light of the unicorn

BY CLIVE WALKER

According to Peter Hitchins, noted black rhinoceros specialist and co-founder of the Rhino & Elephant Foundation, there are three subspecies of black rhino *(Diceros bicornis)* recognised in southern Africa. Two we are familiar with: *Db minor,* found in Zululand, the Kruger National Park and Zimbabwe; and *Db bicornis,* found in Namibia, and more recently in the Augrabies Falls and Vaalbos National Parks to which they were translocated from Etosha in 1985 and 1987. The famous desert rhino of Kaokoveld which has received considerable attention in recent years is classified as *Db bicornis.* But what about the third subspecies, *Db chobiensis,* from northern Botswana? Many believe this animal to be extinct, yet there have been rhino sightings in northern Botswana during the past decade. No one is sure of its status.

Frederick Courteney Selous in **A Hunter's Wanderings in Africa** made the following observation in 1881, "In 1879 there were still two or three drinking in the upper Chobe, to the northwest of the Sunta outlet. Between the Chobe and the Zambezi there are none and according to the natives there never were any there". The late Dr Reay Smithers recorded the black rhino of Botswana as probably disappearing around 1974. The animal has certainly been low in numbers for a long time. Professional hunter Colin Dandridge saw a black rhino in the Kwando area near the Linyanti Swamp many years ago. Petri Viljoen, during a study of lions in the Savuti Marsh, spotted a large rhino male at the southern end of the marsh while radio-tracking from an aircraft. This particular animal may have come from Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe. Other independent sightings of spoor have also been reported.

Reports indicate that the most likely area in which the *chobiensis* subspecies may still occur is the Kwando region, which falls within a controlled hunting area in northern Ngamiland. The Kwando River flows between the eastern Caprivi and northern Botswana and drains into the Linyanti Swamp. The water spreads out over a large area, mainly on the Caprivi side which is characterised by open grassland and reed and papyrus swamp.

In former times, water from this region filled the Savuti Channel via Zibadianja Lagoon, a wild, beautiful area which the late Bobby Wilmot described as "the Garden of Eden" for its magnificence of scenery and variety of wildlife. The country to the south and west is covered with dry thornveld, *Terminalia,* mopane woodland and Kalahari sand. Camelthorn *(Acacia erioloba)* and black monkeythorn *(Acacia burkei)* woodland dominate the swamp edge. There is no human population and the area is certainly not easily accessible.

Hitchins wanted to get into the region and talk to the locals. "They must be there," he kept saying and yet nobody seemed too interested, mostly because of the remoteness of the region and its inaccessibility. He asked me to investigate the rhino depicted in the Bushman painting at the Tsodilo Hills to the west of the Okavango, and this I planned to do during July 1987 with Lloyd Wilmot as a guide. Based in Savuti, Lloyd is one of the people most knowledgeable about Ngamiland.

near Skukuza, Mzanzene who has been reported from the Nwanetsi/Muzandzeni area to the south of Satara, Punda from the far north of the park, several other unnamed giants and Phelwana who lived in the Kingfisherspruit section of Kruger.

From about 1985, Phelwana developed the habit of breaking through the park's western boundary fence and going on a walkabout outside the park. Initially, this habit presented no great problems as he confined his wanderings outside the park to Gazankulu's Manyeleti Game Reserve. In time, he started to range even further, but he still regularly returned to his old haunts inside the park.

Most of the landowners on whose property he wandered regarded the presence of an elephant bull like Phelwana as something very special indeed. The professional hunters operating in that part of the Lowveld observed a gentleman's agreement that the life of the old bull would be spared if they met up with him while on a hunt, even though his tusks were probably the finest trophies in Africa. They, as much as anybody, appreciated Phelwana's status as akin to that of a national monument like Ahmed was to Kenya. They knew he was the carrier of the heaviest pair of tusks yet to come out of South Africa.

