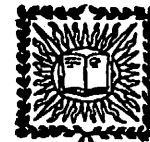


# CAMERA TRAILS IN AFRICA

BY  
MARTIN JOHNSON

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS FROM  
THE AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPHS

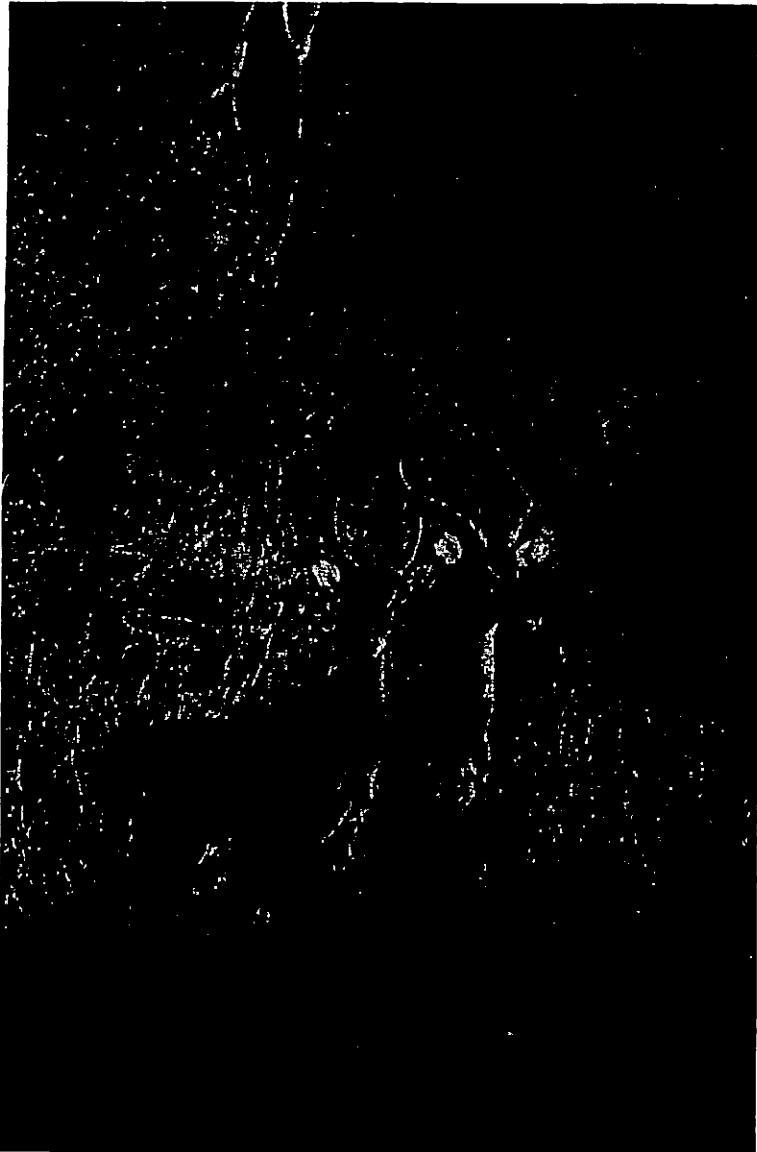


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Startled impala

breaking it, will set the film to winding. Then I will go off to work somewhere, miles distant. Who knows what pictures I may get of animals undisturbed even by suspicion? I can scarcely wait to get back to Africa.

## CHAPTER XIV

## RHINOS

WHEN I had been several weeks in the Chobe Hills, suddenly one day the giraffes failed to show up at the watering-hole. I was annoyed. I had hundreds of feet of giraffe pictures, but they were all taken with long-focus lenses, and I was afraid that by some chance they might not turn out well. I had planned to get closer to the animals and, for safety's sake, to get some pictures with a six-inch lens, and now they had disappeared. The other animals, too, were thinning out somewhat. I sent the boys for miles around to frighten game from every water-hole in the expectation that the animals would then be forced to revisit our depression. There was a slight increase in attendance as a result of this manœuver, but since the giraffes persistently stayed away I decided that it was time to give the place a rest. So, leaving a few boys to watch the camp, we set out on an expedition toward a *tinga-tinga* on the Guaso Nyiro, about which Game-Warden Percival had told me. *Tinga* is Swaheli for swamp, and *tinga-tinga* means a specially big swamp. This particular *tinga-tinga*, Percival had told me, harbored, when last he visited it, an enormous herd of buffaloes.

We followed the river for an uneventful day. Though we saw numerous animals in the distance, we were out after big game and came upon nothing that seemed worthy of our prowess. On the second day, as we were plodding along, Jerramani and I in the lead, I was roused from a meditation on ways and means of improving my cameras by a shrill cry from Osa, who, contrary to her custom, was about a hundred yards behind me.

