact, it has been hard to get Herero farmers to consider farming with wildlife, as their culture is so tied to cattle. A measure of a man's wealth is how many cattle he has. The largest honor you can have in life is to have many cattle slaughtered to feed the people who attend your funeral (with the AIDS crisis, this tradition has been tempered as families were running out of cattle). This cattle kraal (corral), like all Herero corrals is placed in front of the house, so that it is the first thing a visitor sees.

9

Yellow-billed hornbill, Brandberg (Larkin Powell)

During nesting, the female hornbill seals herself in a nest cavity inside a tree, with only a small slit open to the outside. The male hornbill feeds the female for about a month through this slit, utilizing the long, curved bill. One of our favorite quotes from the year came from a gentleman who Larkin was interviewing. When showed a photo of a hornbill, and asked how much he valued the species, he replied, "The veld [field] without this bird is like a house without children."

Crimson-breasted shrike in mopane tree, Kamanjab (Larkin Powell)

This striking bird is found commonly throughout dry shrublands in southern Africa. The mopane tree has butterfly-shaped leaves, and hosts 'mopane worms,' a caterpillar that is harvested for food by the indigenous people.

10

Waterhole, Etosha National Park (Kelly Powell)

Species mix at waterholes. How many species can you see? Giraffe, wildebeest, oryx, zebra, ostrich, and springbok? Etosha was founded in 1907, and has been the country's main tourist attraction ever since. The Etosha Pan (in the background of this photo) is the central feature of the park and is 120 km in length.

Triple play, Etosha National Park (Kelly Powell)

Waterholes are a critical to wildlife in dry regions. Waterhole density and temporal presence has dramatic effects on movements and densities of wildlife. Waterholes are also targets for predators. Prey species are very wary as they approach the water, and giraffes are the most wary animals. We often observed that giraffes could take an hour to approach the water while scanning the surrounding area. Even at the water's edge, a giraffe could make many 'starts' to spread its front legs and drop its neck to drink, and then suddenly bolt upright if something startled it. So, it was a minor miracle to have three giraffes drinking at the same time in the evening at the Tweepalms waterhole at Etosha. Giraffes have special valves in

their neck veins so that they don't black out when they raise their head. They have the shortest sleep requirements of any mammal (less than one hour per day) and they sleep standing with their head resting on their rump.

11

.303 peephole sights, Polytechnic's third-year student shooting excursion (Larkin Powell)

Polytechnic of Namibia's Department of Nature Conservation offers a very practical curriculum. All students take the same regimen of courses, so it is easy for faculty to arrange for week-long 'excursions' during which students leave campus and get hands-on experience in horse riding, plant identification, game counts, or shooting rifles (all skills that will be needed when working at parks or farms). Students practiced shooting with heavy .303 British rifles, a standard military rifle in Britain until the 1950's. The rifle is adequate to shoot anything from smaller antelopes (impala) to large kudu or eland. Because most students were black and black Namibians were discouraged from owning guns in the past, most students had not touched a firearm. Their grade on the excursion was determined by their score using a bulls-eye during the final 'exam' (three stages of shooting with 5 rounds of ammunition and the bulls-eye was 10 points, next ring out 9 points, etc.). Most students received a failing grade on the excursion.

Rock agama, Brandberg (Larkin Powell)

This foot-long lizard was one of our favorites. Tristan enjoyed seeing how close he could get before the lizard scampered away. This one seemed to be content to bask in an odd position.

12

Tristan on Namib dune, Namib Naukluft Park (Larkin Powell)

Namibia gets its name from the Namib Desert. Geologists estimate that this region has been arid for over 55 million years, and is the world's oldest desert. The dunes are massive, as Tristan's relative size emphasizes.

Sometimes it's a river, near Uis (Larkin Powell)

Most of Namibia's rivers are ephemeral; they go dry after the rainy season. This can have an impact on crossing rivers, especially at the beginning of the rainy season. One day, Larkin went with a colleague to a study site and crossed a dry river bed. By the time they were ready to come home, the river was about 1 meter deep. This photo was taken from one of the few bridges that we encountered on back roads through farmland.

14

How many cheetahs, near Kamanjab (Kelly Powell)

Otjitotongwe Cheetah Park was created by a white Namibian farmer who grew tired of shooting cheetahs. He decided "if you can't beat them, join them." He now has approximately 30 cheetahs in a 250-ha fenced camp (pasture), and provides daily tours to visitors. The cheetahs seem to materialize out of the veld during the tour, as they are well-camouflaged.

