

ALSO BY NORMAN E. HICKIN

*Forest Refreshed*  
*Caddis Larvae*

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# *African Notebook*

*The notes of a biologist in East Africa*



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## Rhino

Of all the animals of Africa it was the first sight of the rhino at close quarters that made me gasp. This was not the great shapeless, listless mass, encased in thick concrete walls and iron bars as thick as my wrist, which I had seen in zoos. Ponderous, yes, but as I was to learn, an animal of extraordinary agility. We soon made our own strict rules about driving in the vicinity of rhino. With only one exception, the rhino we sighted were in sparse forest or dense shrub where one was continually trying to peer around the corner to see what was there. This does not make comfortable driving for one's companions. One is forever slowing down to the approach to a hazard, which could possibly hide a rhino, then accelerating; also, of course, not keeping one's eyes on the track or route ahead meant that we inevitably hit a number of obstacles.

The rhino has one similarity with the elephant in that, in spite of the gigantic body size, the nature of the country with its tangled rough forest, generally broken up with fallen trees and trailing plants, meant that they merged perfectly into their background.

### 'Gertie'

We first saw Gertie and her calf in the late afternoon of the 11th August; this was a couple of miles from Ol Tukai, on the dried-up dusty bed of Lake Amboseli near the southern boundary of Kenya. We wound the Land-Rover in and out of the car-high thickets with Komati, a game ranger up in front with us. We had already enjoyed the thrill of seeing a herd of the rare gerenuk giraffe-necked antelope before reaching Ol Tukai, but now the afternoon was drawing on and the intense heat of the day was abating. Then suddenly, without warning, we found ourselves in a glade between the thickets

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with two rhinoceroses facing us. The large female had gigantic horns and she faced us, raising quite a dust as she scraped the sand with her back feet. We were just at thirty yards, and, keeping the engine running, we seized our cameras. After about a minute she became uneasy and started to move off—and we thought it best to move off too.

Then, within a quarter of a mile an earth-shaking and heart-stopping commotion took place. A rhino charged us from our left front. I braked hard and he missed us by about two feet, passing in front of us, and after going twenty yards he wheeled and stood with his nose twitching in the air. When our hearts recommenced to beat we held our course and proceeded.

In another glade we found fourteen lions, and afterwards photographed another rhino and twenty elephants.

We learned later that Gertie had a world record horn. No one has had an opportunity of putting a tape-measure along it, and as we drove away we hoped that it would be a long time before that was possible, for it was estimated to be the longest horn on any rhino living or dead, and to be about sixty inches long.

Soon we were to learn that Gertie had broken her horn in some combat but the broken piece was never found.

We spent the whole of this day in the surroundings of Lake Amboseli. We had made arrangements for Komati to be ready at seven o'clock so that we were up to brew a cup of tea whilst it was still dark. As we were drinking we looked out of the banda and there, about two hundred yards away, two rhinoceroses browsed round the bushes, and a little further away an elephant started to march across a marsh lifting up its feet like a ballet dancer and flapping its great ears.

When Komati came we all got into the Land-Rover and off we drove across the old bed of the lake. At this time of the day the rhinos leave the bushes and browse in the open. When we had gone about three miles we saw the large female rhinoceros 'Gertie' with the record horn and her calf which we had seen the previous evening. She was out on the open bed of the lake, but not so very far from cover, but she was an extraordinary sight as she had gathered a large bundle of old dried grass on her horn. We stopped the Land-Rover and the rhinos also stopped and looked at us for about half a