"Look out! Rhinos!"

Jerramani and I whirled, to see two great black masses hurtling toward us. As we passed, we had roused two rhinos, a cow and a bull, from their sleep near the game trail on which we were walking, and now (so we thought) they were coming to take vengeance on us for having interrupted their nap. As a matter of fact, they were merely running away. But Jerramani and I could not know that. We made for a clump of bushes. As we did so, the rhinos saw us for the first time. They stopped a moment and then made for us. Just before the cow reached the bushes, she swerved to one side and passed us by. But her companion came headlong into the clump. For a moment, I thought he would crash through to where we stood. But the tangle of thorny branches was too much for him, thick-skinned as he was; and, snorting, he extricated himself and went after his mate, in ridiculous, waddling haste to escape.

It was all over in less time than it takes to tell it. Our hearts still pounding, we proceeded on our way,

determined not to be surprised again. We came out, presently, on a little hill, from which we could see for miles around. Directly before us lay one of the now-familiar lava rivers. On it we counted no less than five rhinoceroses. Since, from our eminence, the lava river looked narrow, we thought we could get to the other side before nightfall. But dark came upon us before we were half-way across, and we were forced to make camp amid the spongy rocks.

The night passed without the rhino adventure we feared. Next morning, come into smoother country, we met a wandering band of Samburus, driving with them their camels, their humpbacked cows, their sheep and goats. The Samburus greatly resembled the Masai in the style of their skin-clothing, their spears, their shaven heads; there was even a certain physical resemblance. They may easily have been relatives of the Masai; for the home land of the Masai adjoins Samburu country: since civilization had need of their territory, the Masai were transported south, to share the Southern Game-Reserve with the animals. But the Samburus seemed far below the Masai in intelligence. It seemed to me that the desert sun, beating on their bare pates, had baked their brains, so dazed and stupid they were. They conversed little even among themselves, and rarely showed the slightest animation.

We bought several of their cattle for meat, for a diet of game was palling upon us. When the bargain was completed, we asked them, through Zabellini, who included a few words of their language in

his répertoire, the whereabouts of the *tinga-tinga*. They could give us no direction. On the following day, however, when we arrived at the swamp, we found that they had camped at the very edge of it. Further acquaintance with the Samburus was to convince me that they found their way from place to place by animal instinct. They were never able to give us any direction of the most simple character. Of all the people of Africa with whom we came into contact, they were the lowest in intelligence and habits of living.

The *tinga-tinga* extended from the river's edge about half a mile inland, and was connected by a narrow swamp isthmus with a second, slightly smaller swamp. We camped at first on the river-bank near the large swamp. The river was swollen from the recent rains, and over it and the swamps hung a perpetual mist, as the greedy African sun drank up the water. Though there was fresh hippo spoor about, we did not see a single hippo. We searched up and down the river for miles with only a small crocodile for our pains. The buffaloes we had expected to find in the swamp were not there. In a few days, accordingly, we struck our tents and moved toward the smaller swamp. When we were about half-way there, we came suddenly upon a rhino, grazing peaceably a little in front of us. I set up my camera, and Osa took her place at the crank. Gun in hand, I stole toward the animal, hoping to invite a charge for her to record.

I can stand behind a camera and face a charging

animal as calmly as if he were a stuffed creature on wheels. Then I see only the picture. I myself am not part of the picture, but outside it. I am cold and objective. To stalk an animal with a gun in my hand is, however, an entirely different matter. Then I am an actor in the drama, not a mere spectator. My breath comes quick, and my heart beats fast. Every nerve is alert, almost aching with excitement.

To-day as I advanced cautiously toward the rhino, my heart pounded wildly. When I got within range of his near-sighted eyes, he came for me. But his charge was a half-hearted one. He stopped half-way and stood still for a moment in stupid perplexity, trying to make up his mind what to do. Seeing that I was master of the situation, I grew calm. I would have let the rhino depart in safety, as he now showed signs of doing, had I not seen that he had only one horn. In the hope of securing a rare specimen, I took aim and fired at him. I merely wounded him and was preparing to fire a second time, when a warning scream from Osa arrested me. I looked up to see a wild mêlée of animals coming directly toward us. In the lead were a herd of zebras, a herd of oryxes, and an assortment of gazelles, Grant's and Tommies. Back of them were no less than ninety big black buffaloes. My shot had startled the buffaloes as they grazed peaceably on their way from the small swamp to the swamp we just left; and they had stampeded in terror, driving before them all the animals that had happened to be in their path. As I stared, startled into inaction, one of our boys, who