Cheetah, near Kamanjab (Larkin Powell)

The cheetah is the world's fastest mammal, and it can reach speeds of 70-75mph during brief chases. They have the highest success rate of any cat, as 50% of their chases end in kills. However, after catching its prey, the cheetah must let its heart rate and body temperature recover for approximately 30 minutes before eating. During this time, cheetahs lose about half of their prey to competitors like hyenas or leopards. They kill their prey by tripping it with a swipe from their paw, and they strangle it with a bite to the lower neck (the leopard attacks from above the back). Most farmers suffer 5-10% losses from predators, and cheetahs are favorite targets of frustrated farmers. Cheetahs are very abundant in Namibia, in contrast to the remainder of their range. Cheetahs may be hunted in Namibia, but recent IUCN export restrictions have halted many trophy hunts, and farmers (who had been resisting the urge to shoot cheetahs in favor of waiting for the income from a trophy hunt) are now beginning to kill more cheetahs.

15

Great white pelican, Walvis Bay (Larkin Powell)

Walvis Bay is the sea port of Namibia, and we took several harbor tours with our visitors from the US. The tour operators have trained many of the pelicans and fur seals to come near the boats in return for a snack of fish.

Common impala rams, Wabi Lodge (Larkin Powell)

Wabi Lodge had been a hunting lodge for many years, but recently changed to non-hunting ventures. The primary reason given by our hosts was that when hunters are 'in camp,' you can only host one or two groups of hunters. But, you can host many more non-hunters, so economics wins every time. Most lodge facilities offer 'game drives' which feature large trucks with elevated seats for viewing. These rams seemed to be sizing up each other as the sun set during our game drives at Wabi Lodge, which we enjoyed with the Pegg's and Hygnstrom's during their visit to Namibia.

16

San (bushmen), Farm Zelda (Kelly Powell)

Most people recognize the San people from the movie "The Gods Must be Crazy." They live in eastern Namibia, on the edge of the Kalahari Desert, and are excellent 'readers' of nature: tracking animals, finding plants, and hunting with very small arrows with poison tips. We stayed on a commercial farm, Farm Zelda, during a trip in July with Larkin's parents. In addition to the surprise of having the President of Namibia staying at the same farm, the highlight of our stay was a walk in the bush with three elders from a group of San who stayed on the farm.

Himba girls, near Kamanjab (Kelly Powell)

Most Himbas live on communal conservancies, but this Himba village was located on a private, white-owned farm. The owner provided the space for the village, and worked with the Himbas to offer support to orphaned Himba children. The abundant children were incredibly welcoming, and wanted to climb all over us or be swung between two adults. Larkin made the mistake of wearing a white shirt, and was quickly covered by the ochre that covers their bodies! These girls are probably older than you would guess, as many children in similar orphanages had been

undernourished. It is hard for us to forget the images of these children, and we were continually struck by innovative ways that Namibians and NGO's have devised to care for OVC's (orphans and vulnerable children). In this case, the woman in charge of this village felt it was very important for Himba children to grow up as Himbas, rather than to grow up in Windhoek in a standard orphanage where they could lose their cultural identity.

17

Bull elephant, Etosha National Park (Larkin Powell)

We waited for about 30 minutes for this bull to move out of the road so we could pass. But, in the meantime, he gave us (and everyone else waiting) some pretty good photo opportunities.

Gecko, Namib Desert (Kelly Powell)

The web-footed gecko only grows to about 4 inches long, and buries under the sand in the Namib Desert during the day. Their large eyes help them find insects at night, and their thin skin helps them absorb water from fog. Our tour guide dug repeatedly in the sand, following burrows until he found this specimen. When he released the gecko, it immediately started to burrow back into the dune.

18

Seraphina, #Khoadi //Hoas Conservancy (Larkin Powell)

Larkin employed two students from Polytechnic to translate a survey of communal farmers. One student, Reinold, took Larkin to his house to meet his mother. Reinold's father has passed away, so his mother cares for all the cattle and goats, as well as raising two grandchildren: Reinold's daughter and Reinold's niece. Seraphina is Reinold's niece, and obviously has very tough feet. She stands on a patch from the house to the kraal, where the rocks have been removed for easier walking.

