

# *African* WILDLIFE ISSUE 83 (2023) & ENVIRONMENT

**DON'T MESS WITH  
A BLACK RHINO**

The beautiful  
**MOUNTAIN SANCTUARY PARK**

**THE AFRICAN PITTA**

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**WESSA**

PEOPLE CARING FOR THE EARTH



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### Cover photograph: John Wesson

The Sugar Bush, found in the Mountain Sanctuary Park is the most common Protea species in the mountains protea belt. Its large amount of nectar attracts birds, bees and butterflies and other insects



Ford Newsletter



Don't mess with a Black Rhino



Gardening for biodiversity



A tribute to Sollie Joubert



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## DON'T MESS WITH A BLACK RHINO!!

Ian Whyte  
Main Photograph: John Wesson

**In my early years in the Kruger National Park (mid 1970s), Black Rhinos were extremely rare. They had been hunted to extinction in the Lowveld before the Park was established in 1903. Re-introductions from the Natal Parks Board (now Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife) had started but it was a still rare thing to see a Black Rhino!**



My colleague Dries Engelbrecht and I had been tasked with photographing a variety of Kruger's various frog habitats along the N'waswitshka River near Skukuza. Dries was then a student busy with the practical year of his conservation diploma, but went on to occupy a very senior position in the Arid Node of SANParks.

The conditions for our task were perfect.

There had been good rains and the pans held plenty of water, providing all the required frog habitat subject matter. It was a glorious day in mid-summer. It was hot and humid, and so by around noon, when we arrived at Bejwane Windmill, we thought that a cooling swim in its large concrete reservoir would be in order. Coincidentally, the windmill is named after the Black Rhino, as many of them had been released in that area during the translocation phase.

We pulled the Landie close up against the wall, climbed on the roof, stripped off and dived in. The reservoir's wall was about 2.5 meters high, and it was full of water. So, with our elbows resting on the edge, we could enjoy the cool swim while surveying the surrounding bush. And there, strolling unconcernedly



past, was a large Black Rhino! This was the first one I had seen in the wild, and I was very keen to get some photographs.

Because of their scarcity, neither Dries nor I had any experience of these animals, especially when on foot. So in our ignorance and inexperience, we just pulled on shorts and shoes, and set off after him. We were unarmed, as we had not been expecting to need protection when photographing frog habitats! He had got about 100 metres ahead of us, and we ran as surreptitiously as we could to try to get past him to a spot that would allow for photography.

Luckily, the gentle breeze was from him to us, and the rhino seemed to be unaware of us, even though we were only about 50 metres from him as we passed. We found a gap in the bush and as he entered it, I took a few photos. But I knew I had not got a good one – either his head or his backside was obscured by bush. So we repeated the process, and ran to get ahead of him. Again he seemed to ignore us and when we found a new gap, the result was the same – I could not get a good photo.

Those were the days when we still used film in our cameras, and as luck would have it, my film ran out just then, but I had one spare black-and-white film in my pocket. I hastily reloaded the camera, and we again ran to get ahead of him. Still he ignored us!

In retrospect, and still not fully understanding Black Rhinos, I am not sure why he behaved in this manner. Any other wild animal would very quickly have become aware of us and either made their escape or shown some aggressive reaction. But he clearly feared no natural predator and was therefore less concerned about the possible presence of an enemy. He had his mind on something, and he plodded purposefully on, oblivious to the disturbance we were causing alongside him. This, in turn, lulled us into a false sense of security and we blundered on, stupidly coming to believe he presented no danger to us.

Eventually we came to a much larger open patch. This at last should be my opportunity! He moved perfectly into the gap but just as I was about to press the shutter, he turned and walked directly away, showing us only his backside. Not a great photographic subject!

In my frustration and without giving the consequences much thought, I let out a yell at him. “Hey”, I shouted. This finally got his attention, and he spun around to face us. He stood dead still, head up with his ears swivelling to pick up any further sound. His pose was perfect, and I focused carefully and took one photo. The sound of the shutter was loud in the silence, and it was all he needed.