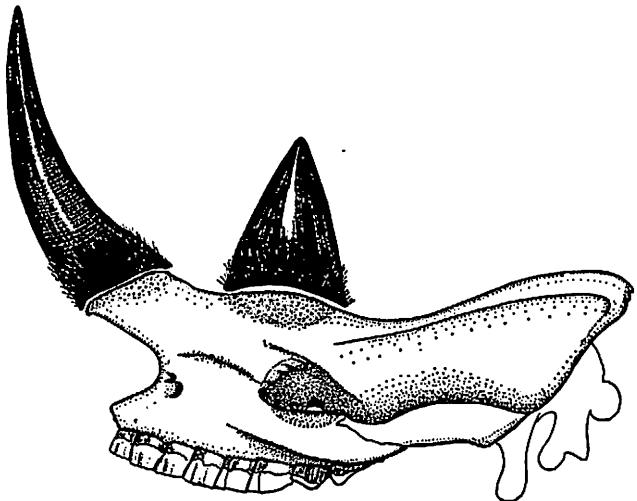


Fig. 10

The horns of the rhino are composed of dense fibrous hair compressed together. If the underside of a horn is examined it is found to have a porous appearance which increases its superficial area enormously. The bones of the skull where the horns rest are rugged and covered with bony protrusions. The bases of the horns show their hairy nature where the hair tends to split off.

minute and then they went off at a fast trot, and I just managed to get them with a cine-camera. Where we had seen another rhinoceros the previous evening there were now elephants and again we took photographs, together with some of the black and white ibises. We returned about half past ten for breakfast and we made arrangements for Komati to return at four o'clock when we would go out again. In the afternoon we went north-east from Ol Tukai and not very far from the Safari Lodge we turned around a clump of grass and there was a leopard stretched across an uprooted tree trunk. It was off in a flash as I brought the Land-Rover to a halt, but by very good luck it came towards us and stood staring at us, only twenty feet away. This gave me time to take a photograph which came out well. Then, after eyeing us for about fifteen seconds it

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slunk off with a graceful, lithe movement and I took another photograph.

Later in the afternoon we came to Observation Hill, a rocky pyramid set in the midst of the swamps. Apparently it was the convention to get one's car to the top. It had a hairpin bend a short distance from the summit with some very large boulders to negotiate, but we managed to do it, and there at the top the whole district lay around us. We could hear the hippos snorting and grunting in the swamp and we could see a rhinoceros, elephants and a girafe, and when we were on our way back to Ol Tukai for a few brief seconds Kilimanjaro to the south of us came into view, an unforgettable sight. The great snowfields seemed suspended in the air without any visible support and it was just going dark as we got into the bandas. One gets all the tropical noises at Ol Tukai: the croaking of a variety of frogs; the peculiar sawing noise made by a leopard as it strolled around; and a background of crashes, grunts and coughs from the darkness of the surrounding bushes.

### *The Invisible Manyara Rhino*

This was one of the outstanding days to which we had been looking forward—the journey to the crater rim of Ngorongoro. The first fifty miles took us to Makayuni where the very dusty road takes a southwards loop. For many miles the open plains were very bare and lacking in interest, but when we came to a small village a few miles north of where we knew Lake Manyara to lie we were on the fringe of an extensive forest.

We obtained petrol here which was rather unexpected and a little further on we came to a delightful picnic spot under a large tree. Coming to a track towards the lake we found it barred by a pole, and a Tanzanian game scout escorted us to the game warden's office. He turned up after a few minutes and made out the necessary authorisation to go into the game reserve. This was an instance of the advisability of recounting one's plans in order to evoke local knowledge. The game warden strongly urged us to give up any idea of proceeding to Shinyanga via Endulen, but to cross the Serengeti via Serenara (as we had previously been advised) and then go along the wildebeest migration route from Banagi between the two rivers (Mbalageti and Mimus) to meet the road between

