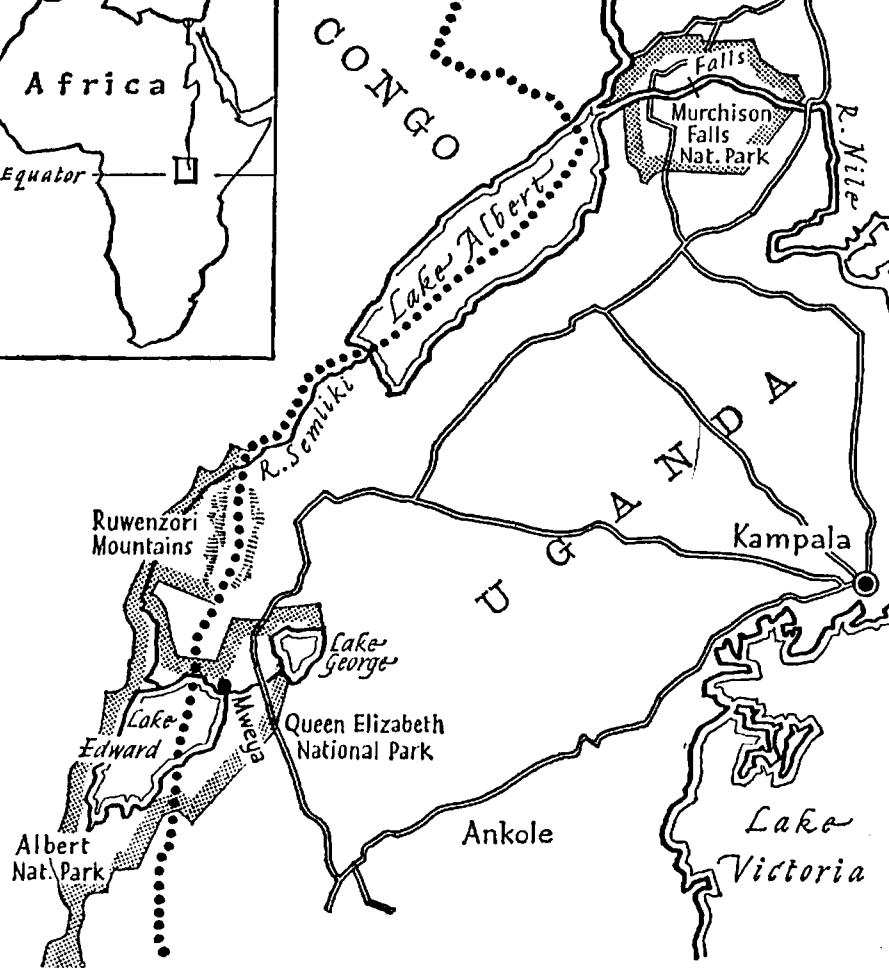


Western Uganda

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Wild Animals in an African National Park

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Rhinoceros and Giraffe

Neither rhinoceroses nor giraffes are found in the Queen Elizabeth Park, where the country is not very suitable for them. But there are about two hundred black rhinoceroses, and the same number of giraffes living north of the Nile in the Murchison Falls Park, in which there are sizable acacia woods.

In Africa there are two kinds of rhinoceros. They are known as the black rhinoceros and the white rhinoceros, though in fact they are both the same slaty-grey colour.

The white rhino gets its name from the Dutch word *wyd*, meaning wide or broad. This refers to the animal's great square muzzle and has nothing to do with its colour — it is sometimes called the square-lipped rhinoceros. Its muzzle is like that of the hippopotamus and is perfectly designed for cropping the grass which this rhino eats. The black rhino has a long, pointed overlapping upper lip which enables it to strip leaves and shoots from the bushes and low-growing trees on which it feeds.

The black rhinoceros is the commoner animal. It lives in suitable country throughout a large part of eastern, southern, and central Africa. The white rhino is now very rare in the wild state. There is a southern race, found only in a few places in South Africa, and a northern race living in adjoining parts of the Sudan, the Congo, and north-west Uganda. (Three other kinds of rhinoceros are found in Asia; they are even rarer.)

