

THE BLACK OR PREHENSILE-LIPPED RHINOCEROS

RHINOCEROS BICORNIS

THE black or prehensile-lipped rhinoceros was once an inhabitant of almost every part of Africa, south of Egypt, and the desert of Sahara, with the exception of the great equatorial forests to the westward of the Ruwenzori range of mountains and the open grass plains lying between the Orange and Limpopo rivers. It was first met with by the early Dutch settlers in the immediate vicinity of Cape Town, but was probably nowhere very numerous to the south of Zululand and the northern districts of the Transvaal. In 1836, when Cornwallis Harris and Sir Andrew Smith penetrated to the valley of the Upper Limpopo, they found black rhinoceroses extraordinarily plentiful. With the spread of European settlement, however, and the acquisition of fire-arms by the native tribes these animals grew ever scarcer and scarcer, and over vast areas of country to the south of the Zambesi they have long ceased to exist, and to-day there can only be a very few localities in this part of Africa where any still survive. To the north and north-east of Salisbury in Southern Rhodesia there may possibly still be a few in out-of-the-way places, such as the neighbourhood of the Lower Umsengaisi River; but, speaking generally, the black rhinoceros is either extinct or on the very verge of extinction almost everywhere in Africa to the south of the Zambesi. To the north of that river this species is widely distributed, but is nowhere found in any great abundance to the southward of the territories lying round the base of Mount Kilimanjaro. From that point, however, throughout British East Africa, right up to the Abyssinian frontier, these animals are still to be found in very large numbers. Indeed, in certain districts they are probably as plentiful to-day as they ever were in Harris's time in the Northern Transvaal and the valley of the Limpopo. In Northern Nigeria the black rhinoceros does not seem to exist, except in the neighbourhood of Lake Chad and the valley of the Shari River. In South Africa this species was always a bush-loving animal, and did not often wander far into open plains, but in East Africa it is commonly met with in bare open country, far away from any trees or bush. In such localities, however, it will be found that the rhinoceroses feed on tiny little thorn bushes, which they

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have cropped to such an extent that they are altogether hidden by the grass, or on the fleshy leaves of a species of plant which grows amongst the grass. Although the point has not been quite satisfactorily cleared up, it is doubtful whether in these localities the black rhinoceros ever eats grass except by accident, and in South Africa these animals certainly never used to eat grass at all.

Speaking generally, it may be said that the black rhinoceros is never found at a distance of more than a few miles away from water, as, generally speaking, it requires to drink regularly every day; but it has been reported that in certain parts of Somaliland it is able to subsist throughout the dry season on a species of aloe, the acrid juice of which affords it a sufficiency of liquid to enable it to live. Such a case is, however, certainly very exceptional, as these ponderous animals usually drink at least once every twenty-four hours, and in hot weather both in the evening and early morning.

In the black rhinoceros the sense of smell is very acute, and these animals are also quick of hearing; but their eyesight is not at all good. They certainly cannot make out the details of a stationary object, even when quite close to it, but I am inclined to think that they can see anything moving at some distance away from them. In South Africa I always found black rhinoceroses very inquisitive animals. When hunting elephants in the country between Matabeleland and the Zambesi, in the early 'seventies of the last century, I often passed with my native attendants close to where one of these animals was lying asleep. On hearing us, it would at once get up, and, if it had not got our wind, would come trotting towards us, often snorting loudly. I was never, however, charged by one of these rhinoceroses. They all of them turned and trotted off sooner or later. If, however, they got my wind, even when they were several hundred yards away, they always ran off. When hunting rhinoceroses on horseback, I have been charged and chased, both before and after I had fired at them. The inquisitive disposition and truculent appearance of the black rhinoceros has, I think, undoubtedly often been taken as an indication of ill-temper and ferocity in all members of the species, which in many cases was probably quite undeserved. At any rate, in South Africa, thousands upon thousands of black rhinoceroses have been killed, and the species has been practically exterminated in that part of Africa, at an extraordinarily small cost in human life. Indeed, with the exception of one inexperienced sportsman who was killed a few years ago in Southern Rhodesia by a black rhinoceros which he had wounded and incautiously

