

CHAPTER THREE

Rhinoceros

When I first came to Kenya my friend, the late Martin Stephens, then shooting editor of *The Field*, asked me to get him photographs of rhinoceros and buffalo, as for every one he got of either he got half a dozen of elephant and more than a score of lion: nearly all the latter from the Kruger and Serengeti National Parks! Probably more big-game photographs passed through his hands than through those of any other man in England. He was himself a big-game hunter with considerable variety of experience, and he always said that, unless covered by a reliable shot, he would prefer to photograph any other animal but rhino.

My own experience makes me a little doubtful of this last statement, for I have found that really wild lion (not the national park hand-fed ones!) are very chancy in their behaviour if followed up or in any way badgered. Nevertheless, of one thing I am quite sure, and that is that it is harder to determine what a rhino is going to do under any given circumstances than any other large mammal, and that they are more prone to attack than any other species of dangerous game; by which, of course, I infer unwounded beasts. A cow rhino with a youngster will almost always attack when suddenly confronted in thick bush, and often in the open; but they are slow and can be dodged, whereas a lion gets into its stride from the very start, and is half-way there before one has raised the rifle

if one has allowed it the initiative, as is almost inevitable when trying to photograph it.

The black rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros simus*) is still very common in many parts of Kenya—so common that it has become a pest in many districts, including my own, Nyeri. On four occasions in the last ten years the Game Department has had to send white hunters to reduce their numbers in this area, and in that period more than 100 have been shot "By Order." About 140 were shot south-east of Machakos at the end of 1944 and beginning of 1945 in order to make the country there available for native settlement. One would have thought that it would have been easier and cheaper to put a free rhino on each big-game licence, and so induce more people to take one out, instead of still charging the absurd fee of £10 for shooting one.

Another anomaly we have is a relic of the long-vanished days of ostrich farming, since £1 is still the fee for shooting one of these birds, of which large numbers do great damage in young wheat.

But to return to our rhino: let us have a look at their life-history.

A full-grown rhinoceros stands 63–64 inches at the shoulder and is about twice that in length, while a bull weighs about one and a quarter tons. The measurements are my own, but the weight is Colonel Meinertzhagen's, and I do not know how it was obtained or whether the eleven specimens weighed were plains or forest rhinoceros. The forest rhino of Mount Kenya is distinctly bigger on the average than those of the adjacent plains, carries a longer horn, and the female is often bigger than the male. The rhino of the Northern Frontier District are small, with poor horns, until north of the lower Tana, and in Somalia, they are about half the weight of a big forest rhino, and 12-inch horn becomes a good average. These small beasts have a reputation for more than usual bad temper, and this characteristic is probably hereditary, for

Somalis, coveting their hide for shields, were wont to hunt them in parties, throwing a shower of spears at them, then running away, and repeating these attacks until the exhausted rhino died of multiple wounds. Of course many got away and passed on their very natural resentment of man to their offspring.

A 25-inch horn is big for a plains rhino, and of over fifty beasts that I saw round the headwaters of the Tana in the course of ten trips south of Embu, not one had a horn as long as this. But 30 inches is not uncommon for a forest rhino, and the Game Department has several of over 35 inches from the Mount Kenya forests. One most remarkable horn, taken from a beast shot near Nanyuki and about 30 miles from my house, was $42\frac{1}{2}$ inches long, and projected directly forward over the bull's nose, thereby seriously interfering with his feeding so that he was very thin when shot. Another pair shot in 1944 about 3 miles from my house measured $42\frac{1}{4}$ inches front and 22 inches rear, while a recent letter from Captain Moore, V.C., Game Warden of Tanganyika, tells me of a $47\frac{1}{2}$ -inch horn handed in to the Government, this last being the second best on record.

The plains rhino generally has a horn which tapers evenly from the base upwards, but forest specimens taken from both sexes are often long and thin, with sturdy bases. In fact, a bull of the forest tribe will often look more like a cow when the head only is seen, but is a much bulkier beast even when not so high at the shoulder or so long. One meets with occasional freaks, and there is, at present, a very big bull living near my house which has the front horn curved over and back like a scimitar, passing right over the rear horn and almost touching the forehead.