The white rhino is the larger of the two animals and, after the elephants, is the largest land animal in the world. A large bull stands over six feet at the shoulder, weighs more than three tons, has a much larger head than the black rhino, and usually holds this low down, near to the ground. The black rhino stands about

five feet and weighs under two tons. From the end of the nose to the tip of the tail, a white rhino bull may measure fourteen feet, and a black rhino may measure twelve.

Both these rhinos have two horns, which are composed of a tightly packed mass of hair-like fibres growing on the nose. The front horn is the longer of the two and, in exceptional cases, may reach over fifty inches. The horns of the white rhino tend to be slightly longer than those of the black: sixty-two and a half inches is the record length. Both rhinos have three toes on each of their feet. This makes their tracks quite distinct from those of the hippopotamus, which has four toes. Both kinds of rhinoceros breed slowly, one calf being dropped every four years or so after a pregnancy averaging sixteen months with the black and eighteen months with the white rhino. Both kinds of rhino seem normally to live for about thirty years.

Both rhinos have poor eye-sight, but fairly good senses of smell and hearing — their ears, particularly the trumpet-shaped, hair-fringed ears of the white rhino, are constantly twitching and twisting. But the two animals vary greatly in their habits and temperaments.

The white rhino is placid by nature. The black rhino is one of the most unpredictable animals in Africa. It is a mixture of truculence and timidity, and can be extremely stupid. The black rhino is always liable to charge, or at least rush towards, any unfamiliar object, whatever it may be. It charges with its head held up, lowering it only when close enough to use its horns. The rhino comes very fast, and is surprisingly nimble for so large an animal, for it can turn sharply even at full speed. But it often misses its aim and goes straight on.

Although black rhinos are sometimes seen in small parties, (and calves naturally stay with their mothers), they are usually solitary in habit. The white rhino is much more sociable, so that small family groups of five or six animals are not at all uncommon. When a female white rhino is accompanied by a calf, she always walks behind it, prodding and steering it with her horn.

A black rhino calf almost invariably follows its mother. A possible reason for this strange difference is that the white rhino inhabits more open country than the black; the calf is, therefore, more liable to be attacked by lions. As this attack comes from behind, the mother rhino can best protect her calf by staying between it and this possible danger.

Both kinds of rhino enjoy wallowing in muddy pools, which helps them to get rid of ticks and biting flies; but they hardly ever cross large rivers. The black rhino lives to the north of the Nile in the Murchison Park, but is not found to the south of the river. The white rhino lives only on the west bank of the Nile north of Lake Albert. The reason for this is not clear. There is vegetation suitable for both kinds of rhino on both sides of the river. Moreover, the black rhinos in the Murchison Park frequently visit certain islands in the Nile to reach a food-plant which they particularly like. They have to wade belly-deep, through turbulent water, to get there.

Walking about in black rhino country can be exciting, for one may come upon the animals quite suddenly and it is impossible to anticipate their actions. Once I nearly trod on a rhino, which was lying on the ground. I thought that it was an ant-hill, but was saved in time by noticing a twitching ear. On another occasion, I was walking up a dry river-bed in which there were patches of thick reeds. I suddenly realized that I was very close to a large animal of some sort, but had no idea what it was as it was completely hidden. An angry snort, and a noise like the rush of an express train, showed that there had been a black rhino less than four yards away. Luckily it went off in the opposite direction.

Like many other animals, black rhinos can be inquisitive. If one stays quite still beside a tree, or on top of an ant-hill, they will sometimes come to within a few yards before realizing what they are approaching. In some circumstances, they will respond to a whistle, and trot up to see what has caused this unusual sound.

The only white rhinos in Uganda live in a small area in the north-

west of the country where, a few years ago, there were three or four hundred. But these peaceful, inoffensive creatures are an easy prey for poachers. They kill them for the horn, which people in India and China believe produces a potent medicine. By 1961 so many had been killed that there were less than one hundred left. The white rhino is one of the rarest animals in the world; so it was decided to try and move a few to the Murchison Falls Park before they were all exterminated.

Catching and transport were not the only problems. Would the rhinos eat the grass which was growing in the Park? How would the white rhino and the black rhino get along together? If the white rhinos could be caught and moved, would they stay in the Park, where they were put, or would they wander away?