had stolen off to sleep under a thorn-bush until my tiresome photography should be over, rose up directly in front of the onrushing animals. Fear lent him speed, and he came running like the wind. I rushed back to where Osa stood at the camera and turned to face the onslaught. A startled herd is as likely to run toward the danger as away from it. I was sure that none of the animals were out for murder. But that fact would not save us from being trampled underfoot if we failed to turn the herd aside. The other animals scattered to either side as they neared us, but the buffaloes rushed blindly on. I aimed for a big animal in the center of the herd and dropped him. Osa brought down another. Quickly reloading (for I had already spent one shot on the rhino), I got a third, and to our relief, the herd, seeing their leaders dead, divided and passed to either side of us. Save for a shower of sticks and pebbles and bits of dirt and a stifling gas attack of dust, we were unharmed. When the excitement was all over, we saw our frightened porter, still running, a quarter of a mile in our rear.

The buffaloes drove away all memory of the wounded rhino, but on the next evening some of the boys, sent out for fire-wood, found him dead not far from the spot where we had pitched our camp near the second swamp. They came to report the discovery, and I told them to go early the next morning with Japanda in charge, to fetch back his hide and his single horn. But next morning, though they got there early, they found that some one had been



Courtesy of Martin Johnson and Blainey Percival  
An African rhinoceros—us ugly and stupid as he looks



A Samburu tribesman

earlier. Some Merus, who had come from their far-off hills to change dried beans for Samburu cattle, had found the carcass and cut the hide into little pieces, just sandal size. My boys, indignant at this appropriation of the trophy of their *bwana*, arrested the unhappy Merus and brought them to camp, with the evidence of their guilt, for punishment. To the great chagrin of my retinue, I not only refused to punish the offenders but sent them off happy with the fruits of their sin, retaining only the horn for myself. I found that, instead of being a rare specimen as I had hoped, the one-horned rhinoceros had merely lost a horn.

The second swamp, near which we were now camped, was only about a hundred yards wide, but it was a mile long. We knew that the ninety buffaloes were concealed in the grasses that grew there, but we did not dare to follow them. We had no desire to face the enraged creatures in that close forest of reeds, twice man-high and each thick as a man's wrist. We had heard tales of the buffalo's vindictiveness, how he will steal up behind a hunter and toss him to death on his wicked black horns. Besides, the place was full of pythons. We counted three during a walk along its border.

I should have waited for the buffaloes to come out of the swamp had I not remembered what hunters had told me of the habits of buffaloes. Fierce as they are, once they have been frightened into cover, it may be a week, sometimes even longer, before they venture into the open. With Lake Paradise still

undiscovered, I had not a week to wait on the Guaso Nyiro, and so, reluctantly, we broke camp and started on the way back to Chobe.

On the return trip rhino encounters became a common occurrence. . . We ran into one after another until they began to get on our nerves. They never attacked us, but we always felt that they were going to. As we neared the Chobe camp we saw a wonderful picture of a mother rhino and her *toto* about the size of a pig outlined clearly against the sky on the crest of a little hill about a mile distant. We set out with guns and cameras, but when we arrived at the spot where we had seen the animals there was not a living thing in sight. Not only that, there was not a bush or a tree or a depression anywhere in view in which a rhino could have hidden. After waiting in vain for their reappearance, we put the incident down as one of the mysteries of Africa and returned to camp, disappointed.

We went back to look for them later, and found them, only to lose them. It was after we had returned to our camp near the six water-holes. I had spent a week in my blinds, rounding off my giraffe series; for to my delight the giraffes had come back. Now it was high time for us to continue our long *safari* off into the wilderness, but before going we decided that we must have some more rhino pictures; so we set out into the lava to see if we could scare up the mother and her *toto*. We found the lava-stream fairly thick with rhinos. We ran into one after another. It was nervous going; for often we did not see

the animals until their attendant tick-birds flew screaming almost into our faces. Finally we crossed the lava-stream and emerged into sparsely wooded plain. There were rhinos everywhere, nosing about under the trees, or just standing stupidly doing nothing. We approached one after another, but no sooner would we set up a camera than the wind, which that day seemed fairly possessed, would eddy about and bring our scent to the keen nostrils of the rhino, and he would be off. Finally we came on one of the beasts asleep under a tree. I got my camera ready, and Osa and Jerramani stepped forward to draw a charge. Instead of charging, however, the beast followed the usual rhino tactics and started off. Osa fired in front of him to turn him, and turn he did and came thundering toward us with the speed of an express-train. Even then, he was not charging, but as usual merely running away—in the wrong direction. When he came a bit nearer, however, his temper changed. He got our scent full and was enraged. His little pointed ears stood up, and his absurd, rope-like tail stuck straight out behind, and he put his head down and came faster and faster. Osa shot him twice, but with no effect other than to turn him aside in time. He passed right in front of the camera. But I could not “panoram” fast enough to get him. I suspected at the time that my picture was a failure, and when I returned to Nairobi and developed it I found that I was right. I got only his tail and his galloping hind legs. How I wished, when I made up my film in New York, that I could include in it that

fragment of rhino! As I reeled it off in the laboratory projection-room, it brought back to me vividly the excitement of that African afternoon. But reluctantly I "edited" out that bit of film, for I knew that it could not mean to the public what it meant to me.

