

WILD LIFE DOCUMENTARY

# The Making of “A Rhino's Life” A Wildlife Documentary

Ever wondered how a small, independent team creates a wildlife conservation documentary? Discover the journey of Rosie Koch and Roland Gockel as they film the award-winning "A Rhino's Life" in the wilds of Uganda and Kenya



STORY BY  
**FELIX PATTON**

**H**ave you ever wondered how a wildlife conservation documentary gets made - not by a highly resourced, high-budget organisation but by an independent, two-person operation?

This is the story behind the making of ‘A Rhino’s Life’ or, in German, ‘Nashörner - Mit Herz und Horn’, an award-winning production filmed in Uganda and Kenya.

**The idea**

Having not been to Africa for some time, Nona Naturedocx filmmakers Rosie Koch and

Roland Gockel wanted to revisit old haunts, including Solio Game Reserve, home to the largest population of wild rhinos in Kenya.

Recent documentaries featuring rhinos have largely focused on poaching and the illegal wildlife trade. Rarely has there been any insight into their everyday lives, especially following the birth of a new calf.

**The finance**

One of the leading documentary film producers in Germany is Doclights. The NDR Natural History Unit film is incorporated into it, a production company working for

**BELOW**

Roland Gockel filming on Solio Game Reserve.



PHOTO BY ROLAND GOCKEL

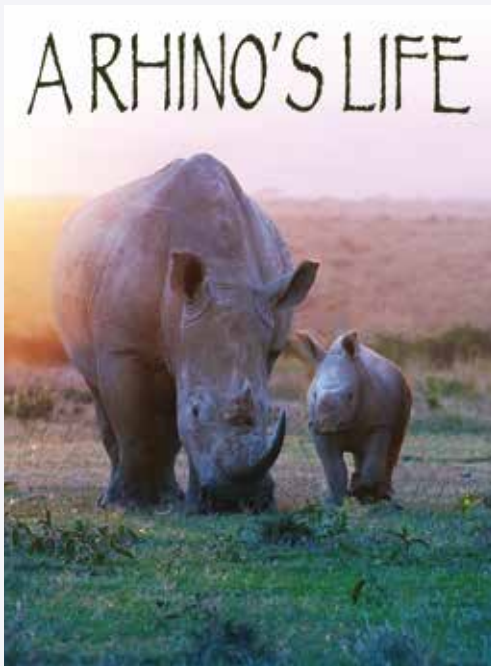


PHOTO BY ROLAND GOCKEL

a leading German broadcaster with whom Nona Naturedocx had previously worked. In September 2019, the idea was pitched to the Head of Doclights, Jörn Röver and Executive Producer Tom Synnatzschke, who were enthused by being able to show previously unseen animal behaviour.

With primary funding from broadcaster NDR, partner organisations were acquired to boost the budget to around \$400,000 to produce the documentary.

### Planning the filming

However, the outbreak of COVID-19 halted immediate progress, and it was not until December 2020 that the filmmakers received the call to start working on the documentary as quickly as possible. The question was how a rhino giving birth could be filmed in the wild.

Rosie was put in touch with the author of this article, a rhino specialist and former adviser to Solio management who was also the technical adviser to the then-management of Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary in Uganda. Here, the rhinos were uniquely monitored 24 hours per day, and the data collected was used to estimate when a new birth was due.

With the next Ziwa birth prediction around 24 January 2021, there was no time to lose. However, the practicalities of travel are not so straightforward! Seven large aluminium boxes with filming equipment had to be specially security-screened at the departure airport. The high-class, expensive lenses had to be taken in four carry-on bags, which also had to go through screening. On arrival, especially in a foreign country, all the security procedures had to be repeated!



PHOTO BY ROSIE KOCH

So, on 16<sup>th</sup> January, the filmmakers and their equipment made their way to Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary to try and succeed in filming the birth of a rhino in the wild where most others had failed. It would be difficult, especially since rhinos tend to give birth deep in the bush. The hope was that the long-lens camera, the experience in wildlife filming, the rhino rangers' expertise, and the rhinos' cooperation would all work together!

### The filming

The female white rhino Malaika had already had two calves, the 21-month-old male Elias being the latest. Malaika and Elias had been born on the sanctuary and grown up in safe but close proximity to rangers and tourists. The filming initially concentrated on their day-to-day behaviour.

Around the due date, anxieties increased. The filmmakers felt it necessary to follow Malaika around so as not to miss the birth. This meant not only staying out in the field during daylight hours but also being on standby in case of a night birth. On 5<sup>th</sup> February, the birth occurred at 12.17 p.m., and the whole procedure was successfully filmed.

After the birth and a week's more filming in Uganda, the focus switched to Kenya and Solio Game Reserve where there was a better

### TOP RIGHT

Filming began at Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary focusing on the pregnant female Malaika - with a helpful rhino, knowledgeable rangers and a long lens working well together.

### TOP LEFT

NDR and partner organisations provided the budget for the film.



PHOTO BY FELIX PATTON



chance of seeing a greater range of behaviours from the much larger rhino population.

After two weeks in Kenya, it was back to Uganda for around three more weeks to record the development of Malaika's new calf, Pipo.

A further and final three-week period of filming was undertaken at Solio in late 2021.

