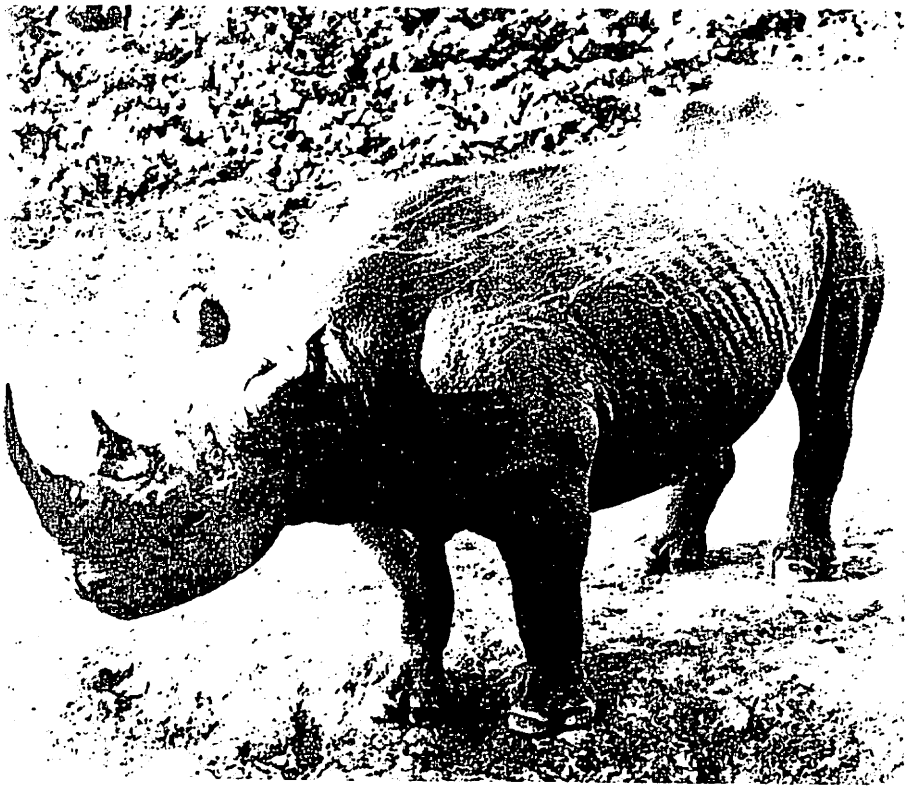


LESS COMMON IN THIS AREA THAN THE WHITE RHINO, THEY ARE FAR MORE AGGRESSIVE

BLACK RHINO OF THE TWIJ

Noted for unprovoked aggression, they remain unmolested

THE black rhino in the Twij country of the Bahr-el-Ghazal Province of the Sudan are notorious for their ferocity. Unprovoked aggression is their order of the day. The Dinka, a cattle-owning tribe, who are unfortunate enough to have these bad neighbours in their tribal territory, are quite unable to deal with them, despite a war-mongering tradition and a fine upstanding physique. Consequently, as these rhino are fully protected by the Sudan's game laws and have no natural enemies, they remain unmolested. Nor do they succumb to the epidemics which attack the cattle and cloven-hoofed varieties of game in the area.

The Twij country, which lies between the junction of the Bahr-el-Arab River and the River Lol, is the only known place on the west bank of the River Nile, in the Southern Sudan, in which the black rhino is found. It was only in recent years that it was discovered that what was thought to be an unusually aggressive tribe of white rhinos in the middle of white rhino country was, in fact, black rhino. The mistake was very natural as the area is seldom visited by big-game hunters, and the nearest known haunts of black rhino are many hundreds of miles away.

I first realised the importance of these rhino to the local people when a Dinka, to whom I had given a letter to deliver in a village only a few miles away, persisted in walking two sides of a triangle along roads, rather than across country. When I saw him setting off in entirely the wrong direction, with my letter carried in the traditional manner in a forked stick, I remonstrated; but the messenger replied, " The rhino in the forest will chase me ! "

On another occasion, a Dinka herdsman arrived at a cattle inoculation centre in the same area carrying rather proudly the shattered remains of the butt end of his spear and announced to me the local equivalent of, " I saw him off ! " He had had a nasty encounter with a rhino which had attacked the cattle he was driving through the forest.

