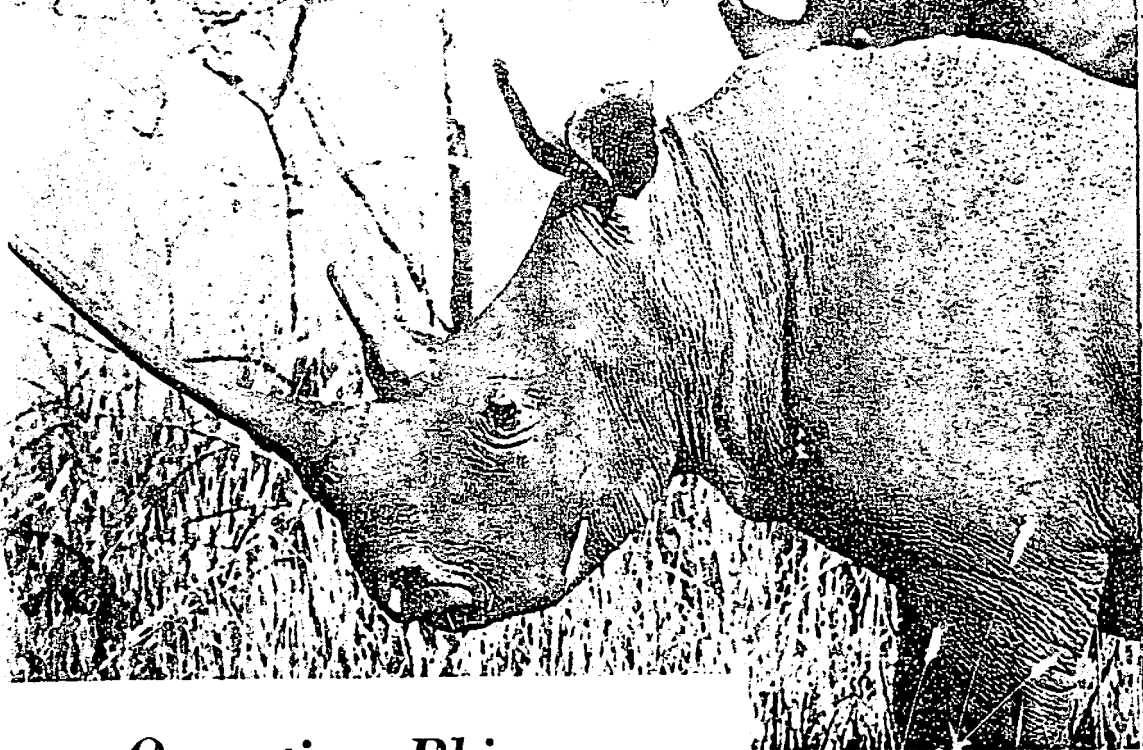




Springtime in the Serengeti (photo by John Blower).



## Operation Rhino

An exciting experiment in practical conservation aimed at ensuring the future survival of Uganda's rare white rhino by establishing a breeding population of twenty in the Murchison Falls National Park.

IN another part of this issue Dr. Williams contributes a most interesting article on Ajai's Island, one of the main strongholds of the white rhino in West Nile District. The only other part of Uganda where white rhino still survive is in the adjoining sub-district of West Madi. But here unhappily their numbers have decreased alarmingly in recent years as a result of the activities of local poachers. In 1955 it was estimated that there were 100 rhino in the Lomunga area of Madi, but by 1960 the numbers were down to not more than 30.

It was clear that something drastic had to be done to save them. The white rhino is a rare and valuable beast and the only area of East Africa where it is found is in this corner of north-western Uganda. Numerous appeals were made to the Chiefs and people of Madi to look after their rhino, but they were apathetic or disinterested, and it was obvious that the rhinos' hope of survival in this area was small indeed.

The only answer seemed to be to move at least some of the beasts to the Murchison Falls Park, where conditions were generally similar, in the hope that they would breed and establish themselves there. The proposal was first made two or three years ago, and preliminary investigations were carried out in various parts of the Murchison Park to try

and determine which particular area would be the most suitable for white rhino.

It was found that many of the grasses on which they feed occurred in the Buligi area, in the angle between the Victoria and Albert Niles, while this part of the Park also had the advantage that it was not easily accessible to poachers, and that it was unlikely that the rhino once released in it would try to stray out of the Park.

