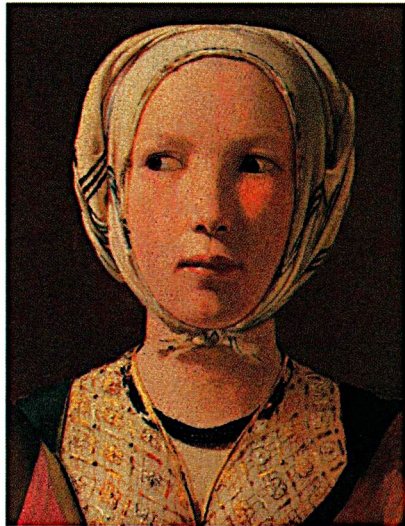


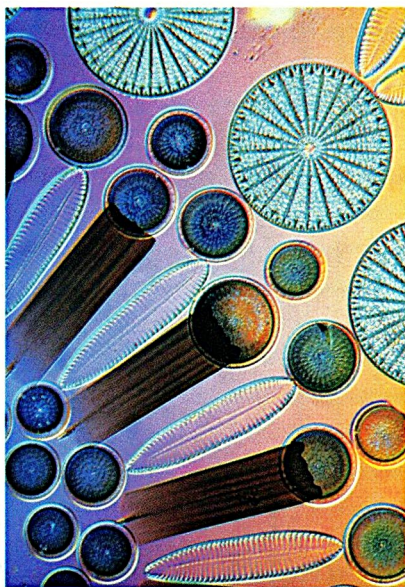
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Cover:

The fair-skinned, shifty-eyed thief in Georges de La Tour's *The Fortune-Teller* (detail), c. 1630, is probably Preciosa, the well-born heroine of a novel by Cervantes. Kidnapped by a gypsy, she was raised as her granddaughter (p. 74)
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Around the Mall and Beyond

By Michael Kernan

Since her arrival in September, baby Chitwan has charmed visitors and curators alike; the birth of a rhino is a rare event and hasn't been seen at the National Zoo since 1974



She's cute, all right. I mean, you want to pick her up and dandle her. I wasn't prepared for that.

She is an exact miniature of her mom, down to the last knob and pimple. They look like they're wearing mother-and-daughter outfits.

Except for the horn.

Baby Chitwan weighed 138 pounds when she was born September 18 at 3:55 A.M. She gained 51 pounds in the next 11 days, and then the scale broke. But that happens with rhinoceroses. Her mother, Mechi, weighs 3,600 pounds.

Chitwan, named for the Royal Chitwan Park in Nepal, where her mother came from, is about the most popular resident at the National Zoo in Washington. For the first few weekends after she was born, the lines stretched out the door of the Elephant House, where she lives with other rhinos, elephants, hippos, giraffes and potbellied pigs.

"This birth is pretty rare," says John Lehnhardt, assistant curator for large mammals. "In the last 2½ years in North America there have been only ten births of this species, and there are only 45 of them on this continent. For us, this is the first successful birth since 1974."

Right now Mechi is striding about, with the baby close at her heels. This is sweet, but it is also a basic survival technique, for these rhinos come from a land where the wild grasses can grow 25 feet tall, and a baby rhino, or a baby anything, or you or I for that matter, could get lost in a minute.

Mechi is nervous. She is extremely protective, especially right now. She

sees humans she doesn't know hanging around and staring at her. She doesn't like the look of that tape recorder, either, so she makes a threatening move toward the bars. We back away.

"Of course, for the vets it's a standard problem. They hate the vets, with their needles and all," says Morna Holden, who has been caring for Mechi and the other female rhino, Kali, ever since they arrived here nine years ago as babies themselves.

"They recognize the keepers who work with them all the time by their light-colored shirts.

"People in dark shirts are apt to be workmen, who make sparks with their welding machines and hammer on things. So they aren't so happy with dark shirts."

When a photographer climbed all over the enclosure to take the first pictures of the baby, Mechi was amenable since the woman wore a light shirt. She came back later, however, wearing a dark blue outfit. Mechi made a distinctly rude gesture with her massive horn.

After breakfast and a shower, delivered through a hose by Holden, Chitwan and her mom keep busy with a stroll outside, a roll in the mud and then a snooze in the sun. When visitors arrive, the pair are usually sleeping.

The afternoon is Chitwan's best time. "She runs and runs," says Holden. "She goes outside and gallops and gallops. One day a keeper came by with a white food cart, and Chitwan came flying through the air right across the enclosure, snorting and squealing. She was

just playing, I think. Practicing. She's getting more personality every day."

Well, personality is as personality does. I am not so sure I want to dandle her anymore.

"The baby will nurse for two years," says her keeper, "though she'll get solid foods, too, after six months, like soft grass and maple leaves with the stems pulled off. The baby nurses every hour, night and day. And she's gaining five pounds a day."

To enable her to make all that milk, Mechi puts away more than half a bale of hay a day, say 30 pounds, plus 8 pounds each of fresh produce and grains, and a whole lot of water.

"She's picky," observes Holden. "She'll eat carrots if that's all there is, but she'd rather have something sweeter, like apples or sweet potatoes. They love green beans."

The mother is so tenderly attentive that staff keep wandering over from other duties to watch them. Mechi is careful not to roll on her baby, her first after a stillbirth. Both of them defecate in the same place every day, which is typical of rhinos, and Mom always covers Chitwan's bright orange production with her own dark brown one.

Perhaps this keeps enemies from knowing there is a baby around. Rhinos have few diseases and no enemies at all in captivity, of course, but in the wild there are tigers. To a tiger, a baby rhino is a walking appetizer.

"In Chitwan Park," says curator Lehnhardt, "there are 450 rhinos but also a hundred tigers. And they take out 10 to



Mechi, the mother, is tenderly attentive to her calf—and extremely protective.