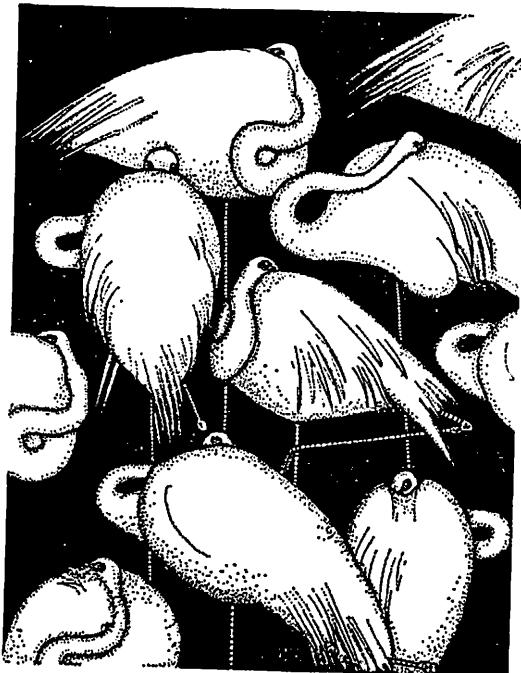


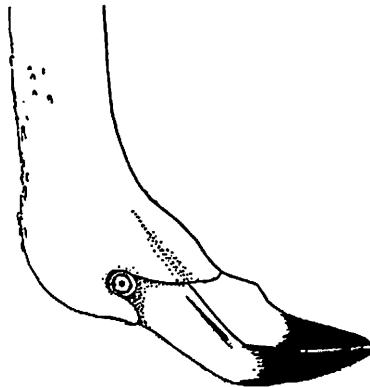
Fig. 11

Walking along the shore of Lake Manyara towards the dazzling white line of birds, groups of pelicans and flamingoes would get up and fly further along the lake-shore. Looking through the binoculars at the flamingoes they seemed all sinuous necks, only one leg apiece and there was one bright little eye watching us.

Musoma and Mwanza. We took this advice and our experiences were most rewarding. The game warden arranged for a young game scout to accompany us and off we went. The track first went through forest, down a rocky track, and although there was reputed to be the greatest concentration of rhino in Africa in the Lake Manyara area, we saw only waterbuck and bushbuck, although the track was thick with the dung of many rhino. (It was also the greatest concentration area of tsetse flies we encountered in Africa!) The

Fig. 12

When the flamingo feeds, the head is held upside down and moves towards the body. Water enters at the tip of the beak and leaves at the angle, being pumped in by the action of the uppermost lower jaw. The microscopic, and not so microscopic, living organisms are sieved out by fringes inside the bill and notches on the tongue. The large tongue prevents large debris and organisms from being swallowed. Sometimes the mud is so rich in nitrogen and non-living nutrients that it serves as food on its own account.



track was much too rocky and rough to exceed the fourteen miles an hour necessary to prevent the flies from getting into the car and it was too stifling hot to have the windows closed, so we stuck it out. Slowly traversing some high reeds in which buffalo were grazing we came out on to an extensive lawn leading down to the lake, which was a breathtaking sight. The edge was a brilliant, quivering white, and as we approached nearer we could make out immense numbers of pelicans and flamingoes. Small parties of the birds were constantly taking off and alighting again. A wide fringe of foul-smelling mud did not allow a very close approach, but the shore was strewn with the long tapering flame-crimson feathers of the flamingoes. We could see the buffalo herd on our right occasionally leaving the cover of the reeds and a herd of about a hundred wildebeest careered up and down the shore. As we ate our lunch under the shade of a solitary tree we felt secure in the solitude.

Back on to the road we soon had to climb out of this section of the rift valley which was rather tough in places and we met a Tsetse Fly Control Point. The two fly boys collected eighty-seven flies from inside and outside the car. We fancied that these fly boys

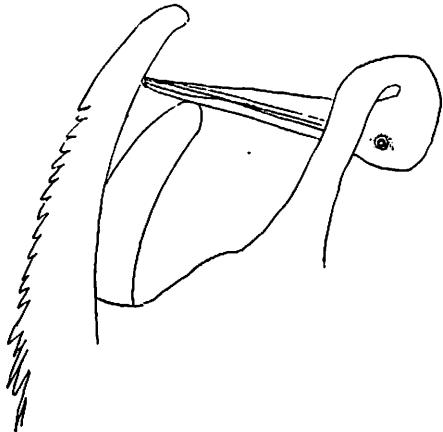


Fig. 53

When sketching birds, from nature that is, one is struck by the infinite number of postures which can be assumed by them. Birds can be watched getting into almost impossible situations during the preening operations. Of course, the feet and the beak can reach every feather, but in doing so the head often disappears from view and it would be necessary to include such a drawing with many others in order for it to be believed by the viewer. The pelicans almost tie themselves in knots. Add to preening, the flight of birds, and the flexible nature of the form of birds can scarcely be exaggerated.

must have enjoyed a bonus on the total flies caught as they carefully removed all the dead tsetse we had killed on the windscreen with our little transparent box. Then after a time we tackled the last ascent up the crater wall through forest and then down a shrubby hillside. The last few miles was on the rim itself and we were able to look down on to the crater floor two thousand feet below—bathed in the afternoon sunshine. A number of buffalo grazed on the hillside, rather unconcerned and like domestic cattle. Our banda contained several rooms and a bathroom with water heated by a fire under a forty-gallon drum. At this altitude it was distinctly cold at night and a fire was lit at sundown. The house boy allotted to us was named Elias and he baked us some bread.