The grass was found to be suitable, and it was learned from South Africa that the black and white rhinos live side by side, in one of the reserves, with hardly any friction. Whether they would stay in the Murchison Falls Park could only be discovered by experience.

Ten white rhinos were caught by a team of experienced animal-catchers. They worked from a truck, catching one animal at a time. First they drove alongside, then slipped a noose over the head, and finally secured the legs with a rope. The rhino was then lifted on to a lorry by means of a winch, and moved to a prepared stockade at the catching camp. In the stockade the captured rhinos soon settled down, taking food and water within a few hours. Some days later each one had to be persuaded into its own travelling crate and moved to the Murchison Falls Park (a distance of two hundred miles by road) where the Warden was ready to receive them.

The first rhinos to arrive were a mother and her calf, which had travelled in separate crates. The cow moved out cautiously with her tail curled up tightly like a pig's. She stood under a tree for a few minutes and then walked off into the bush.

The rhino calf was released immediately afterwards. First it circled the lorry rather suspiciously. Then it called to its mother

in a husky voice, rather like the greeting whinny of a horse. The cow heard the call and replied. The animals walked towards each other; and, as soon as they were again united, they trotted off together in the direction of the Nile. Their recent astonishing adventures might have been part of their normal lives.

The rest of the move went off equally well, though two of the ten animals died soon after arrival, probably because of some internal damage suffered during capture. One of them was a cow, whose very young calf the Warden adopted and tamed. Christened Obongi, after the place where it was born, the little rhino soon became a great favourite with the staff and visitors to the Park. Obongi is now well grown, but has remained both tame and friendly.

The remaining white rhinos seem to have accepted their new home; and another small importation has already taken place. If twenty of these rare animals can be safely established in the Park, they should be able to form a small breeding colony in a place where they will always be secure.

Where the black rhinos live in the Murchison Park, one may also see giraffes. Both browse off leaves and shoots, and favour the dry, thorny scrub country where the acacia trees grow. In Uganda alone, there are twenty-five different kinds of acacia, and they vary in size from large trees to quite small bushes. The giraffes feed on the taller trees. They strip the leaves off the upper branches with their long, narrow, rough tongues. The rhinos take the bushes.

The giraffe is the tallest animal in the world. A large bull, whose neck alone is over six feet long, stands over eighteen feet to the top of his short, skin-covered horns, and weighs about one ton. The cows are two or three feet shorter. Not only does this great height allow giraffes to browse off tall trees; it enables them to see their enemies from a long way off. They have excellent eye-sight.

Other animals, such as antelopes and zebras, often associate with giraffes, and I have one particularly happy recollection of a great

mixed herd in the Kidepo Valley. There were forty or more giraffes (the average number in a herd is about twenty), hundreds of zebras, and so many antelopes that it was almost impossible to count them. These were of three different kinds, however, and among them were a number of elands, largest of all the antelopes. Other animals probably feel safe in the company of giraffes, for giraffes command such a good view that it saves them from the necessity of posting sentinels. Many antelopes have this habit of posting sentinels to guard the rest of the herd from danger when it is feeding or drinking.

The height of giraffes can be a disadvantage to them. They always seem to move awkwardly when they have to bring their heads down to browse off low-growing branches, or to drink; and to make this possible at all, they have to spread their great legs wide apart in a series of slow jerky movements, which are comical to watch. Giraffes usually sleep standing up. It appears that they find it difficult either to lie down or to get up again.

Giraffes are peaceful and inoffensive creatures. Their large brown eyes, fringed with heavy lashes, seem to express their gentle characters. They rarely fight; and their only effective weapon against lions, which sometimes attack them, is a kick with their long, powerful legs. They can run fast, too, in spite of the appearance of slow-motion in their movements. As they gallop across the open grass-land, with their necks undulating gently, they look like ships sailing upon the rolling waves of the sea.

When bull-giraffes fight they do so in a most formal way. They stand opposite one another with their legs apart, and each takes his turn to buffet the other with his head, until finally one gives up. Very occasionally one knocks the other down; but generally neither bull seems to suffer any harm. Young giraffes, which are not normally playful, sometimes have mock fights of this same sort.

When they are courting, male and female giraffes show affection by rubbing their necks together. One may truthfully say that they indulge in necking.