

# Snaring, Poaching and Snare Removal from Giraffes in Serengeti, Tanzania

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The giraffe population in the Serengeti ecosystem is subjected to poaching pressure, mainly through the use of wire snares. This takes place mainly in the western parts of Serengeti National Park and Grumeti Game Reserve, where poachers specially set snares high in trees to capture giraffe by the neck. The animal dies an agonizing death while circling the tree struggling to free itself, thus becoming progressively more entangled in the wire noose and eventually asphyxiated. Snares are heavy gauge cable usually sourced from mining or other industrial applications. Some giraffes suffer wounds from snares set on the ground for other game animals, and in these cases the injuries are usually on the lower legs or feet. If any wild animal has broken free from a snare and is seen and reported to veterinarians, it can be immobilized and treated. In most cases such treatment is successful. The mainly affected species in Serengeti in approximate order of cases are zebra, elephant, giraffe, lion and hyaena.

Giraffes are immobilized with standard drugs remotely administered via a dart, but peculiarly they are the only species that often does not fall down and thus become recumbent when drugged. Once the drug has taken full effect a giraffe is often still on its feet - showing a typical disorientated short stepping gait bumping into trees and obstacles, and an elevated "star-gazing" posture of the head. At this point it has to be physically brought down by a team of about six assistants who have been given a thorough briefing beforehand. A long, thick but fairly soft rope is held in front of the giraffe by at least three men on either side and then these two 'teams' cross over behind the animal to encircle its legs. As the rope tightens around the slowly moving animal, the giraffe falls to the ground and is then further restrained by the assistants who weigh down the neck and tie up the legs. It is not really known why giraffes don't easily become recumbent like other drugged animals.



**A female giraffe killed by a poacher's snare specially set in tree. The meat from this animal was never taken and it also had a small calf which was unlikely to survive alone. On the same day a snare was removed from another live giraffe nearby.**

Because the design of a giraffe's circulatory system necessarily involves high blood pressure, recumbent posture will of course be potentially dangerous because of blood pressure changes and compromised ability to breathe. Therefore wildlife veterinarians carrying out short-duration procedures like snare removal usually inject a reversal drug once the animal is physically restrained on its side. If this is given intravenously its effect is rapid and the animal must be kept fully blindfolded and restrained by the combined efforts of the co-ordinated team. To avoid metabolic complications setting in, the capture team has to work very quickly to remove the snare with cutting tools and treat the snare wound.

Treatments usually involve topical and injectable antibiotics, and also remedies to prevent fly maggot infestation in the healing wound. In some snare cases where wires are loose and have not caused wounds, they are merely pulled off over the head. Sometimes there are logs or parts of a tree attached to the wire that the giraffe has been dragging along. After all necessary procedures are complete, members of the capture team simply let the animal go in unison. Because by this time there are no effects of the immobiliz-

ing drug, it regains its feet on its own, albeit in an unavoidably ungainly manner.

Giraffe populations are now being scientifically studied again in Serengeti for the first time since the 1970s. The researcher, Megan Strauss (email: [strau102@umn.edu](mailto:strau102@umn.edu)), is gathering data to attempt to quantify poaching as a mortality factor in the population. Giraffes give poachers a high reward in terms of volume of meat and are a popular target in areas where larger quantities of game meat can be rapidly removed from a protected area onto neighbouring village land and sold. Undoubtedly there are other causes of giraffe mortality, especially amongst juveniles, but poaching is a worrying current threat. Conservation personnel may have thus far largely assumed that giraffe populations are little affected by poaching, or simply been preoccupied with species facing apparently more immediate and obvious threats.

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**Brief immobilization and rapid recovery after removing wire snares in live giraffes**

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