Reinold's house, #Khoadi //Haus Conservancy (Larkin Powell)

This is the home of Reinold, a Polytechnic agriculture student, and his mother. They have a small solar panel to charge a battery used for a radio, and they get their water from a nearby borehole. The walls are made of mud and dung mixture, but the family enjoys cell phone reception at the house from a tower on a nearby mountain! Larkin stayed with them one night, sleeping in a tent near the house. He provided the evening meal of potatoes, onions, and sausage, as well as some Lipton's noodles. Reinold's mother was initially suspect of the 'different' food (i.e., not corn meal), but came back for seconds and thirds. In fact, Reinold said he'd never seen his mother eat so much.

19

Maize for winter, Ehirovipuka Conservancy (Larkin Powell)

Namibians raise maize ("field corn") only for human consumption. Cattle are only grass-fed. The traditional 'pap' dish, like porridge, is the daily meal for most Namibians on communal conservancies. Larkin encountered this family taking kernels off the cob and sifting the chaff; they stored the maize in a 55-gallon drum. The dry season extends from April to December (and sometimes February). Corn is

hand-planted and harvested by women, after the men use oxen to plow fields. In many areas, the people must defend their crop fields from rodents and elephants.

Dry river, Grootberg on #Khoadi //Hoas Conservancy (Larkin Powell)

Grootberg means “large mountain” in German. Imagine making your living from grazing cattle or goats in this landscape.

20

Dog’s day, #Khoadi //Hoas Conservancy (Larkin Powell)

You do a lot of sitting around when you visit farmers on communal conservancies, and there is time to marvel at the vast, open areas of bush. This photo captures the slow, hard life on a conservancy. But, the dog seems to enjoy that life.

Goat, #Khoadi //Hoas Conservancy (Larkin Powell)

Domestic animals mingle freely around houses on communal conservancies. This goat had been inside the house in the background.

21

Competition, Etosha National Park (Kelly Powell)

Elephants are very picky about the quality of their water source. At this waterhole in Etosha National Park, elephants gather near the entrance of the pipe, which brings water from a nearby borehole (well). The most dominant elephants get to drink first, but sometimes juveniles sneak in and get their share. The soil of Etosha is low in phosphorous, which makes elephants’ tusks brittle, and the tusks wear down very quickly. The competition at the waterholes (often hostile) results in many broken tusks. Etosha elephants have some of the shortest tusks in Africa because of tusk wear and fight-related breakages.

Toes and trunk, Etosha National Park (Kelly Powell)

Elephants walk silently on flat, padded feet. It is hard to imagine an animal that large walking as quietly as they do.

22

Zebra, Etosha (Kelly Powell)

African mammals are interesting from many perspectives, and we enjoyed the patterns on the hides of many species when viewed close-up.

Chorus line, Etosha National Park (Larkin Powell)

Different species of mammals have different versions of ‘waterhole etiquette’ that they follow. Giraffes wait forever to come timidly to the edge. Warthogs prance right up to the edge of the hole and kneel on their knees. Zebras are the bulldozers of the waterhole. They walk up quickly in clouds of dust, and plow right into the water. Zebras usually end up drinking in a line, for some reason, and this line of zebras seemed especially choreographed.

23

Nile crocodile, Kwando River (Kelly Powell)

After hippos. Crocodiles kill the most people in Namibia. They are only found along rivers in the northern portion of the country.

Kwando River marsh; Caprivi Strip (Larkin Powell)

We spent so much of our year in dry, dusty surroundings that we really enjoyed a boat ride on the Kwando River. All large rivers in Namibia have water utilization issues similar to the Platte and Republican Rivers in Nebraska, as the rivers flow from Angola, through Namibia, and into Botswana.

24

Acacia sunrise, Otjiwarongo (Larkin Powell)

It is impossible to go to Namibia for a year and come home with any clothes that have not been ripped by thorn-trees. In fact, it seems rare to find plants in Namibia that do not have thorns.

