



WILD AFRICA

Three Centuries
of Nature Writing
from Africa

EDITED BY
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very uncomfortable, for the wind rose, and there was great appearance of a heavy rain; and the wild beasts are so very numerous in the neighbourhood, that I should have been under the necessity of climbing up the tree, and resting among the branches. About sunset, however, as I was preparing to pass the night in this manner, and had turned my horse loose, that he might graze at liberty, a woman, returning from the labours of the field, stopped to observe me, and perceiving that I was weary and dejected, inquired into my situation, which I briefly explained to her; whereupon, with looks of great compassion, she took up my saddle and bridle, and told me to follow her. Having conducted me into her hut, she lighted up a lamp, spread a mat on the floor, and told me I might remain there for the night. Finding that I was very hungry, she said she would procure me something to eat. She accordingly went out, and returned in a short time with a very fine fish; which, having caused to be half broiled upon some embers, she gave me for supper. The rites of hospitality being thus performed towards a stranger in distress, my worthy benefactress (pointing to the mat, and telling me I might sleep there without apprehension) called to the female part of her family, who had stood gazing on me all the while in fixed astonishment, to resume their task of spinning cotton; in which they continued to employ themselves great part of the night. They lightened their labour by songs, one of which was composed extempore; for I was myself the subject of it. It was sung by one of the young women, the rest joining in a sort of chorus. The air was sweet and plaintive, and the words, literally translated, were these.—“The winds roared, and the rains fell.—The poor white man, faint and weary, came and sat under our tree.—He has no mother to bring him milk; no wife to grind his corn. Chorus. Let us pity the white man; no mother has he, &c. &c.”—Trifling as this recital may appear to the reader, to a person, in my situation, the circumstance was affecting in the highest degree. I was oppressed by such unexpected kindness; and sleep fled from my eyes. In the morning I presented my compassionate landlady with two of the four brass buttons which remained on my waistcoat; the only recompence I could make her.



3

The South African Unicorn

JOHN BARROW
(circa 1797)





The extent to which our understanding of nature has evolved since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century is quite apparent in this passage from John Barrow's (1764–1848) *An Account of Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa* (1801). On the one hand, Barrow, who was a minor government official in Britain before becoming Auditor-General of Public Accounts for the colony, displays a familiarity with Linnean taxonomy and with the skeptical rigor of his age. On the other hand, though, he gullibly allows himself to be led on a misbegotten search for unicorns, and then engages in a lengthy disquisition on the arguments for and against the existence of such a fanciful creature. It seems likely, in retrospect, that the cave-drawings Barrow describes were depictions of a South African oryx in profile (*Oryx beisa*). The oryx is a thickset pale grey antelope whose straight, rapier-like horns would appear to be one horn if seen in profile or if drawn in such a perspective. Barrow's selection makes for interesting reading, if only as a sample of an antiquarian natural history writing—mixing Classical and Biblical allusions with anecdote and hearsay—that would, in a few short decades, be replaced by the new scientific precision of Charles Darwin and his followers.

From *An Account of Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa in the Years 1797 and 1798* (London, 1801).

On the fifteenth we made another long excursion into the Tarka mountains, near where they united with the great chain that runs along the upper part of the Kaffer country. Our object was to find among the drawings, made by the Bosjesmans, the representation of an unicorn. One of the party promised to bring us directly to the spot where he knew such a drawing stood. We set off at an early hour, and rode through several defiles along the beds of temporary streamlets. In one place was a very large and curious cavern formed by a waterfall, that from time to time had desposited a vast mass of stalactitical matter; many of the ramifications were not less than forty or fifty feet in length. Some were twisted and knotted like the roots of an old tree, and others were cellular and cavernous. This great mass, reflected from a sheet of deep water beneath, clear as chrystal, hemmed in by two steep faces of solid rock, and fronted by two old weeping-willows, made as fine a piece of wild and romantic scenery as fancy could design. A little on one side of the cavern, and under a long projecting ridge of smooth white sand-stone, were several sketches of animals, and satirical attempts to represent the colonists in ridiculous situations and attitudes, characterizing them by some of their most common and striking habits. But the grand object of our research was still wanting. The long-necked camelopardalis was easily distinguished among the rest; as was also the rhinoceros and the elephant.