His ears locked immediately onto our position. As I remember it, he was about 70 metres from us and although he could probably see us, I think his poor eyesight would not allow him to recognize us for what we were. At this stage I was still expecting him to turn and make off like any other wild animal might be expected to do. But, as we were about to find out, that is not the Black Rhino’s way! After a moment’s stillness, with us barely breathing, his curiosity got the better of him and he started to walk slowly towards us.

It seems that this species does not like to run away from potential danger. His curious instinct is to go and investigate the problem and sort it out! His attitude was not one of aggression. I think he was merely coming to satisfy his curiosity. But there we were, in a fairly open area with not a climbable tree nearby. Dries was somewhere behind me doing I know not what, but I stood as still as I could, watching the approaching rhino with mounting consternation.

I was still hoping that he might pass us by, but it quickly became clear to me that he was going to walk right up and sniff me to establish what I was! Next to me was a smallish multi-stemmed bush willow, and the only thing I could think of doing was to jump behind it, and if he tried to chase me, I would run around it until there was some kind of outcome!

He got to within about two metres of me at which stage I no longer had a choice, and I jumped to get behind the bush. The rhino was clearly not expecting this and he initially staggered back a pace or two in his surprise. Then instead of coming around the bush after me, he lunged forward straight into the bush. I am sure his horn got to within about half a meter from me, but instead of pressing home his attack, he thrashed his head from side to side, sending leaves, branches and dust flying in all directions!

I watched all this in some kind of horror, not knowing what I should do next. This probably all happened in just a second or two, but the images remain fixed in my memory. Then suddenly he turned away and went crashing off through the bush like a steam train. I think at that moment he had for the first time got our scent which was enough to send him off. It sounded as if he was running a straight line, not bothering to deviate around trees and shrubs. For a minute or two we could still hear him as he crashed away on his high-speed departure.

Then it got quiet, and we realised that we had come through it all unscathed. Strangely, at that moment it was the funniest thing in the world! It must have been the release of emotion and relief, but we looked at each other and laughed and laughed,



almost hysterically. And then, as the laughter subsided, my left knee began to twitch uncontrollably, probably from a massive adrenalin surge! This in turn brought on a new bout of laughter which lasted a few another minutes until I got my knee back under control!

In retrospect, this was probably the biggest fright I got in all my experiences in Kruger. I think that it all happened so slowly with the apprehension building which gave time for the real fright to gain hold. Subconsciously I suppose I was expecting a serious injury or worse, so the outcome was unexpected.

The relief was enormous, and we walked back to the Landie on Cloud Nine! In our ignorance we had 'got away with murder', but it was a lesson not to be forgotten – do not mess with Black Rhinos - they do not respond like other animals! But fortunately for me the lesson was never again put to the test, as I had no further close encounters with one of these extraordinary animals.

**Ian Whyte**

Ian is an independent environmental consultant who retired from SANParks in 2007 after 37 years of service. During all of that time, he was engaged in full time wildlife research. At the time of his retirement,

he was responsible for all research into the larger herbivores in the Kruger National Park. His PhD focused on elephant while his MSc research looked into the lion/wildebeest predator prey relationship. He also conducted studies on buffalo and hippo. He held a pilots' licence and was responsible for the aerial censusing of large herbivores. He has been a member of the IUCN's African Elephant Specialist Group since 1992. He has co-authored two field guides to the birds of the Kruger National Park and in 2019 he privately published his memoirs entitled "Living the Wild Life – Thoughts and Stories from a Researcher's Life in the Kruger National Park".

Most of the stories to be published in the *Wildlife Chronicles* series originate from this book which has been described as a "must read" for any wildlife enthusiast. The book is excellently printed and bound in a soft cover and contains 378 pages of text and 44 pages of colour photos, maps etc.

**Copies of the book can be obtained by emailing [merle.m.whyte@gmail.com](mailto:merle.m.whyte@gmail.com).  
Cost: R345 plus postage.**

# HOLIDAY PICKS

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