



A Day in the Field of a Woodland Ecologist

To avoid the intense Namibian heat, the workday starts early; around 6am. However, we begin everyday on the Ongava Game Reserve with the sun. Although the locals bundle up in fleeces and hats, I find the temperature perfect.

Loaded into an old game viewer vehicle and boxed in by equipment, we bump along dusty dirt roads to reach the day's sampling locations. Most days we are fortunate to see game animals, especially during the dry season when the vegetation has died back. Young male elephants sometimes block our path, one even charged at us when we caught each other off guard!

Once we have arrived, we unload the vehicle with the days equipment and walk to site. This can be anywhere from a few hundred metres, to a kilometre from the track. Our trusted guard Simeon leads the way, rifle in hand, ready to scare away wildlife. Some days we hear hyena, leopard or lion calls, and sometimes Simeon throws rocks to move along herds of zebras or impalas. The morning is the most dangerous period as the cooler conditions mean the animals are on the move, searching for some shade before the sun get too high. Only on one occasion there was a lion lying within our sampling area.

Most of our work is centred around the 11-hectare plots established across the reserve's different vegetation types. Using standardised protocols, we measure the above ground biomass, which includes everything from leaf litter to shrubs and trees. These surveys are repeated every few years to track how climate change is shaping these valuable ecosystems.

Our first task of the day is to establish the plot perimeter using 100-metre tapes. This sounds easy on paper, but often involves searching through thick vegetation for the plot corners, hoping the markers are untouched by inquisitive elephants. We shout through the vegetation and rocky outcrops whilst simultaneously waving a stick with a hat on top, in order to guide a teammate in a straight line, whilst they lay the tape. Once the plot perimeter is defined, tasks are divided, one person records the data while the others begin measuring the vegetation.

We work through the morning until lunch time, which gets later every day as we inevitably realise there is more work to do than time permits. Lunch often consists of a sandwich, usually with cheese or tinned fish (great options for a vegan), a piece of fruit, a boiled egg and biscuits. Food has never been more delicious.

Alice Jones

Following lunch, we continue where we left off, working until completion or darkness forces us to stop.

Back at Ongava Research Centre, equipment is organised for the following day. Samples are processed, data is entered and cooking begins. Cooking in pairs, we prepare food purchased from the monthly food shop. By the end of the month, this means the food is tinned and dried – yum!

We end each day dusty and exhausted, but deeply satisfied. This work wouldn't be possible without the continued support of Simeon, our local field assistants and students from Namibia University of Science and Technology. Their knowledge of the landscape advances research projects whilst ensuring we all get to keep our body parts intact.