**Developing the story**

During the eleven weeks of filming, hundreds of hours of film were produced, all of which had to be reviewed, and a synopsis of the story to be told by the documentary had to be elicited. While initial concepts evolve during the filming, much depends on how different scenes can be knitted together into a coherent and engaging story. This was a job for Rosie.

After reviewing some of the footage, it became clear that specialist expertise was needed to explain the behaviours. Rosie called on me again to spend a day in the editing

suite describing the rhinos' actions in various clips. Regardless of the footage available, the documentary was scheduled to only run for 43 or 52 minutes!

After several weeks of storyline development in conjunction with the film's producer, a 'Cutting Concept' was finalised. The 18-page overview covered the basic music, images, and scene descriptions.

**Creating the documentary**

Rosie and professional editor Karen Tonne looked through all the footage prepared for each potential scene and then started to edit. Working together, they look to find ways for the audience to see and feel the stories the filmmakers saw and thought at the time. During the process, broadcasters and others who review progress may ask a question or make a remark suggesting there was room for misinterpretation and clarification. The editing took six straight weeks, after which the final edit of the pictures was locked and could not be changed.

**TOP LEFT**

Rhinos love to wallow and play in wet mud with calf Elias climbing over his mother Malaika.

**TOP RIGHT**

After a long wait, the birth of new calf Pipo was successfully filmed.

**BELOW LEFT**

The rhinos were followed throughout the day with all the equipment being carried even through the bush and grassy swamps.

**BELOW RIGHT**

Pipo was soon standing and stayed close to Malaika while she grazed.



PHOTOS BY ROLAND GOCKEL

**The film follows the female rhino Malaika as she teaches her male calf Elias how to stay safe and healthy iafter the birth of her new calf.**

However, the form and shape of the story could still be slightly adjusted in the writing and rewriting of the narration and even during its recording. After that, there was a final mix of audio, ambient sounds, music, and narration with sound editor Sven-Uwe Bluhm.

Rosie and Roland (filmmakers), Tom (executive producer), and Sven-Uwe (sound editor) then made the final check, and the documentary was declared complete.

**The outcome**

The film follows the female rhino Malaika as she teaches her male calf Elias how to stay safe and healthy after the birth of her new calf. Elias meets his father Moja, who was initially introduced to Ziwa from Solio in Kenya, where there is a prolonged drought. Here, the rhinos are surviving thanks to adequate water from a permanent river.

Back in Uganda, Malaika shows signs of giving birth and chasing Elias away. The film shows the birth and tracks the early weeks of her bonding with her new calf, Pipo, while breaking her bond with Elias, who struggles

to get used to the change in circumstances. Meanwhile, rain finally arrives on Solio, much to the relief of the rhinos.

**Exposure**

The finished film went to the funding partners for broadcast—NDR (for Germany), ORF (for Austria), ARTE (for German and French rights), and NHK (for Japan). The Japanese broadcaster chose to be involved in the film because “the majestic African savannah and its creatures are the dreams of Japanese viewers” and added a section on poaching, which had rarely been mentioned in Japan.

Germany-based ZDF studios had distributor rights for all other territories. The film has been sold for broadcast in 20 countries in the

**TOP LEFT**

Professional editor Karen Toone worked through all the filming with Rosie to bring out the story and emotions the filmmakers had witnessed.

**BOTTOM LEFT/ TOP RIGHT/ BOTTOM RIGHT**

Adding music, ambient sounds and narration together with the pictures to create the finished film.



PHOTO BY PICTURE ALLIANCE GOCKEL



PHOTO BY ROLAND GOCKEL

United Kingdom, much of Europe, and the Far East, including China, South Korea, India, and Pakistan.

Another way to promote the film was through film festivals, especially if the film gets nominated and goes on to win an award. With seven awards, not the least of which was the highly prestigious Deutscher Naturfilm Preis, and five nominations, thousands of nature-loving fans from all over the world have seen the film, in addition to those who have watched it on terrestrial television.

Look out for the film 'A Rhino's Life' or, in German, 'Nashörner - Mit Herz und Horn', especially on catch-up TV with a broadcaster in your region. ●

#### The Filmmakers

**Rosie Koch**, a biologist by profession, started her own natural history film production company, Nona Naturedocx, in 2009. She has directed and produced natural history documentaries and German and French television reports.

**Roland Gockel** is a very experienced, well-travelled camera operator who specializes in natural history filming and directs his own award-winning productions.

#### The Locations

**Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary** in central Uganda is the only place in the country with wild rhinos. The fully fenced, 70 km<sup>2</sup> sanctuary was started in 2005/6 with six individuals. At the time of filming, there were around 35 rhinos.

**Solio Game Reserve** is located south of the Laikipia Plateau in central Kenya. It is the oldest fully fenced rhino conservancy in Kenya, receiving some 28 black and 12 white rhinos between 1970 and 1980. At the time of filming, it was home to around 70 black and 350 white rhinos.

**Felix Patton** is a wildlife ecologist with an MSc and PhD in conservation biology. He has been working in and writing about conservation in East Africa for over 20 years.

#### TOP

Collecting the prestigious Deutscher Natur Film Preis along with five other "winner" awards and many nominations at film festivals around the world has made the film an international hit.

#### BOTTOM LEFT

The filmmakers.