

THE WHITE OR SQUARE-MOUTHED RHINOCEROS

RHINOCEROS SIMUS

THE white or square-mouthed rhinoceros was, within my own experience, an exceedingly common animal less than forty years ago in many parts of South Africa to the south of the Cunene and Zambesi rivers, but already at that date the species had been exterminated throughout all the south-western portions of its original range. I believe there is no authentic record of the occurrence of the white rhinoceros to the south of the Orange River, but in the early years of last century it was met with by Burchell and other travellers in Southern Bechuanaland not far to the north of that river. The emigrant Boers first encountered the white rhinoceros just north of the Vaal River on the open grassy downs, where the towns of Klerksdorp and Potchefstroom now stand, and I have had the actual spots pointed out to me by old Boer "voortrekkers" where they averred they had seen or shot individuals of this species, and I have no doubt that it was the circumstance that the first square-mouthed rhinoceroses seen by the Boer pioneers must undoubtedly have looked very white when seen standing sunning themselves in the early morning on these open grass plains, which gained for them the name of "white" rhinoceroses in contradistinction to the prehensile-lipped species which had been previously met with, and which, being a bush feeder, had always been seen amongst trees and bush, where it looked perhaps darker than it really was, and had already been named the "black" rhinoceros. As a matter of fact, both species of African rhinoceroses—the square-mouthed and the prehensile-lipped—are of very much the same colour—a uniform dark grey. In 1836 Cornwallis Harris and Sir Andrew Smith found the white rhinoceros extraordinarily plentiful in the north-western districts of what is now the Transvaal State, and at that time it was doubtless almost equally plentiful from Zululand in the south-east to the Cunene River in the north-west, wherever the country was suitable to its existence. In those days these huge pachyderms were practically without enemies, for, with the exception of the small number which fell into native pitfalls, very few could have been killed, and before the advent of the European hunter with his death-dealing fire-arms, the species must have increased almost to the limit of its food supply. Within fifty years, however, of the

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The big game of Africa & Europe 1914

Ills. Dixon & Son.

WHITE RHINOCEROS.
From Sebakwe River, Matabeleland.

Shot by Mr F. C. Selous.

PLATE II.

WHITE RHINOCEROS.

From Bahr-el-Ghazal, showing long extension at back of skull.
In the Collection of Sir Edmund G. Loder, Bt.

Photos by J



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time when Cornwallis Harris had met with the white rhinoceros in almost incredible numbers, in what is now the Magaliesberg district of the Transvaal, thousands upon thousands of these huge creatures were killed by white hunters, and natives armed with the white man's weapons, and the species had become practically extinct. A few still lingered, possibly a few may still linger, in the neighbourhood of the Angwa River in Northern Mashonaland, and a small number also survived in Zululand. These latter have been carefully preserved of late years, and in 1909 were supposed to number about twelve, including two or three calves. Shortly before that date, however, five of these most rare and interesting animals had met with their death by misadventure in the Zululand reserve. One was killed by a solitary old bull elephant—the only elephant still existing in Zululand. Another fell over a cliff and was killed; whilst a third died of some unknown disease, and two others, which had wandered out of the reserve into an inhabited part of the country, were killed by the natives.

Up to a very recent date it was always supposed that the range of the white rhinoceros was entirely confined to the southern portion of the African continent, and that with the final extinction of the small number of these animals still surviving in Southern Rhodesia and Zululand, the species would vanish from the face of the earth. A few years ago, however, Major (now Colonel) A. St Hill Gibbons shot and preserved a square-mouthed grass-eating rhinoceros in the neighbourhood of Lado, on the west bank of the Upper Nile and about five degrees north of the equator. Since then it has been found that these animals exist in considerable numbers all along the western bank of the Nile, from Lake Albert to Shambé in the Bahr-el-Ghazal Province and probably further north still. Although the most southerly limit of the range of the northern white rhinoceros is separated by some 2,000 miles from the nearest point where the southern race of the same species has ever been known to exist, whatever differences there may be between the two forms appear to be very slight and of little importance. However, in point of size, the white rhinoceroses found along the west bank of the Upper Nile certainly seem to be smaller than their relatives of South Africa. Mr Roosevelt found by actual measurement that the largest black rhinoceros he shot in the Sotik district of British East Africa actually stood higher at the shoulder than some of the adult white rhinoceroses he shot in the Lado Enclave. I imagine therefore that adult male white rhinoceroses on the Upper Nile do not as a rule stand higher than 5 ft. 8 in. at the shoulder. This is ten inches to