By this time I had become really interested, and wanted to have a look at these rhino at close quarters; so a few mornings later I set off at dawn with Dinka guides to a known haunt of the rhino in some thickish forest near the village of Aweng. I took a rifle with me to satisfy the feeling that a gun gives one when doing anything hazardous, but I had no intention of using it, as it is a long-standing joke that it is far better to be killed by a rhino than to face the wrath of the Sudan's Game Department for shooting one.

After a few miles walk through forest we came to a clearing where one of my guides had his homestead, a patch of cultivation and a wet-weather cattle barn. Not far away I could hear the bells of the cattle out at early morning grazing, so I knew that there was open marshland nearby. A few hundred yards further on, in very dense bush, my guides became worried; we had reached an obvious rhino camp. There were patches of sandy soil under thick bushes with much rhino dung scattered among recent footprints, and deep grooved scratches where the rhino had polished their horns on the ground.

The rhino were not at home, which was just as well, as if we had come on them there we should have been at very close quarters in such thick forest. Leaving the forest we searched the nearby marshland and forest edge, but could see nothing except a few waterbuck, tiang and white-eared cob. However, after another mile or so we came to a fairly open stretch of country on the edge of the forest, where trees had been cleared for cultivation probably two years before.

About 150yds. in front of us we suddenly saw two rhino browsing on some green sprouting bushes; beside the rhino was a waterbuck, which saw us immediately and scampered off. The rhino were quite unable to see us, and the wind was right, so I sat down under a tree to study them. They were a male and female, full grown, and with their battleship grey colour against the green foliage around their knees they looked enormous.

With my binoculars I could see the pointed upper lips which characterise them, differing from those of the white rhino; they appeared to be almost prehensile as they browsed the very succulent " nubuk " bushes. They continued to graze towards us and slightly across our front, remaining close together but never appearing to look up at one another. Their eyesight must have been exceedingly poor, for although we were sitting in the shade of a tree, we were not an inconspicuous group, with open ground between us and them. They grazed and browsed closer and closer to us until we thought we ought to make a move.

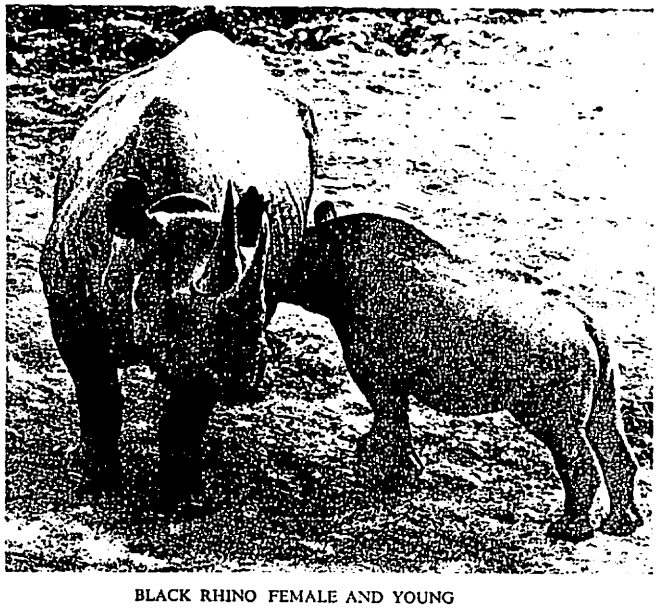
Very slowly we got to our feet and stood behind our tree; by this time the rhino were only about 30yds. from us and getting to a position where they were at right angles to our wind. The minutes raced by, and looking at my watch I realised we had been watching for over half-an-hour, under perfect conditions at this close range, and in perfect light with the morning sun behind us. They were feeding their way home towards their day resting-place which, incidentally, was on our route home, and were getting uncomfortably close to us. Very soon they would be down-wind of us, but we had no way of retiring unseen as our tree was out in the sun, and at that close range the rhino could not fail to see or hear us if we moved. Already the male, which was slightly nearer, was cocking his head in a most suspicious manner and smelling the breeze.