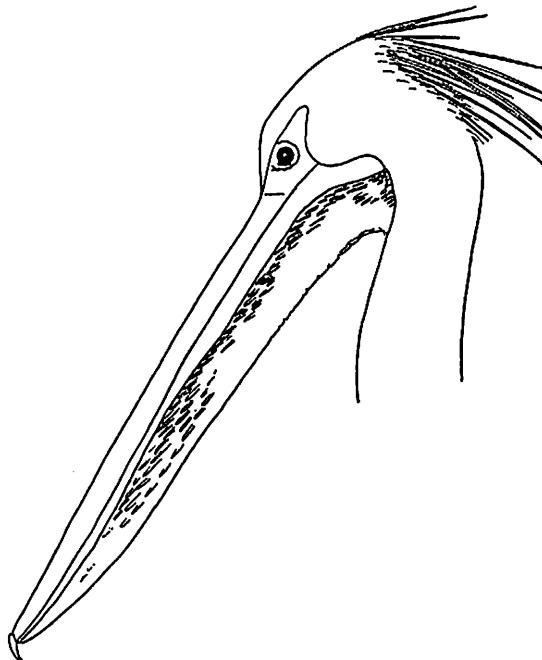


Fig. 54

The pelicans belong to an ancient bird group that have remained unchanged for many million years. The beak is relatively enormous and when the mandibles are moved independently the whole head seems to move with them. Like their close allies the cormorants, there is a strong well-defined tooth at the beak's tip. On Lake Victoria we saw three of them fishing as a team; with their pouches in the water they swam until they met together and then closed their beaks and swallowed.

#### Black and White

There are two species of rhinoceros in Africa. The black rhinoceros, *Diceros bicornis*, and the white rhinoceros, *Ceratotherium simum*. The common names are not much help. The black rhino is, in fact, a slatey grey, whilst the white is greyish black. The two species can, however, be distinguished with certainty and ease by the following



Fig. 15

The black rhino is a browser and uses the finger-like projection on the upper lip to help pull leaves into its mouth.

features. The upper lip of the black rhino is triangular, somewhat resembling a small proboscis and it is prehensile, coming in useful for browsing. That of the white rhino is square, transverse and there is no proboscis-like prolongation. This animal is a grazer, exclusively. The nostril of the black is oval, whilst that of the white is visible only as an elongated slit parallel to the mouth. In the nape of the neck of the white there is a large fleshy lump called the nuchal hump. It is absent in the black rhino. The footprints can be distinguished with ease, that of the white showing a deep indentation in the hind margin, which is not present in the black. The three toes are much more pronounced in the white than in the black.

The white rhino is much the larger animal, standing up to a foot higher at the shoulder than the black, and may weigh up to four thousand pounds whilst the black only reaches a weight of two thousand five hundred pounds.

There is a great difference in temperament. The black is nervous,



Fig. 16

The proboscis-like finger on the upper lip gives the lip a triangular shape when viewed from the front, but it is capable of considerable distension, or it can be tucked away almost out of sight.

curious and is ill-tempered, often with little provocation, and charges and horns the object of its annoyance. The white is docile and sluggish by comparison. It is mild-tempered and timid, and seldom charges, which is a good thing as it gallops faster than a man can run!

#### *Lonely Rhino*

It is usual, when driving around England, to turn to one's companion and refer to the varied nature of the countryside. Africa can often match it. If one takes a drive from the crater rim at Ngorongoro to Seranera in the middle of the Serengeti plains, it is, in the dry season, an easy day's work. But nothing could be more varied. Starting at cold misty dawn in tropical rain forest, the backsides of buffalo poke towards you and heads turn, balancing their great horn hooks.