THE GUN AT HOME AND ABROAD

a foot less than the standing height often attributed to white rhinoceroses in South Africa. Having myself measured only one white rhinoceros in South Africa, I have in some of my writings acquiesced in Harris's statement that these animals stood 6 ft. 6 in.; but as the only animal I actually measured—a very large male—only reached a height of six feet at the shoulder, I have always privately doubted the accuracy of the very much greater measurements which have been recorded. From information given me by Mr Roosevelt I have, however, no doubt that in South Africa the white rhinoceros was, on the average, a bigger animal, carrying finer horns, than the northern representatives of the stock from which all the white rhinoceroses in Africa were originally descended. The better feeding and cooler climate that the white rhinoceroses which had ranged down to South Africa undoubtedly enjoyed, are quite sufficient, I imagine, to account for this difference in bodily size, and in the development of the horns. One very remarkable point about the white rhinoceros in South Africa—a point which I think was first recorded by Gordon Cumming—was the way in which when moving a small calf always preceded its mother, which appeared to guide it by pressing with the point of its horn on the little creature's rump. On several occasions I have galloped after a cow white rhinoceros with a small calf, and have been astonished at the precision with which on any sudden change of pace, from a trot to a gallop or vice versa, the relative positions of the two animals were always exactly maintained. During the rainy season in South Africa white rhinoceroses became excessively fat, and often retained their good condition till far on in the dry season, and their meat was, I think, held in higher estimation than that of any other animal in the country. It was strong dark red meat like beef, but with a peculiar flavour of its own. White rhinoceros hump was considered a great delicacy by old South African hunters. This hump was situated not on the shoulders, but on the back of the neck, in front of the shoulders, and was always cooked in its skin in a hole in the ground. Although a few accidents have occurred in the course of the extermination of the white rhinoceros in South Africa, they have been very few and far between, and I have never heard of a human being having been killed by one of these animals. Speaking generally, they were most inoffensive creatures, and there was no sport or excitement in shooting them. Of all the very considerable number I encountered I am glad to say I killed very few, and these only when I required food for myself and my native followers. As all the white

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rhinoceroses still surviving to-day, both in Southern and Central Africa, are in British territory—unless, indeed, there are a few in the French Congo—it is to be hoped that they will be afforded a measure of protection which will save them for a long time to come from final extinction.

In South Africa white rhinoceroses were accustomed to feed during the night and in the early morning and late evening, and lay asleep in the shade of trees or bushes during the heat of the day, looking for all the world like gigantic pigs. In that part of Africa I certainly thought that these animals were accustomed to drink regularly every evening, but those inhabiting Central Africa may be capable of going without water for a longer period, as when I was recently in the Bahr-el-Ghazal province, Captain Collum, with whom I was travelling, shot one of these animals near the well of Gemaiza, eighteen miles from Shambé, the nearest point on the Nile, as far as we could discover, where it could have got water. The white rhinoceros is a pure grass feeder, and where undisturbed was accustomed to deposit its dung day after day in the same place. Though very keen-scented and fairly quick of hearing, the eyesight of these animals always seemed to me to be extraordinarily dull. They were often warned of danger by the rhinoceros birds—*Buphaga erythorhynca*—which were accustomed to run all over their heads and bodies in search of ticks, and they would at once stand up and very soon run off when these birds showed any excitement, as they always did at the approach of human beings. Their pace was a long ground-covering trot, which soon left all pursuit from a man on foot far behind; but if chased on horseback, they could gallop at great speed for a considerable distance. In my experience, whether walking, trotting or galloping, these huge animals always held their great square noses close to the ground. When mortally wounded, they would often stand and beat their noses on the ground many times before falling down. This was indeed a piteous spectacle even to the eyes of a hungry hunter. White rhinoceroses, though they will quickly succumb to a shot through the heart or through both lungs, will travel very long distances before halting or lying down after having received anything but an absolutely mortal wound. They may be killed undoubtedly with small-bore rifles, but it would be a most unsportsmanlike proceeding on the part of anyone to risk wounding one of these rare and wonderful animals, and either a heavy cordite rifle ought to be used to secure a specimen or they should be left alone.