Rear horns vary very much in shape and length, and some of them (particularly in the small eastern beasts) are longer than the front one; but most are short, stumpy affairs, and in forest rhino the rear horn is often broken off short, how, it is

hard to suggest, for one would think that the front horn would be the first to suffer damage.

Quite a large proportion of rhino have a wound low down behind the shoulder (Plate 14), which is continually enlarged by tick-birds pulling at the edges until the poor brute takes to such thick forest that it is scored all over with white lines from broken branches. Whether the tick-birds start these wounds originally I do not know, but I have been told recently that the cow is responsible for horning the bull during courtship, and again that the wounds are caused by bulls fighting. I have not taken sufficient note to make sure that these wounds occur only in bulls.

Sulky, stupid, bad-tempered, and uncertain, rhinoceros start their life, after a 15-month period of gestation, already endowed with a pronounced offensive spirit. The calf, born with a thing like a large limpet shell on its nose as the beginnings of a horn, will worry and attack all smaller animals that come within range, its mother often supporting its efforts, obviously under the impression that her dear little offspring is being put upon. As the calf has much better eyesight than the mother, and is inquisitive in the extreme, meeting a cow with a yearling calf may lead to unfortunate situations from the photographer's point of view.

After the first eighteen months the calf, which stays about three and a half years with its mother, may still retain its offensive spirit, but mother may have come to the conclusion that co-operation in her infant's excesses is no longer called for.

One misty morning I was out with the camera when we suddenly spotted a rhino and a 6-months-old calf coming straight towards us along the hillside and about 100 yards away. Sending the two boys into the scrub uphill, I hastily retired to one of the clumps of bush which dotted the slope, and wormed into the side of it ready for action.

Unfortunately, I did not then know that a calf's vision is

effective up to double the usual 40 yards of an adult rhino, and the little beast had seen me. He galloped straight forward towards me, with mother puffing along steadily behind, and pulled up about 15 yards away to stare. Mother arrived convinced that somebody was threatening her hideous offspring and ready to abolish the offender, so the situation looked awkward, and I forced my way backward right through the bush, losing a good shirt and much valuable skin in the process, then took a photograph round the farther edge. The pair then moved on, and I stepped out to take another picture, but found that my struggles through the bush had resulted in an alteration of focus and by the time I had made the necessary correction, mother and child were showing only their butt ends. Following up only induced an offensive demonstration and I had to give it up without having got a picture—the first effort having been ruined by change of focus and general shakiness, which we will kindly attribute to excitement and not to funk!

Earlier that same morning I had seen a pair of bushbuck feeding peacefully round a clump on top of the hill on which I was working, and thought that I was going to get the photograph which I had been trying to bring off for years and still have not obtained. Getting to the next clump of bush to the bushbuck, I focused the camera and waited for them to come round into view. They were just visible through the twigs at the edge, and about to arrive exactly where I wanted them, when the camera boy pulled my sleeve, jerked his thumb upwards towards the interior of our clump, and whispered, "There's a rhino in there." A large dark form rose slowly to its feet within 5 yards of us, sighed heavily, and began waking up from the deep slumber induced by a muggy, misty morning. We retreated hastily to the next cover as the brute lumbered out and stood half awake looking at us blearily. I took one photograph (which was badly under-exposed) and retired out of sight, while the great lump lurched away in the opposite direction. I have known people quite short tempered when

they wake up with such a bad head as that rhino obviously had, and was taking no further risks.

When the calf has been about three and a half years with the mother, the latter comes in season again, and either she or a bull chases the calf away; though sometimes a bull joins up for some time before the cow comes in season, so that three is a common number to find together. I have once seen the pre-mating chase, with the cow lumbering along, a caricature of coyness, and the bull cantering behind, puffing regularly like a steam engine on the randan. The chase lasted about twenty minutes, in and out of clumps of forest, and was laughably reminiscent of some scenes featuring the old and stout on a French *plage*.

It is very difficult to spot rhino in cover, and the local Kikuyu are so much better at it than I am that I rely on them very largely. It is curious that I can usually pick up other animals before they can, but rhino I find the almost invariable exception.