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approached, I have never heard of the death of any other white man by the horns of one of these animals in that part of the continent. Amongst all the well-known English travellers and hunters of the last century in South Africa, Mr W. Cotton Oswell and C. J. Andersson are the only men who met with severe injuries in hunting these animals, and the last-named seems to have courted the accident he met with by going close up to a rhinoceros in the dark which he thought he had mortally wounded. However, although in my own experience in South Africa, I never found the character of the black rhinoceros to be as black as it had been painted, yet I am inclined to think that in some districts in East Africa a certain percentage of these animals may be expected to make themselves disagreeable. But opinions differ very much as to what that percentage of vicious and aggressive animals really is. Some sportsmen in East Africa aver that almost every rhinoceros they saw either charged them or was on the point of charging when stopped by a well-directed bullet, or would have charged if it could only have made them out. Others, again, consider that although some rhinoceroses in East Africa are really savage and dangerous animals, the majority will avoid all contact with human beings if they possibly can do so. My own experience with black rhinoceroses in East Africa has not been very large, and I cannot therefore give any opinion regarding the character of these animals in that part of the continent. My friend, Captain C. H. Stigand, however, who has had a very large experience with black rhinoceroses in East and Central Africa, and who is not only an expert hunter, but a very observant naturalist, has recently written as follows* on the much-disputed question as to the general character of the black rhinoceros:

“ My view is somewhat as follows:

“ First of all, there are the many rhino you see, but which do not perceive you either by hearing or smell. These can be practically put out of the discussion. So a man walking about in an open rhino country and having his wits about him may see many rhino and meanwhile himself be only in the slightest danger. But rhino often suddenly make up their minds to run in a certain direction, apparently for no object, and as suddenly decide to stop still or to run off somewhere else. Thus even some of these might have the appearance of coming for you or might run across the wind of a sportsman after he had taken every precaution.

* *The Game of British East Africa*, by Captain C. H. Stigand, F.R.G.S., F.Z.S.

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“ Putting aside these, however, we have to deal with the rhino which have been made aware of your presence either by sound, smell, or possibly sight. These will, as a general rule, run away from you. About one out of five, however, will make as if he was coming for you. Of those which do this, the greater part will subsequently think better of it, and so, after coming towards you for a short distance, will swerve away and make off or will pass you at a distance to either flank. But about one out of five again, of these, will press straight on. Thus, out of twenty-five rhino which have got your wind or in some way perceived you, we have on an average one pressing home an attack. He may be shot coming at you, and he may be wounded. If he is wounded, it will probably alter his frame of mind according to the gravity or otherwise of the wound he has received and his individual temperament. He may also just miss you and then decide to go straight on without turning. Possibly he never really intended to hit you off.

“ If rhinos were left alone and not fired at, I believe the greater number would be found to make a blind charge. That is to say, they would come straight for your wind, and if they did not actually run right up against something or some one, they would then rush straight through and off the other side, still going up-wind. If one met anything directly in his way he would toss it. The chances are, however, that he would just miss you by a few yards and go straight on. When you came into his range of vision he might also not like the look of you, and swerve so as to pass you.

“ Out of these rhino who press home an attack, I take it that, say, one in ten again are really bad rhino and mean to do harm. Instead of passing by at a few yards, they will, directly you come into view, whip round on you with surprising agility, and they really mean business.

“ So we get out of every two hundred and fifty rhino about one which is a really bad rhino, and which will, if he gets your wind, without any act of aggression on your part, try his best to do some damage.”

This is the opinion of a very experienced hunter as to the character of the black rhinoceros in East Africa, but it is only fair to say that many sportsmen who have had considerable experience in that country believe that not a small minority, but a large majority of these animals are really savage and aggressive in disposition, and can give what seem to be very valid reasons for the opinions they hold; and it certainly will be advisable

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for young sportsmen when first making the acquaintance of these formidable-looking brutes, whose characters and tempers must always in the first instance be unknown quantities, to treat them with the caution and respect which is due to their tremendous strength and great activity, if these qualities should happen to be combined with a savage disposition. Some men of great experience in East Africa express the greatest contempt for rhinoceroses, whilst others again confess that they can never get over the nervousness they always feel in the presence of these always truculent-looking and sometimes really dangerous animals. The extraordinary diversity of opinion on the subject of the black rhinoceros in East Africa shows very clearly how impossible it is to lay down any hard and fast rules as to what the behaviour of one of these animals is likely to be under any given circumstances.

Like all other African animals, to be killed quickly, rhinoceroses must be hit in a vital spot. They can often be so closely approached against the wind that they can be killed on the spot with a shot just below the root of the ear, which will penetrate the brain, and for this brain shot a very small-bore rifle is just as good as the most powerful weapon, though for body shots it will always be advisable to use the heaviest rifle in one's battery. The heart and lungs are the vital organs to aim for; but, although a rhinoceros will quickly succumb to a shot which penetrates the large blood-vessels of both lungs, it is as well to remember that one of these animals, if only shot through one lung, or in any other part of the body other than the heart or lungs, is likely to travel many miles after having been wounded before halting or lying down. If the one foreleg or shoulder of a rhinoceros should be broken, it will gallop on three legs at quite a good pace for half a mile or so before stopping; but with a hind leg broken, or even a hind foot shattered by a bullet, it will at once come to a standstill.