

# SOUTHERN WHITE RHINOCEROS

*Ceratotherium rhinoceros*



## DESCRIPTION

Class: Mammalia  
 Order: Perissodactyla  
 Family: Rhinocerotidae

The Southern White Rhinoceros is the largest of all the rhinoceros, with the adult males being notably larger than their female counterparts. The skin of the Southern White Rhinoceros is light in pigmentation with colourations ranging from yellow-brown to a slatey grey. The Southern White Rhinoceros is characterised by short legs and a massive neck. It is recognised by 2 prominent horns, with the front horn being notably larger, reaching lengths of up to 150cm. This mammal appears hairless except for the ear fringes and tail bristles. Hair is present in the skin, but does not protrude. The Southern White Rhinoceros has a huge mouth and the upper and lower lips fit together exactly. An adult male is approximately 2.3 tonnes and the female is approximately 1.8 tonnes.



## HABITAT

The Southern White Rhinoceros was distributed throughout the dry savanna regions of South and NE Africa. The social structure of the Southern White Rhinoceros is such that it has defined 'home ranges' that are occupied by large family groups of adult cows and mothers with offspring, while the adult bulls are solitary and territorial.

## STATUS

The Southern White Rhinoceros was brought to the brink of extinction before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when numbers were nearly wiped out by big game hunters. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the South African government implemented 'Operation Rhino'. This has been a successful program and the current population of the Southern White Rhinoceros has reached approximately 8 000. The northern subspecies however has



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declined dramatically with figures suggesting that the numbers have been reduced to only a handful of animals, all of them living in Garamba Park in the Republic of Congo.

Humans are the only predators of the Southern White Rhinoceros, considering that the number of Rhinoceros killed by carnivores is insignificant. The rhinoceros is hunted for its horns, hooves, blood and urine, all of which are believed to have medicinal and aphrodisiac properties in some cultures. The horns are also used to make handles for Jambia daggers' worn as a sign of status by North Yemen men.

## DIET

The Southern White Rhinoceros is a grazing animal, feeding on grass species. It needs a large intake of food to support its great bulk. Its broad lips give it a large area of bite, enabling it to obtain an adequate rate of intake from the short grassy areas that it favours much of the year. The rhino will grind its food in order to obtain the nutrients that it requires from the grasses. It is one of the largest pure grazing animals ever to have existed.

At Victoria's Open Range Zoo at Werribee the Southern White Rhinoceros diet consists of lucerne, hay, grass, and giraffe pellets (protein, fibre, vitamins and minerals).



## REPRODUCTION

The Southern White Rhinoceros may copulate for as long as 2 hours. When the cow is in oestrus she may mate once with the dominant bull, whose territory she is occupying. Males fight fiercely with other bulls for the female and this can occasionally result in death. After mating, the bull may remain with the cow for 1 or 2 days.



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The gestation period is 16 months and the calves are highly developed at birth. Within 1 hour, a newborn can stand and maintain its balance. The instinctive searching behaviour of the newborn helps it to obtain its first meal of milk. During this time, mother and calf bond and become closely attached. There is a 4-year interval between rhinoceros births. The low rate of reproduction of the Southern White Rhinoceros is in keeping with their longevity and lack of natural enemies.

## GENERAL INFORMATION

The Southern White Rhinoceros is seldom aggressive and despite its large size, it is easily frightened off. It is the most sociable of the 5 Rhinoceros species and females often engage in friendly nose to nose exchanges. The bull is more vocal than the cow, making noises that include snorts, bellows and loud cries like an elephant's trumpet. The Southern White Rhinoceros is active in the morning and the evening, spending the remaining hours wallowing or resting.

## REFERENCES

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Nowak, R. and Paradiso, J. 1983, *Walker's Mammals Of The World – 4<sup>th</sup> Edition*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

McDonald, D. 1989, *The Encyclopedia Of Mammals*, Unwin Hyman Ltd, England.

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