50 percent of the baby rhinos. This may look like a hefty baby to you, but to a 400-pound tiger, it's just a morsel."

When rangers in Nepal come across a baby rhino eaten by tigers, generally all that remains is a pair of tufted ears.

Those ears are something else. They work independently, and since they are, with the nose, a rhino's sharpest sense organs, they waggle all the time, harkening to every little squeak and shuffle, swiveling about like radar dishes.

"I am partial to elephant babies," remarks Lehnhardt, who spent the first part of his career working with elephants in zoos in Chicago and Calgary. "But I'd never seen a baby rhino. And this one has won me over. She's a doll."

(The father, by the way, is Sport, age 16, now on loan to the Philadelphia Zoo. Sport also impregnated Kali who, at press time, had just given birth to a 150-pound male. All of a sudden, the National Zoo is up to here in rhinos!)

"The breeding is pretty amazing," says Lehnhardt. "Very determined on both sides. The act itself can take an hour. The female can only conceive for a few hours during estrus. She gives clear signs when she's ready, she vocalizes, urinates, stops eating and starts climbing the walls."

Pregnancy takes 15 to 17 months, and a mother can have a baby no more than once in three years. They nurse from one to two years.

"Rhinos are very instinctive," Lehnhardt says, "and they know what to do in a birth. We basically watch, and keep ready in case help is needed. The baby has to hit the floor breathing, and the

mother has to want to care for it. It has to be able to stand and then to nurse. If they pass those tests, they'll be okay."

Now Mechi is trotting. She moves at a steady pace, her huge bulk riding smoothly on her stumpy legs, her head held high with an eerie sort of dignity. The baby trots just behind her, not quite as dignified, but getting the hang of it. The two of them head for a pile of hay, where Chitwan will get her hourly snack of mother's milk.

"They're an endangered species, all right," says Lehnhardt. "Men and tigers are the problem. Their grazing lands are steadily being reduced, and they're hunted for their horns and skin."

Think about this: we worry over the fate of elephants, because there are only 650,000 left. There are 11,000 rhinos. Of this species, the greater one-horn Asian rhino, there are only 2,000—on the whole planet.

The other four species are the Javan rhino and the Sumatran in Asia, and the black and white rhinos of Africa.

"Being able to breed them is our safety deposit for the future," Lehnhardt says. "It's important that people see them in the zoo, see the baby and fall in love with it. We may get three million people in this one building in a year. Our mission is to create a concern for the species itself and the wilderness in general."

"We humans are part of the continuum of life on earth. We brought the rhino to the brink of extinction. It's up to us to try and bring them back."

Rhinos don't roar. They chirp and whistle and hee-haw like donkeys, which

is natural because they are related to horses and tapirs. (I could see the equine features in Chitwan's long, blunt snout.) They also seem to make sounds below human hearing.

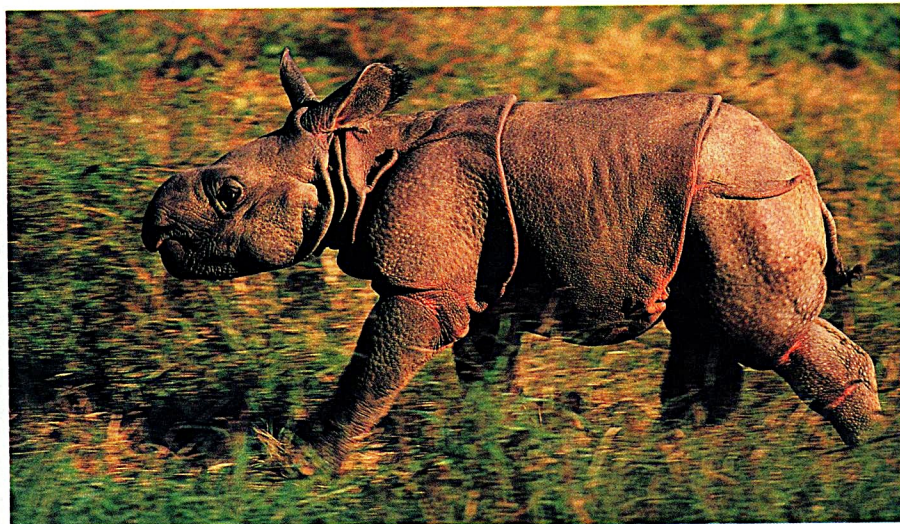
Rhino eyes are famously weak, and some people believe the animals' so-called bad temper is simply a startled reaction to a threat they can't see. I must say, Chitwan's eyes are not impressive. With that dimly searching Mr. Magoo expression, she looks as though she could use glasses.

This also may be why Mechi is so very protective. Even when she is just moving from one room of her enclosure to the other, she checks it out like a Secret Service operative, sniffs, listens, pokes into piles of hay, while Chitwan waits by her rear hoof.

Interestingly, the rhinoceros is the only existing animal I can think of that has what I would call a dinosaurian name. Tyrannosaurus, "rhinosaurus"? Everyone comments on how prehistoric the creatures look. I also found a curious resemblance to early Japanese samurai armor with its wide-skirted, plated effect. It is true that coats of rhino skin have been worn as armor.

But not to worry about that fearsome horn. It serves well when charging a safari Land Rover, but for a real fight between angry males, the long, sharp lower front teeth are the weapon of choice.

I should also mention the birds. Sparrows and swallows and others love to hang about the big beasts, perching on their backs sometimes. Groupies. I wonder what the rhinos think of that. ■



Afternoon is Chitwan's best time, says her keeper. She gallops and gallops. With just 2,000 of this species left, breeding them is our "safety deposit for the future."