As he disappeared, four other rhinos, scared from cover by the shooting, joined in his flight. We decided then that we had undoubtedly so thoroughly aroused the suspicions of all the rhinos in the locality that we could hope for no more photographs that day. But we had not gone more than a few hundred yards when I suddenly heard a chattering of tick-birds right in front of me. Simultaneously, Jerramani put out his hand to stop me. And there, so close that I could all but touch her, stood a rhino mother and a *toto* no bigger than a Newfoundland. I grabbed my camera from Kavairondo, who as usual was close behind me; but before I could set it up, mother and child had trotted quietly off. Luckily I was using my lightest camera. I shouldered it and went after them, and Osa followed, exclaiming, "Is n't he the sweetest thing you ever saw, Martin?" He certainly was interesting, though I should never have called him sweet. His hide, as if he had been provided with a suit of clothes big enough for him to grow into, was even more wrinkled than that of an adult rhino. His head looked like that of a catfish. It was nearly all mouth and reached back in a long, sloping line to his ears. He could not go very fast, according to rhino standards of speed. The mother

stopped every now and then to let him rest. But she never gave me time to set up my camera and take a picture. I followed the rhinos for miles, and then gave up. I turned my camera over to Kavairondo and started for camp, determined not to try for any more pictures. Fifteen minutes later, we ran into another mother and her half-grown child, almost certainly those that had done the disappearing trick for us a week earlier. A few minutes later we heard the tick-birds again, and there were two full-grown rhinos a little to one side of us. We backed hurriedly off. We were beginning to have enough of rhinos.

But I, where pictures are concerned, never know when I have enough. When we were within a quarter of a mile from camp, I saw a beautiful rhino asleep at the edge of a little *donga*. He was perfectly posed for a picture. He stood, his head hanging, in fine light, outlined against a good background of hillside, against which his profile—Roman nose, prehensile, beak-like lip, two splendid horns, the front and longer of the two nearly three feet long—was clear-cut. I determined to get him and to get him charging. I set up the camera, and after filming a few feet, with the rhino still unsuspecting, I put Osa in charge, telling her to begin turning the crank when I snapped my finger. Then Jerramani and I walked up to the sleeping rhino. When we were quite near I gave the signal. Just as I did so, the rhino suddenly came to attention—and another rhino that up to that time had lain concealed behind a rock stepped to its side. The pair of them made for us but, as usually



happens with rhinos, thought better of the tactics after a few yards and turned and went rapidly off. Their flight across the plain was visible for a quarter of an hour.

It had been a good picture. I turned, as the rhinos made off, to congratulate Osa on our luck. To my surprise, I found her, not grinding away at the camera, as I had expected, but standing a few feet in front of it, white-faced, her gun in her hands. She had not taken the picture at all. I suppose I showed my disappointment in my face, for Osa suddenly thrust her gun into Ferraragi's hands and turned and ran as fast as she could toward camp. I followed. As I went toward the tent, guided by the muffled sounds of sobbing, I turned for one last look in the direction the rhinos had taken. They were still going it, off across the plain.

Osa, ashamed at having spoiled a picture, refused to be comforted. Between sobs, she explained to me: "I would n't have minded one rhino. But two! I've had enough of rhinos. Oh, I'm sorry."

Finally she quieted down and we made a pact. We resolved that whichever of us was at the camera would stick to the camera no matter what happened, until it became apparent that either the picture or the life of one of us must be sacrificed. We kept that pact faithfully, and once at least Osa stood by the camera under conditions that called for the utmost bravery and steadiness of nerve.

Right here I want to say that for bravery and steadiness and endurance Osa is the equal of any man

I ever saw. She is a woman through and through. There is nothing "mannish" about her. Yet as a comrade in the wilderness she is better than any man I ever saw. She does not like rhinos. When she has nightmares, safe in our New York apartment, it is rhinos she sees coming up the fire-escape. But any one who has ever met a rhino at close quarters will excuse her. Nobody loves a rhino.