



## THE RHINO WORLD

by Sumati

The rhino lives in a world of smells and sounds. Its sense of sight is poorly developed and it can hardly see beyond 100 metres. (The younger animals are said to see slightly better.) But its remarkable olfaction and hearing almost make up for it: you can hardly approach a rhino that is downwind. Upwind, where olfaction can't help, hearing takes over. It also makes up for its shortsightedness by a symbiotic relationship with birds. The African rhinos have the red-billed oxpeckers (and water egrets when near water) that warn them of approaching danger. These birds ride on the rhino's body, pecking at ticks and wounds and sores on the skin. Thus perched on the myopic giant, they reap a bountiful harvest as the rhino plods through the vegetation and scurries grasshoppers and other insects. The Indian rhino has as its guard the jungle mynah, *Aethiops fuscus*. Near water, the swamp egrets follow it.

Though its blundering gait gives the impression of a clumsy animal, the rhino is quite agile and can manage short bursts of high speed. And the famous rhino 'charge' — well, rhinos seldom go out of their way to attack; the charge is generally an exploratory gesture that has been misunderstood. And when a rhino does charge (when surprised or when it has a calf), it is rarely persistent; once missed, the attack won't be renewed unless seriously provoked.

Rhinos have one peculiar habit which often spells their doom: they always drop their dung at a particular place. Any rhino passing the dung heap gets an urge to relieve itself. And when approaching the dung heap, it usually moves backwards. This is one of the vulnerable times when poachers strike.

The horn, a mass of agglutinated hair, is not connected to the skeleton at all. It forms a part of the epidermis and can be knocked off by a hard blow. It grows continuously, and broken ones are replaced. The two African species and the Sumatran rhinos have two horns in tandem. However, the shape and length of the horn are not species-specific. The record white rhino horn length till now is 158 cm for the front horn, and 56.5 cm for the shorter one behind. Also, there have been freak cases of three and five-horned animals. In one case, the extra horn was nearly 14-cm long. Stranger still is the 8.75 cm long horn that grew on a rhino's rump; it is on display at the office of the Kenya Game Department. Also on display are two shorter ones that came from another animal's flanks. The Indian rhino's horn rarely measures more than 30 cm and generally weighs about 2½ kg. The longest Indian rhino horn measured 62 cm. The Indian rhino does not use its horn to attack as do the African species. It uses its lower incisor that leaves a single gash, which gives a wrong impression that the horn was used.

Rhinos and elephants often compete for the same food. In Africa, the elephants have the upper hand, but in India, the elephants are more respectful. It is said, during the time of Babur, the King of Cambay had gifted a rhino to the Portuguese King Emmanuel. The King wanted to test this strange animal's skill. It was put in a ring with an elephant and the elephant fled the moment it spotted the one-horned creature. The king was impressed and decided to present it to Pope Leo X. However, the ship carrying the rhino was hit by a storm and capsized.

Though rhinos are quite long-lived — almost 70 years — their breeding rate is slow. Besides, both the male and the female have to be in heat for mating to take place. And, it seems, there is no specific mating season. The young are born after a prolonged gestation which varies in each species but is roughly 16 to 19 months. One calf is born at a time. It is nursed by the mother and remains with her for 3 to 4 years during which time she does not breed again. The white African rhino calf is very deeply attached to the mother. If the mother dies, the calf stands rooted to the spot, often till it meets its end there. Several such calves have been rescued. Both the Indian and the African white rhinos (both grazers) guide their calves along ahead of them with their horns.



*A Sumatran two-horned rhino at a salt lick in Malaysia, Photo: O. Milton*



*Javan one-horned rhinos wallowing in the Ujung Kulon Reserve on Java, Photo: A Hoogerwerf*

All five species of rhinos look similar. But the African species do not have the armour of the Asian types. And, again, the white African rhino is not white, nor is the black rhino black; it is just that in certain lights their colours appear so. Also, it isn't true that the armoured rhino has a tough skin. Indeed, its skin scratches very easily. The skin of the Indian rhino is covered with tubercles; the more tubercles, the older the animal is. The neck-fold of the Indian rhino is not continuous on the back as is the case with the Javan species. It stands nearly 185 cm at the shoulder and has a girth of 340 cm. The Javan species is slightly smaller. The Indian rhino is smaller than the African white rhino, though larger than the black rhino. The Sumatran is the smallest in size and is covered all over with bristles which are lost with age. It stands about 130 cm at the shoulder and the girth measures 210 cm. The Javan rhino's skin has a mosaiclike pattern.

Rhinos spend the hot part of the day wallowing in marshy mudholes. At wallowing spots, several animals may congregate together. Rhinos are good swimmers, too. They feed from late afternoon throughout the night. The African black, Javan, and the Sumatran rhinos are browsers. The Sumatran species is a forest animal and is an expert climber that can go where no elephants or game animals can trek. The Indian rhino resorts to the hills only during the rains.