Naturally the plains rhino is much easier to photograph than the forest beast, as, where not too much molested, they may be found away from thick cover up to ten o'clock in the morning, especially after rain. In the forest they will wallow nearly every day, and after rains in the plains. In some places I have found them go over a mile from cover to have a dustbath, evidently being particular about its quality, since there were several other apparently suitable places much closer in. The mud bath is amusing to watch, as the great beast is very thorough, rolling on back and both sides—so that it is a mystery how a long front horn is tucked away—or sitting up on its hunkers in the mud, then relaxing to lie down for a good soak.

I have seen rhino 11,000 feet up on the Aberdares, and their tracks at the same height on Mount Kenya; though I have not seen them or their tracks above the giant heath, which they use much as cover, nor do they go up on the moors

to over 14,000 feet as do elephant and buffalo, largely because rhino stick very much to their own bits of territory and do not change feeding grounds with the frequency which takes both the other big beasts right over the crest of the moors when shifting. One rhino in the Embu district I was able to keep an eye on for several years, as, like most of them, he stuck to one beat, while his general build and relative shape of horns were distinctive. It is worth while giving an account of him.

I first saw Stuffy (Plate 12), as I later named him, when he was with his mother shortly before he was due to leave her. He then had a front horn about 8 inches long and, at the end of a run of good years, was well rounded and furnished, and about three and a half years old.

Mother and son were feeding in a wide grassy valley about eight o'clock of a dull morning, so I dropped the boys amongst some rocks near the top of our slope, and made my way down it to the cover of a group of saplings near the bottom, where it looked as if some good pictures were a certainty. But, as usual, the three boys, though they had all seen many rhino, could not restrain their curiosity, and showed themselves, so that, just as I focused and Stuffy turned round to give me my first exposure, he saw them from 100 yards away, and in a couple of seconds was charging up the hill to scatter them. They knew all about such games, of course, and fled long before he got near them; then he came down the slope again past me, got my wind, stopped, wheeled and snorted until I shouted at him, and then went back to mother, who had taken no interest whatever in his antics. They both moved off slowly away over the far rise and gave no opportunity of another picture in a mile of following up through open tree and grass forest, particularly as Stuffy discouraged the taking of chances by often turning round suddenly to stare, though mother remained quite uninterested.

Having taken careful note of his appearance, I easily recognised him when I saw him again two years later, within a



PLATE 12. "STUFFY"
A few seconds later he sent me up a tree.



PLATE 13. "STUFFY" AS A FIVE-YEAR OLD
He began ranging up and down trying for my wind.



PLATE 15. RHINOCEROS GRAZING
After drought and every rib showing.



PLATE 14. RHINOCEROS IN A SALT LICK
Note the wound behind the shoulder.