We had a hurried consultation; the opinion of the committee was that it was dangerous to retire, as if we were suddenly seen we should probably be charged. Eventually we decided to try and frighten the rhino, and we all jumped out of the shadow of the tree together, shouting and whooping like madmen, the Dinkas brandishing their spears in a most excited manner. Our good luck held; the rhino were certainly startled—for a second they stood alert rocking their bodies backwards and forwards without moving their legs, then off they both shot down wind and away from us—big square grey tons of power, like jet-propelled coal-waggons.

Having got them on the run all was well, and we watched them disappear towards the thick forest, running with their tails in the air like wild pigs, right past the legs of a herd of giraffe who appeared to take no notice of them.

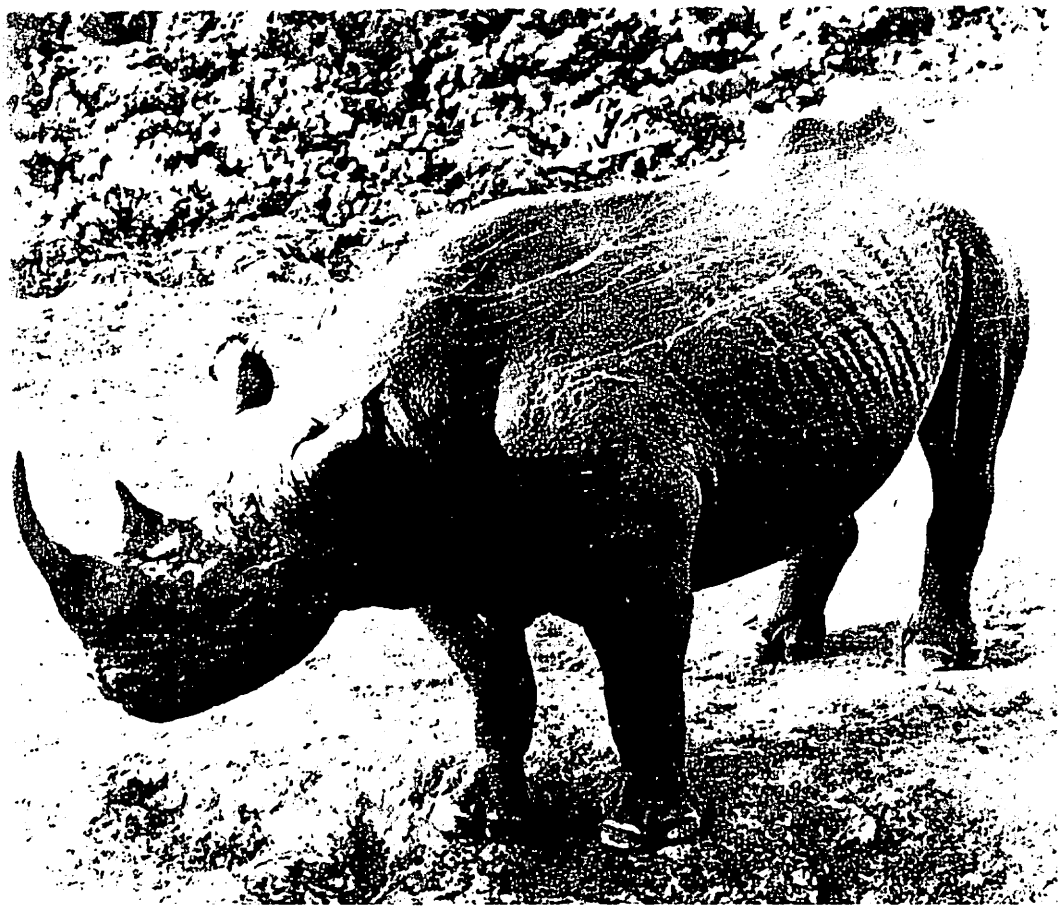
We set off home *via* their resting place and saw them again under the trees, but my guides were confident that we were now quite safe and chatted away most gaily in their own language. The guides were very pleased that they had been able to give me such a good show; they insisted that our good luck was brought by the great ground hornbill bird whose white wing-tips we had seen on our outward journey, for this is a well-known omen of good fortune on a hunting morning.

P. Z. MACKENZIE



BLACK RHINO FEMALE AND YOUNG

The Field, 196, 7 Oct 1950, p. 586



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