

THE LOST ARK

NEW AND REDISCOVERED ANIMALS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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with a foreword by Gerald Durrell

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Cotton's white rhinoceros

Following the discovery of Grévy's zebra *Equus grevyi* in 1882 and a last flourish of new antelopes in the early 1890s, zoologists confidently asserted that no further large animals remained unknown to science in Africa. How wrong they were was demonstrated dramatically when, within the space of just a few years, the Dark Continent unfurled a series of spectacular new mammals, one after another, to astonish the scientific world.¹⁻³



Science was unaware of the white rhinoceros's existence in Central Africa until 1900. (Owen Burnham)

The first of these was truly extraordinary – a completely new subspecies of white rhinoceros, the world's third largest species of land mammal. Zoologists traditionally believed that the white rhino was restricted to areas of southern Africa located south of the Zambezi, including Botswana, Mozambique, and Zululand, but in 1900 Major Powell-Cotton bagged several specimens more than 2000 miles further north – on the Upper Nile, bordering the Sudan, Zaire, and Uganda. Also in 1900, and from that same locality, Captain A.St.H. Gibbons brought back a white rhino skull. Not surprisingly, zoologists were amazed to learn that entire populations of such an

enormous mammal were existing undocumented by science, but this was swiftly remedied by mammalogist Oldfield Thomas's *Nature* report of 18 October 1900. And in 1908, Dr Richard Lydekker named the beast *Ceratotherium simum cottoni*, thereby differentiating it from its slightly hairier, southern counterpart.¹⁻³ (Intriguingly, unconfirmed encounters with Central African white rhinos were also reported by Dr John Gregory and Count Samuel Teleki in the 1880-90s.¹)

Okapi – the Congo's incongruous short-necked giraffe

Although, as this book demonstrates, it is inaccurate to refer to the okapi as the last major zoological discovery (as so many people do), there is assuredly justification for calling it this century's greatest – because in so many, very varied ways it is unique, and wholly unmistakable, embodying a bewildering plethora of morphological and historical paradoxy. With a richly-hued coat more comparable to the gleaming plumage of some jungle bird than to the pelage of a mammal, adorned with vivid zebra-like stripes, and equipped with an inordinately long blue tongue more at home in the mouth of a chameleon, this exotic-looking creature has always been a living contradiction in terms – first believed to be a cloven-hoofed zebra, then proving to be a short-necked giraffe.

It all began in 1890 when, in his book *In Darkest Africa*, the explorer Sir Henry Morton Stanley briefly mentioned a strange, supposedly ass-like beast familiar to the Wambutti pygmies inhabiting the dense, little-known Ituri Forest – nowadays housed within Zaire (formerly the Belgian Congo), but at that time contained within Uganda's borders. According to Stanley:⁴

In December 1986, however, during a specific search for the species in the vicinity of Valenca, in Bahia State, mammalogist Ilmar Bastos Santos was taken by a local hunter to a tree that contained two thin-spined porcupine rats, one of which was a pregnant female. Additional specimens are now being sought, and it is hoped that a protected breeding area for this taxonomically significant species can be established.¹⁹³

Koopman's tree porcupine *Coendou koopmani*, a new prehensile-tailed porcupine, was formally described in 1992, from Brazil's Amazon lowlands. It is a very small, dark-spined species, no larger than a guinea-pig.¹⁹⁴

Return of the rhinos

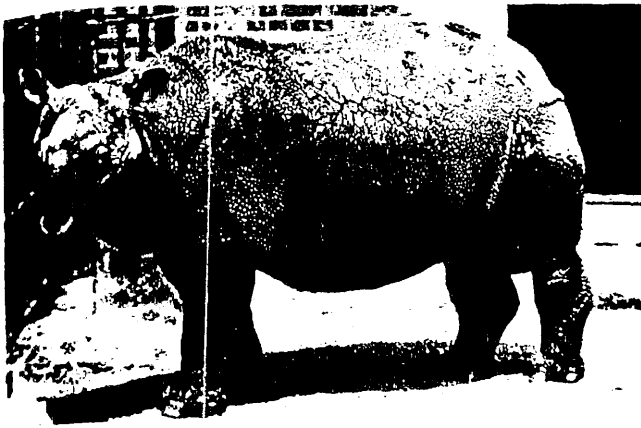
The possibility that animals as large as rhinoceroses could remain unknown to science for decades must seem very remote. Yet between 1986 and 1988, zoologists learnt of two separate cases in which this is precisely what had happened. The first announcement came in 1986, disclosing that up to five specimens of the hairy Sumatran rhinoceros *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis* had been found in Sarawak, on the island of Borneo. Science had hitherto assumed that this species had died out in Sarawak by the end of World War II. Inhabiting a remote valley in the Ulu Baram area, they had first come to the notice of local inhabitants in 1983, and were reported at once to the Sarawak Forest Department's National Parks and Wildlife Office. It decided to keep the discovery secret for a while, however, to allow time for protection measures to be drawn up and implemented.