Elephants have strewn branches about which have been stripped of their leaves and half chewed. Batch-loaf-like piles of dung indicate their near presence, so caution through the mist is necessary. Then the forest dwindles, and with it the mist, showing rough grassy hills rather Cotswold-like except that the only two human beings in sight carry spears! The track skirts round wild, treeless, valleys and several times rises over a pass, then plunges again into the next. It gets hotter, then the long rocky valley to the Olduvai

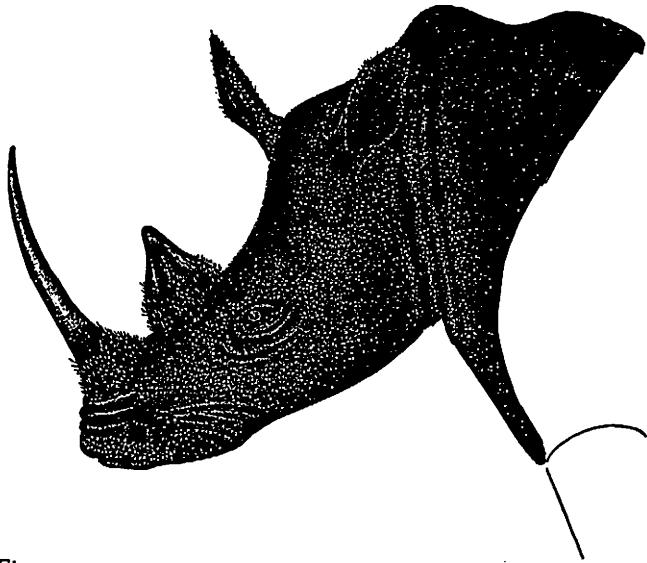


Fig. 57

The most obvious character differentiating the white rhino from the black is the possession of an extra hump between the back of the skull and the shoulder blades in the former. This is the 'nuchal' hump. The white rhino is much the rarer; until relatively recently it was confined to a small area in Zululand, to an area in Northern Uganda, and the contiguous areas in the Sudan, but it has recently been 'planted' elsewhere, such as around the Murchison Falls in Uganda.

gorge has to be tackled. Inhospitable thorns and rocks line the bare dusty slabs down which the vehicle is forced in many uneasy jumps from slab to slab. The wind blows down the valley just a little faster than the Land-Rover can be driven, so that dust envelopes all. Eventually, that is left behind and the grassy plains come into view. It is a relief that the earth is once again flat and there is enough grass to cover it. Grey-blue mountains stretch across the far distance as we cut across the head of the Olduvai gorge towards Lion Hill. The earth was more sparsely covered and the dead grass was spiky. We were now amongst saucer-like shallow valleys and the track wound through them as two smooth ruts. 'Kifaru', I said, as I

Fig. 58

The white rhino is square-lipped, it does not possess the proboscis-like finger of the upper lip, as found in the black species, and it is predominantly a grazer. The white rhino is generally placid and timid, but the black is aggressive and bad-tempered. In the films of safari life it is the white rhino one sees when the heroine strays from the camp, but it is the black rhino we see punching the Land-Rover with his horn.



noticed the track of a rhino keeping to the rut and going in the same direction as ourselves. His clover-leaf like foot prints stretching to the horizon mile after mile showed him to be a rhino with a single-minded purpose. His prints were clear cut in the dust, no detritus having been blown on to them, so that we judged him (or her) to have passed this way not long before. Eventually the ground deteriorated, as far as driving was concerned, and once when I got on to some loose sand on a hill we had to get out and push, but when we surmounted the hill a single tree grew, a hundred yards or so away to our left, and underneath, taking advantage of the only shade for many miles, was our rhino. He heard or smelled us and got up, turned around, and faced us. Our maximum speed for comfort through the rough tussocky stuff we now found ourselves in was about twenty miles an hour, so we reluctantly turned towards our destination and left him without his photograph being taken.

He certainly was a very lonely rhino, his only companion a bat-eared fox which was sitting, disconsolately, a little distance away from him.