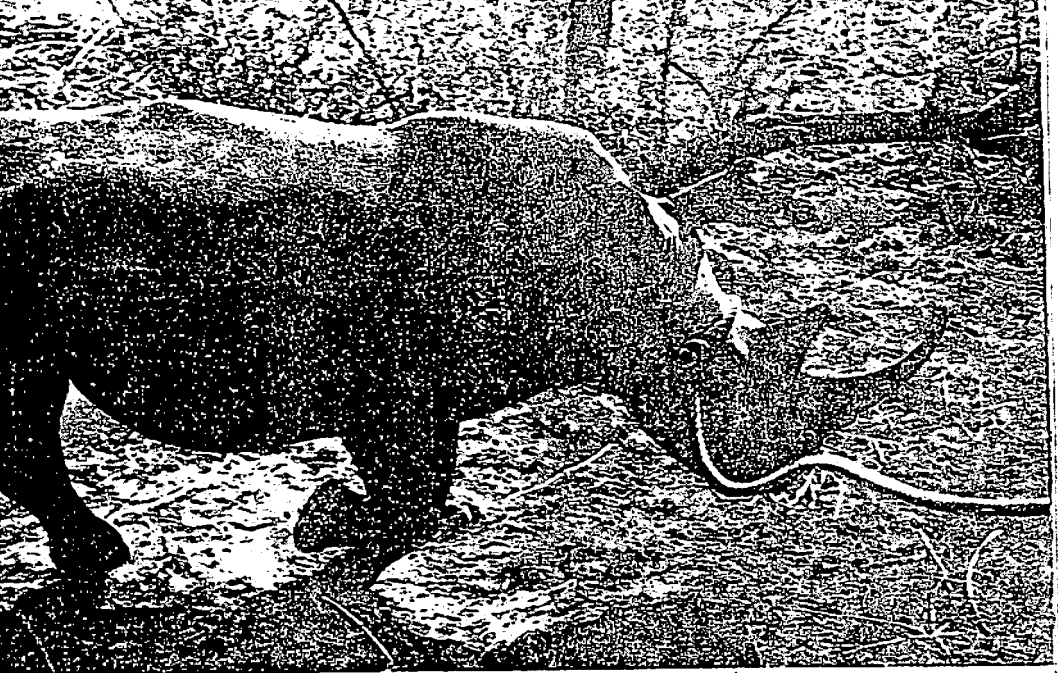
Rather naturally no one would give a definite opinion as to whether or not they would thrive in the Park. There were a variety of imponderables, not the least being whether or not they would live happily alongside their much more aggressive cousins, the black rhino. Hitherto the habitats of the two species of rhino have been effectively separated by the Nile. Some said that the black, intensely jealous of his territory, would drive the white out. However, it was known that the two species did share the same habitat in certain parts of Natal, and there seemed no reason why they should not do so in Uganda also.

Obviously the only answer was to try the experiment. Even if it was a failure little would be lost since it seemed certain that they were doomed anyway if left to the mercy of the Madi poachers. Accordingly, in November 1960 it was decided to attempt to move twenty rhino from the Lomunga area of Madi into the Murchison Park.

At first it was proposed to immobilise them with drugs administered by means of hypodermic darts fired from a crossbow or airgun, and then transport them by road or river steamer down to the Murchison Park. This technique of using immobilising drugs was, however, still in the experimental stage, and recent trials in Natal had showed that white rhino were dangerously susceptible to the effects of the drugs. It was, therefore, decided that this method was too risky and should not be employed except as a last resort.

*"We were soon racing neck and neck . . ."* (photo by John Blower).





**"Pat reached out . . . and suddenly he had the rope right about her head"**  
*(photo by John Blower).*

The prospects of moving the beasts did not seem at all promising. But then, by a stroke of luck, Messrs. Ken Randall and Pat O'Connell, one of the best known and most successful teams of big game catchers in East Africa, approached the Game Warden for permission to catch a number of elephant and hippo in Uganda for sale to Zoos. A bargain was soon struck, and it was agreed that they should have their elephant and hippo in return for moving the rhino into the Park, free of charge. At the time of writing the operation is well under way, in fact nearly half completed, with ten rhino already released in the Park.

I was recently fortunate enough to take part in the catching of two of the rhino and the subsequent release of one of them in the Park. The accompanying photographs tell the story. It was, needless to say, a most exciting experience, though for Ken Randall and his tough and highly efficient team it was part of their ordinary everyday work.

About 7 a.m. on the first morning the Game Guards came in and reported two rhino down in the thorn scrub near the Nile. The much battered catching truck was soon ready, with Ken at the wheel and the two lasso-men at their stations in the open back of the truck, just behind the cab. Clad in leather jackets and goggles to protect them against thorns and branches, they carried the nooses of their lassos attached to the ends of twelve foot long bamboos. The other ends of the heavy ropes were attached to bollards on the truck.

I was given a place of honour on the catching truck between the lasso-men where I held on somewhat nervously as we bumped and crashed across the uneven black cotton soil, threading through the thorn scrub as we searched for the rhino. Behind at a respectful distance followed the big 5-ton truck which was to carry them once caught.



There followed a titanic tug-of-war between the rhino and those on the lorry.

Slipping ropes around her legs. A tricky operation but to this highly efficient team it was part of their everyday work.