It was a source of concern, therefore, when rumours began circulating during the dry season of 1987 that up to R100 000 was being offered to shoot Phelwana. For us in the Kruger National Park, there was nothing that could be done. Once Phelwana crossed the park boundary, he was beyond our jurisdiction. The head of Gazankulu's Nature Conservation Division issued an instruction that Phelwana was to be left strictly alone if he was encountered by a legal hunting party on Gazankulu territory. The local officers of the Transvaal Nature Conservation Division supported the professional hunters who had agreed to regard Phelwana with reverence rather than as a trophy.

On 12th January 1988, he was seen by game scout Armando Ndhlovu of the Kingfisherspruit section of Kruger. Although the bull had definitely been shot and wounded by then, Armando did not report anything unusual. When he saw Phelwana again on the morning of 22nd January, he realised that the bull was in difficulties. Phelwana was thin and could barely walk. He could not raise his head and so could not drink other than by walking into a pool and sucking water straight into his mouth. He was emaciated and we discovered later that this was because he was unable to chew properly as his jaw was injured. Armando's report on his observation was quickly relayed to Skukuza and I was asked to take a look at the elephant and do whatever was required for the animal.

A helicopter was quickly arranged and Dr Valerius de Vos, a veterinarian from Skukuza, his technician and I flew up to the Nwamutsatsa Windmill on the western boundary of the Park. From the helicopter, Phelwana was a pathetic sight – he was literally skin and bone, and struggling to walk. On the right side of his neck was a gaping wound which oozed puss onto his shoulder and leg. I darted the bull, but with great sadness for it seemed unlikely that we could save an animal which appeared to be so close to death.

Dr de Vos examined the wound. He realised that he would not be able to repair the damage surgically since it was serious and extensive. A bullet from a heavy calibre rifle had entered the side of the neck just behind the ear. The resulting injury to the jaw and muscles meant that the elephant could only chew with difficulty and could not lift his head sufficiently to drink properly. There was really no hope of saving the old gentleman and we reluctantly agreed that in view of his age, his terrible wound and his poor condition, we would have to put him down. This was done by an injection of drugs which quickly and mercifully killed the already immobilised elephant.

Phelwana was a large bull, reaching 325 cm at the shoulder and with a forefoot circumference of 152 cm. His ivory was magnificent. The left tusk was 54 cm thick at the lip, reached a length of 257 cm and weighed 63,8 kg (141 lbs). His right tusk, at 56 cm, was thicker, longer at 277 cm and weighed 71,7 kg (158 lbs). This is the heaviest pair of tusks in the National Parks Board collection, and the heaviest pair to come out of Africa for several years. They could command a high price, but will not be sold. They will, in time, be exhibited in the Kruger National Park – objects of great beauty, great price and great significance as the end product of successful elephant conservation policies.

Photo: Herman Potgieter

Photographer Herman Potgieter and I went to Botswana, primarily to gather material for a new book. We were accompanied by my son Anton and pilot Andre Pelser. Andre, Anton and I went directly to Guma Lagoon where we planned to spend the night, and Lloyd and Herman followed at first light in Lloyd's Cessna 172 (minus the right hand door) to join us.

To the west of Savuti is a large pan in the middle of a vast dry area: the only water to be found in this immense wilderness. Some years ago, Lloyd discovered the carcass of a large white rhinoceros which had become bogged down in thick mud. Unable to get out, it had died a lingering death.

On their way to Guma Lagoon, Lloyd and Herman flew low over the pan, which as the crow flies is 30 km from Linyanti – and there she was. A female black rhinoceros and calf. Lloyd made a number of passes as she ran off into the dry woodland. Was this actually *chobiensis?* And with a strapping big calf? Imagine our excitement when they landed at Guma. From all indications, she had to be a black rhino. Herman's photographs later confirmed that she was indeed a black rhino, and we reported this to John Benn, chief game warden of Ngamiland.

The rhino depicted in the paintings at the Tsodilo Hills are also black rhino, and I later had an opportunity to speak to a nature conservation officer based in Caprivi who confirmed that black rhino still occur in western Caprivi, although low in numbers. The likelihood of black rhino living in this area of Botswana is good news indeed. Whether or not it is in fact the subspecies *Db chobiensis* does not matter. What is important is the black rhino's existence and its possible future in Botswana. With the overall decline of the species in Africa, the presence of the black rhino in northern Botswana is encouraging.