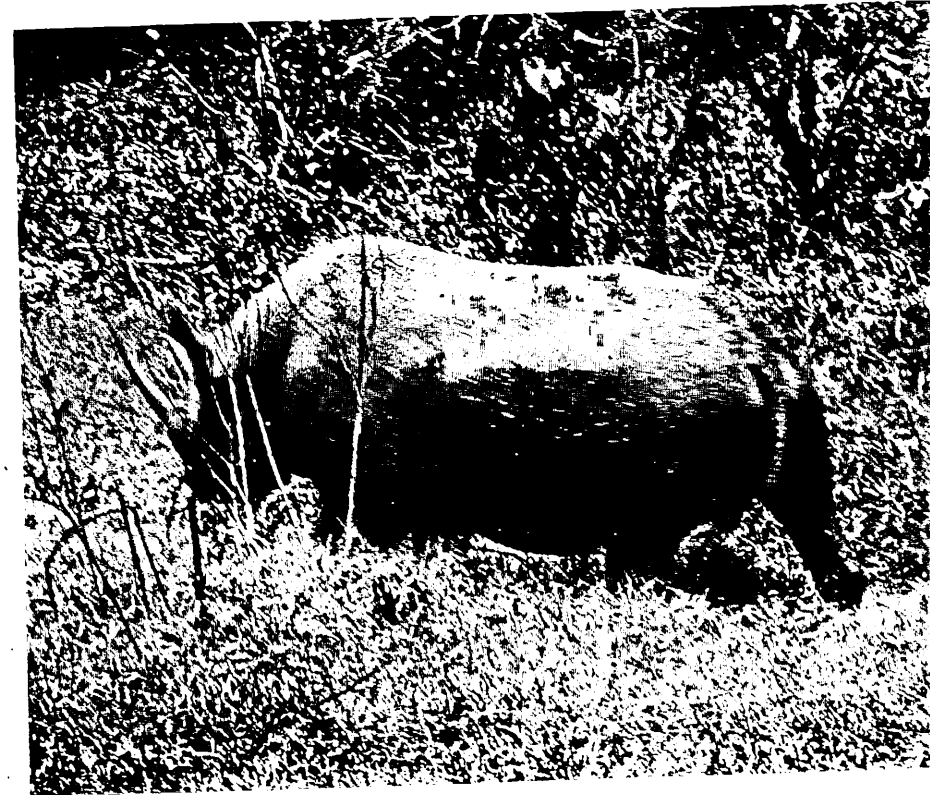


PLATE 16. THE PLEASANTEST VIEW OF A RHINOCEROS



PLATE 17. MOTHER AND CALF



PLATE 18. MOTHER AND CALF

The cow has an abnormally long horn. These are forest rhinoceros.

furlong of the same place. I was on the east side of the valley this time, and he came down the western slope past the place where he had routed the boys, and almost straight up towards me. I had picked a nice tree (I am the best judge of a climbable tree in Africa!) and stood behind it as he came up the next little ridge about 30 yards away. By bad luck it was again a very dull and cloudy day, so I had to risk under-exposure as he was moving, and so called upon him to halt. His tail whirled up, and he at once began ranging up and down trying for my wind, while I got one picture (Plate 13); then, evidently spotting movement as I changed the slide round, charged across the shallow dip between us and put me up my tree. Always on these occasions there are leaves and twigs obstructing the chance of a picture, and he soon went off, trotting with his tail whirling aloft, without another exposure being possible. Still I had quite a good silhouette of him ramping up and down in a real bad temper.

He went to a half-mile patch of bush, which he had evidently taken over as the centre of his territory, for there had been no rhino in it on my previous visits, and there I found him next year. He was lying down, and his front horn, now about 17 inches long instead of the 14 of the previous meeting, was just showing in front of a bush on the edge of a narrow clear lane. Focusing the camera, I roused him with offensive remarks about his personal appearance, temper and ancestry, but without profit; for he ramped up and down inside the thick stuff and would not show clear for a picture. He was too cross, and there were no suitable trees, so I had to give it up and left him.

My last meeting with Stuffy is told in Chapter Six, when he showed the same impetuosity and desire to abolish me. He was the only rhino I have known which did not haver about charging, but got off the mark as soon as he had located his man. Before our last meeting he had made it impossible for a couple of Meru to carry out their intention of cultivating a

small plot at the south end of his beat; clearing them off repeatedly during the day, and moving round their hut at night making threatening noises, so that they had to give up the idea. I fear his impetuosity has since led to his death at the hands of another sportsman.

A trick that Stuffy tried to play on me was to lie down and wait for me to come closer, so that a charge would get home effectively, and I saw it done by another rhino.

A cow with a six-month calf came across a wide valley towards me, from about half a mile away, so I circled them to get downwind before they should enter the big bay for which they were heading. This was about 300 yards wide and almost bare of cover, so that when they kept over to the windward side I was stumped, even the most careful and devious stalking failing to bring me within camera range. The cow was very suspicious, often mounting on an anthill and having a good look round as she pivoted slowly on top of it, trying the wind and staring in my direction. What had upset her I do not know, for I never got within 100 yards and, as I was very little exposed to view, ought to have been outside her range of vision. Finally, they both retired about a quarter of a mile and faced round, watching the bushes at the foot of the slope containing the main valley, while I had gone round once more and was working down under cover of these same bushes, which were considerably scattered. Eventually I got to one of the lowest clumps with the camera ready, but they were in 2-foot high grass, and I waited for a better chance. The calf was standing a few feet from the cow when she walked to it, pushed it right up against her hindquarter, and lay down facing me, only her horns and the top of her head showing above the grass.

The calf had also lain down, and they remained quite still waiting for me to come into the open. I photographed her head and horns showing just above the grass, then went home. Her tactics were admirable, for there were only a few bushes for cover, and no trees, so that if I had come out into the open,

a charge would have been a certainty and very difficult to avoid. Ten pounds is the fee for shooting a rhino, and I have never yet found it worth the money.