Donkeys fed to cheetahs, Cheetah Conservation Fund near Otjiwarongo

(Larkin Powell)

The Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF), founded by Laurie Marker, has worked to change attitudes about cheetahs on private farms in Namibia. Namibia’s cheetahs are not endangered, and they are so plentiful that conservationists must now determine ways to convince farmers, who are faced with increasing predator populations and increasing livestock losses) to continue to refrain from shooting cheetahs. CCF has over 50 captive cheetahs that were rescued as orphaned cubs, and these cheetahs have to be fed. CCF feeds them donkey meat, as feral donkeys are a problem in Namibia and are a steady, dependable food source. Approximately 10-12 donkeys per week are killed to support the cheetahs at CCF. We stumbled across their ‘bone yard’ during routine vegetation surveys for a Polytechnic of Namibia student excursion. American and UK volunteers at CCF commented that they had not thought about the high number of animals that had to be killed to support CCF’s cheetahs.

25

Bulls, Etosha National Park (Kelly Powell)

Even big animals can look small, sometimes.

Day care, Etosha National Park (Kelly Powell)

Lionesses share cub-raising responsibilities in a pride, and this mother has charge of at least 3 different aged groups of cubs. What you can’t see in this photo are the 50 Land Rovers lined up to get a view.

26

Carnivore confirmation, Etosha National Park (Kelly Powell)

This is the reason that visitors to Etosha must stay in their vehicles.

Nap, Etosha National Park (Kelly Powell)

Lions at Etosha are like bison or moose at Yellowstone; everyone lines up to see them. On the way back to our lodge one afternoon, we rounded the bend of a road

to find one male and four female lions relaxing in the middle of the gravel road. There were no other cars, and we enjoyed watching this pride for about 15 minutes. Just us and the lions.

27

Cheetah cub, near Kamanjab (Tristan Powell)

Tristan enjoyed taking photos of cheetahs at the various farms we visited. It is possible that the cutest animal in the Kingdom *Animalia* is the cheetah cub, and Tristan did a nice job capturing its inquisitive look.

Life among rocks, Brandberg (Larkin Powell)

We were continually amazed by the environments in which Namibians were able to sustain their families. This landscape is typical. Imagine farming with goats here. Imagine trying to navigate across the rocky landscape in a donkey cart. Imagine living here.

28

Meerkat, Brandberg (Kelly Powell)

“Meerkat” is Dutch for “lake cat”, but meerkats are not cats and they are not attracted to water. They live in colonies of 20-30, and one member of the group acts as a sentry during foraging. They are immune to scorpion venom. In Zambia and Zimbabwe, meerkats are known as “sun angels” and are thought to protect local villagers from werewolf attacks. This meerkat and its friend were attracted to our campsite. They eat insects, and we enjoyed watching them dig little holes as they pursued underground prey. We were not attacked by werewolves, either.

Baboons, Chobe National Park, Botswana (Kelly Powell)

We were warned about baboons—“like pit bulls with thumbs” was the exact description. Luckily, we never had a bad encounter with baboons, but we did enjoy watching this close relative of ours interact in social groups.

29

Dune beetle, Namib desert at Sossuvlei (Larkin Powell)

These beetles scurry across the face of the dune, and then quickly bury themselves under the sand. They obtain water by holding their abdomen up in the air on foggy mornings; the water collects and drains down to their mouth.

Namib Desert, Sossusvlei (Larkin Powell)

Early morning shadows provide the best viewing of dune shapes in the Namib, but you have to get up early.

30

Morning in Damaraland (Larkin Powell)

Namibia is a wonderful place if you want to get lost and feel isolated from the world. Here, we stayed on the farm of a Polytechnic student’s family (Uapii). Uapii’s brother lives here, alone, and tends a herd of cattle. There is literally no one else on this landscape for about 30 km. If you have any introvert tendencies, this landscape is perfect.

“The greenest this farm has ever looked.” Farm Nauseb, Helmeringhausen (Larkin Powell)

The rainy season of 2009 was one of the best on record in Namibia, and we were constantly reminded by residents that we were seeing the country “at its best.” We stayed with one family, the Millers, who lived in southern Namibia. The husband had a PhD in chemistry, but had returned to the family farm. They home-schooled their children as the nearest town was 1.5 hours away, and the nearest English-speaking school was 6 hours away. Dr. Miller gave us a tour of the farm, and when we reached this vantage point, he paused and asked us to look around. “This is the greenest this farm has ever looked,” he said. “You will see many smiles this year. It has been a good year.”

31

Seal skull and succulents, Skeleton Coast (Larkin Powell)

The western coast of Namibia is known as “Skeleton Coast” because of the numerous shipwrecks and beached whale bones that could be found along the shore. Namibia is unique; it is the only country in the world with 100% of its coast line protected by public or private conservation areas. It is also the only place in the world where a desert runs directly to the sea. Plant life in the desert along the coast is sustained by fog, and there is an amazing variety of succulent plants that are adept at storing water in their thick leaves.