Sumatran rhinoceros – its startling ability to remain undetected in Sarawak for almost four decades gave the zoological world a great surprise in the 1980s.

They were assisted by Dr Julian Caldecott of the Earthlife Foundation, who spotted Sumatran rhino tracks himself in August 1986.¹⁹⁵

An even more spectacular revelation occurred just two years later – because this was when the Javan rhinoceros *Rhinoceros sondaicus*, the most critically threatened of all rhino species, supposedly confined totally to Java since the 1940s, was rediscovered on the Asian mainland. In November 1988, a female specimen was shot by a local tribesman in the jungles of southern Vietnam, about 80 miles northeast of Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon). Its remains, together with those of a second shot specimen, were later examined and conclusively identified by Dr George Schaller, Vice-President of the New York Zoological Society, who had been working at the time on a faunal survey with Vietnamese scientists in the jungles of southern Vietnam. In February 1989, Schaller also sighted some Javan rhino tracks, on the banks of the Dong Nai River (75 miles northeast of Ho Chi Minh City), and estimated that as many as 10-15 individuals may still survive in the area. Prompted by this dramatic find, the





Vietnamese government has established a Rhinoceros Conservation Group, and is considering plans to extend the neighbouring Nam Cat Tien Reserve to encompass the entire region housing the rhinos (only a portion is contained within it at present), which would be of great benefit to the long-term survival of this small but priceless population of a species ranked in 1984 as one of the world's 12 most endangered species of animal.¹⁹⁶

Incidentally, it is often alleged that the Javan rhinoceros has never been maintained in captivity, but this is far from being true. Reproduced here is a photo of an Asian rhinoceros on show at London Zoo from 1874 to 1885 and it is unquestionably a Javan rhino – as evinced by the characteristically scaly, mosaic-like patterning upon its hide, and especially by the fold of skin in front of its shoulder, which runs right across its back (in the great Indian rhino *R. unicornis* this fold does not run right across its back). In addition, as I learnt from John Edwards, of the Zoological Society of London, the large Asian rhino that had lived at Adelaide Zoo until 1907 had always been looked upon as a great Indian until 1948, when researchers revealed that it had actually been a Javan.

Javan rhinoceros – recorded in 1988 on the Asian mainland, the first such record since the 1940s. (The Zoological Society of London)

Indeed, it is quite likely that a number of other supposed great Indians from the earlier days of zoological parks will ultimately be exposed as incognito Javans.

A bronze quoll and a black tree kangaroo

Australasia's answers to the mustelids (weasels, martens and suchlike) and viverrids (civets, genets and mongooses) found elsewhere in the world are the dasyures, traditionally comprising a quintet of brown-coated, white-spotted marsupial carnivores. Two are commonly referred to as quolls – New Guinea's *Dasyurus albopunctatus*, and eastern Australia's *D. viverrinus* – but in 1987 a third species of quoll was described, from the savannahs of southwestern Papua New Guinea, thereby increasing the total number of dasyure species to six. Dubbed *D. spartacus* by Queensland Museum zoologist Dr Stephen Van Dyck, its common name is the bronze quoll, on account of the deep bronze colouration of its pelage, which is dappled with small white spots (except for its tail, which is uniformly black). It can also be differentiated from the other dasyures by the extreme narrowness of its muzzle measured between the left and right lachrymal canals (channels in the skull for the tear ducts). It first came to light in the early 1970s, when five specimens were collected as part of a mammal survey in the Trans-Fly Plains of southwestern Papua New Guinea during 1972-3, but these were classed as western dasyures *D. geoffroyi* until Van Dyck examined them and perceived their distinctness from known examples of the latter species.¹⁹⁷