Rhinoceros are mainly browsing beasts, but they also graze at times, and, after rain following two years of drought, I photographed a rhino whose every rib was showing, and which was alternately eating grass and small bushes.

Queerly stupid animals at times, they seem to be given to daydreams which render them impervious to ordinary sounds. I have mentioned in Chapter Five an instance of this characteristic which manifested itself just after a lion had been shot. On another occasion, quite near the same place, we had just returned to the car and were standing in the open road chatting when an old rhino passed slowly across our front within 40 yards without taking the slightest notice of us.

This was a beast with a peculiarly long and dipped back, the like of which I never saw before or since, although the general shape of individuals varies considerably. Stuffy himself was of very compact build, and I have seen long, lean rhino, high up on the Aberdares, which were greyhounds compared with some of the massive pachyderms which live near my house.

The behaviour of rhino towards a car is, like everything else about them, eccentric. At times they will stare stupidly from 30 yards away, or make off at the sound long before they can have distinguished its nature. In the early morning, before sunrise, they are often decidedly truculent: I have several times been held up by one which refused to quit, but stood facing me too near the track for a dash past, while twice a bull has moved off and drawn me into passing, and then come galloping back with offensive intention, though too late to do damage. There have been several instances of their attacking cars, even chasing them for over a mile, and quite lately one villain has smashed up a car on the Nairobi-Mombasa road, and followed it up by damaging a lorry enough to halt it for repairs.

Comparing elephant with rhino as pests, the elephant has it every time, since they are much more numerous and go for crops which rhino do not touch; but there is one characteristic in which they differ considerably. On coming across a fence, a rhino will just push his horn under the lowest wire, give a heave, and carry straight on, often with part of the fence. Elephant will walk a long way beside a fence without doing any damage, often turning back.

Against these rhino "pros" we have many "cons." They will stick to a patch of cover even amongst farms, often making a thorough nuisance of themselves on a road, chasing boys and cattle. It would be thought that they are easy to deal with under such circumstances, but far from it. The stuff they live in is so thick that one cannot see them at 5 yards, while it provides perfect cover from view, but none from a charge. On more than one occasion I have detected the feet of a rhino at under 10 yards and had to clear out, there being no chance of dropping him until too close to prevent my probable decease as well—a contingency for which I have no use whatever.

Two more things remain to be said about rhino. The first is his frequent change of colour due to wallowing in various coloured earths. I have seen them in Somaliland, brilliantly white after taking a dustbath in white gypsum dust; almost jet black after being thoroughly washed in heavy rain; bright yellow in some of the clay pools in the Aberdares, and almost any colour between that and brown at other times.

The other thing is their habit of sweeping their horns or a forefoot through their droppings to spread them about. This practice is not confined to fresh droppings only, for I have seen an old bull come mooning along through the bush until he got to a place where several sets of droppings lay in hollows scraped out with his predecessors' feet at the base of trees beside the game path. He stopped at each and swept them about with his 30-inch front horn.

There are two African stories about this habit. One is that

the rhino and the elephant had a competition as to which could make the biggest pile. The rhino found that he was likely to lose, so spread his about to make them look larger; but was caught cheating by the elephant, since when there has always been bad blood between them.

The other, which was told me by a Rhodesian, is that when the Almighty issued hides to all animals for their suits, he also gave them a large needle with which to sew them together. The rhino was pondering over cutting-out problem with his needle in his mouth, when the hyæna passed and made some ribald remark. In the ensuing explosion of violent temper the rhino swallowed the needle and has been looking for it ever since. This also explains why his hide fits so badly for he had to carry on with an acacia thorn.

I do not like rhino. They have spoiled too many photographic opportunities, ruined too many nights' sleep by the habit of snorting offensively at one's tent, thus making it necessary to get out of bed to deal with a possible attack, which they have frightened me considerably at times, and kept me on the strain whenever hunting with the camera in their territory. The elephant is not so dangerous, though one has to be careful with him too, but he is a gentleman, whereas the rhino is a cad!

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AFRICAN CAMERA HUNTS

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