Fur seal, Cape Cross on the Skeleton Coast (Larkin Powell)

Cape fur seals are plentiful along the west coast of Namibia, as the Benguela Current brings nutrient-rich waters north from South Africa, and the waters sustain fish populations. The seals gather at various points along the coast. Males claim territories prior to mating season, and may live off their body fat for up to two months (they don’t want to risk leaving their territory unattended to obtain food). It is no wonder they are so grumpy! This female seal is one of 200,000 seals that find a home at Cape Cross, the site of the first European to land in Namibia (in 1468). As you might expect, they erected a cross at the site. The stench associated with the colony is pretty bad and results from a mixture of seal dung and decaying seal pups. Many pups die during their first few days, because they are unknowingly rolled on by nearby animals. Today, Cape Cross is in a swirl of controversy because the Namibian government is not very transparent in their seal culling operations. Each year, a few thousand seals are culled from the colony. The methods of culling and the secrecy surrounding the cull lead to international interest, and reporters affiliated with various conservation groups are routinely jailed after trespassing near the seal colony during the cull. Seal skin boots and other items made from the hide are very common in Namibia; the boots are preferred by local hunters for their quiet soles and flexibility.

32

***Sterculia quinqueloba* (5-lobed chestnut), Kamanjab** (Larkin Powell)

The Kamanjab area in northwest Namibia had geological formations called “kopjes” (pronounced “koppies”). They are small rock piles, which are perfect lookouts when hunting antelopes. This chestnut grows on many of the kopjes, and is symbolic of the region.

Where we live, Ehirovipuka Conservancy (Kelly Powell)

As we drove through communal conservancies, we learned to take hard candy with us. Although there are few visitors to the conservancies, kids know that visitors usually bring candy. So, as we approached a small settlement, kids would come to meet us. This group lived near our friend Uapii's house. Their smiles are typical of people we met on the conservancies. They live in conditions that made us cringe, initially. No toilets, dirt floors, limited water and very little food. But, we never met someone who was not happy.

33

Corn cricket, Everywhere (Larkin Powell)

Yes, they were everywhere.

“Uapii, is this really a road?!” Damaraland (Kelly Powell)

During one of our adventures with our friend (Polytechnic agriculture student), Uapii, he suggested a 30-km shortcut through the back country on a two-track road. We were happy to see new country, and took him up on the suggestion. As the day wore on, and the main road was not in sight, Uapii admitted that he had never actually driven in this direction. We saw some amazing country, and each valley we traveled through could have been a National Park in the US. At one point, we had to turn back and take another fork when the two-track completely disappeared. This prompted Kelly to ask, repeatedly, at various other forks if “this was really a road?” We bounced along at about 15 km (10 miles) per hour over some very serious rocks, with limited water and no shade to stop and take toilet breaks or eat. We had told no one of our travel ‘detour,’ and we only had one spare tire left (a rock puncture earlier in the day had used up the first of two spares with which Namibian 4x4 vehicles are always equipped). When our adventure was over, Uapii did lead us to the main road, and we had traveled over 110 km! And, we saw our first wild elephants immediately after reaching the main road. In retrospect, it was one of our most interesting days in Namibia, but this is one of only 4-5 photos we took that day (too frustrated to stop and soak it all in). At the time, we wondered if we would ever get back to civilization!

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Giraffes on the horizon, Etosha National Park (Tristan Powell)

We quickly became skilled at recognizing animal shapes from a distance. Although it looks pretty easy, with this group of giraffes, it is amazing how a zebra can be mistaken for an elephant. This photo shows the vastness of Etosha National Park. It also shows how far animals will travel for food or water. Neither are in sight for these giraffes.

Locust swarm, near Aus (Larkin Powell)

The Biblical locusts still plague villagers and farmers in Namibia. A swarm can literally eat their way across pastures, and farmers have designed many interesting ways to combat them. After we saw this flying swarm, a farmer told us that they had helped their neighbor with a swarm that had just hatched (and had not yet grown full wings). They dug a hole in the sand, and essentially ‘herded’ the swarm towards the hole, where the locusts were doused with diesel fuel, set on fire, and summarily buried.