No light task but ropes and a hard push from behind all helped and the whole thing was carried out with most impressive speed and efficiency.

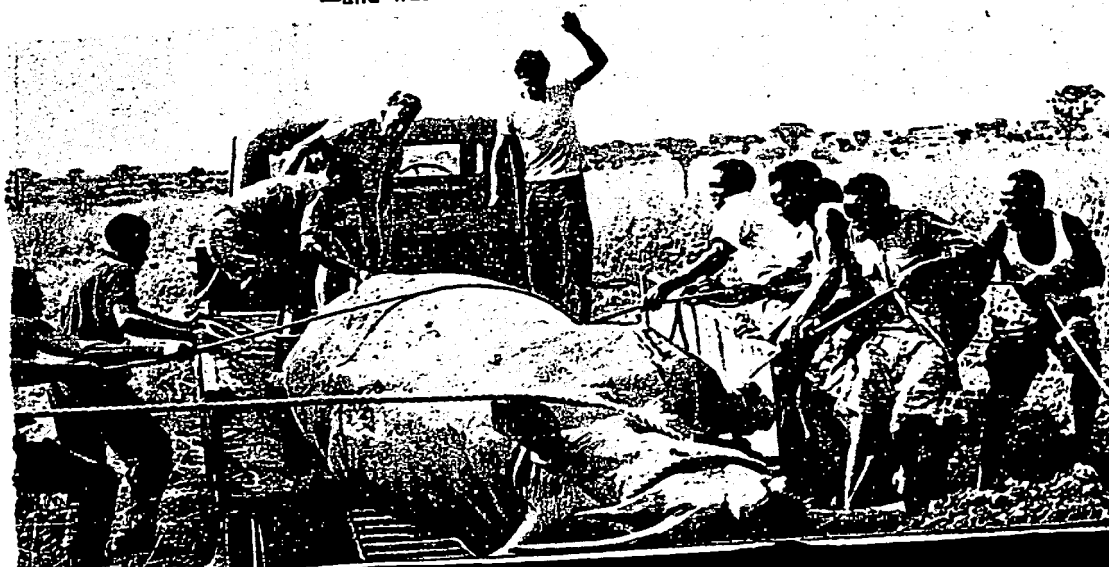


"She was soon firmly up against the much-battered lorry—

"There they are, - let's go!"; two massive grey monsters, suddenly aware of us, they surged away like battleships making for the open sea. In a moment we were rocketing along at what seemed an impossible speed for such country; there was no question of going round—obstacles, we went either over— or through— them; anthills, thorn thickets, the lot. I found myself fully occupied in merely remaining in the truck!

We were soon racing neck and neck with one of the rhino, a big cow with a long bowspirit horn. Pat O'Connell reached out with his bamboo, the noose of rope suspended from its end. At the first attempt she evaded it, but suddenly he had her, the rope tight about her head. There followed a titanic tug of war; rhino versus truck, she moved us a little but not far, and then charged the truck making vicious jabs at its already much scarred and buckled body, radiator and tyres. With her attention thus diverted the men were quickly overboard and, nimbly dodging her business end, slipped ropes round each of her hind legs. They were obviously well practised in this tricky operation, and in no time she was firmly if unwillingly trussed down.

—and was then winched up the ramp."



The whole thing was carried out with most impressive speed and efficiency, as if moving 3 ton rhinos about the country was quite the most commonplace of undertakings, as indeed it apparently is for Messrs. Randall and Company. Pillows were placed under her ladyship's undainty head to keep her comfortable while the preparations were completed, and then she was winched ignominiously up a roller ramp on to the lorry. Back at camp the proceedings were reversed and she was rolled gently down the ramp into the pallsided holding paddock, where she was released to await the journey to her new home in the Murchison Park.

Owing to their size and weight only one animal at a time can be transported to the Park. So with a journey of over 200 miles each way the actual ferrying operation alone is quite an undertaking. I accompanied one rhino, a young bull, down to the Park. He travelled comfortably in a huge open-topped crate in which he was able to lie down on a luxurious bed of straw. In the Park everything had been well arranged for the arrival of the distinguished new residents, even to the extent of twenty miles of excellent new road into the release area. We were met by a reception committee headed by John Savidge, the Park Warden, and including television cameras and members of the Relationships Commission.

The lorry was backed up to the unloading ramp, the door of the crate unbolted and removed, while the spectators stood back to a respectful distance or perched like vultures in neighbouring trees. Cameras whirred and clicked, but rhino, now free to walk out into his new home, took no interest in the proceedings and continued to lie comfortable and unconcerned in his crate. Someone gave him a smart smack on his well-rounded bottom, he then arose, stopped to survey the assembled company for a moment, and trotted off disdainfully into the surrounding bush.

J. H. B.

After a comfortable journey "on a luxurious bed of straw" the distinguished new resident starts a more protected life in the National Park.