The same kind of black matter that had been found along with the native nitre, was here abundantly adhering to the rocks, and oozing down the sides of the cave. A Bosjesman that belonged to one of the party informed us that his countrymen mixed it with water, and drank it as tea. This cavern was near the source of the Riet river, a small stream that falls into the Fish river.

We still continued our search in the kloofs [cliffs] of the mountains, in the hope of meeting with the figure of the unicorn, the peasantry being equally sanguine to convince me of the truth of their assertions as I was to gratify curiosity. We came, at length, to a very high and concealed kloof, at the head of which was a deep cave covered in front by thick shrubbery. One of the party mounted up the steep ascent, and having made his way through the close brushwood, he gave us notice that the sides of the cavern were covered with drawings. After clearing away the bushes to let in the light, and examining the numerous drawings, some of which were tolerably well executed, and other caricatures, part of a figure was discovered that was certainly intended as the

representation of beast with a single horn projecting from the forehead. Of that part of it which distinctly appeared, the following is a *fac simile* [Barrow includes a drawing with his text]. The body and legs had been erased to give place to the figure of an elephant that stood directly before it.

Nothing could be more mortifying than such an accident; but the peasantry, who could form no idea of the consequence I attached to the drawing of such an animal, seemed to enjoy my chagrin. One being told, however, that a thousand, or even five thousand, rixdollars would be given to any one who would produce an original, they stood gaping with open mouths, and were ready to enlist for an expedition behind the Bambos-berg, where some of them were quite certain the animal was to be found. Imperfect as the figure was, it was sufficient to convince me that the Bosjesmans are in practice of including, among their representations of animals, that of an unicorn; and it also offered a strong argument for the existence of a living original. Among the several thousand figures of animals that, in the course of the journey, we had met with, none had the appearance of being monstrous, none that could be considered as works of the imagination, "creatures of the brain," on the contrary, they were generally as faithful representations of nature as the talents of the artist would allow. An instance of this appeared in the cavern we last visited. The black shell of the *testudo geometrica* was lying on the ground; and the regular figures with which it is marked, and from which it takes its name, had been recently, and very accurately, copied on the side of a smooth rock. It was thought, indeed, from several circumstances, that the savages had slept in the cavern the preceding night.

The unicorn, as it is represented in Europe, is unquestionably a work of fancy; but it does not follow from thence that a quadruped with one horn, growing out of the middle of the forehead, should not exist. The arguments, indeed, that might be offered are much stronger for its existence than the objections are against it. The first idea of such an animal seems to have been taken from Holy Writ; and from the description there given, a representation of the unicorn, very illy conceived, has been assumed as a supporter to regal arms. The animal, to which the writer of the Book of Job, who was no mean historian, puts into the mouth of the Almighty a poetical allusion, has been supposed, with great plausibility, to be the one-horned rhinoceros: "Canst thou bind the unicorn with his band in the furrow? Or will he harrow the vallies after thee? Wilt thou trust him because his strength is great, or wilt thou leave thy labor to him?" Moses also very probably meant the rhinoceros when he mentions the unicorn as having the strength of God. Aristotle had a very different idea of the animal, to which he gives the name of unicorn, for he ascribes it as a species of wild ass with solidungulous feet.

The African rhinoceros, having invariably two horns, cannot be supposed as the prototype of the Bosjesmans' paintings of the unicorn.

Besides, the former frequently occurs among their productions, and is represented as the thick short-legged figure that it really is, whilst the latter is said by the peasantry to be uniformly met with as a solidungulous animal resembling the horse, with an elegantly shaped body, marked from the shoulders to the flanks with longitudinal stripes or bands. The greatest number of such drawings are said to be met with in the Bambos-berg; and, as the people who make them live on the north side of this great chain of mountains, the original may one day, perhaps, be also found there.

This part of Africa is as yet untrodden ground, none of the peasantry having proceeded beyond the mountains. It may be said, perhaps, that if such an animal existed, and was known to the natives inhabiting a part of the country not very distant from the borders of the colony, the fact would certainly before this time have been ascertained. This, however, does not follow. Very few of the colonists have crossed the Orange river, or have been higher along its banks than the part where we were under the necessity of turning off to the southward; and the sort of communication that the peasantry have with the Bosjesmans is not of that nature to supply much information respecting the country they inhabit. The mouth of the Orange river is much nearer to the Cape than the plains behind the Kaffer mountains; yet it was but the other day that the existence of the *camelopardalis* was ascertained near the former place; though no savage nation, but a civilized tribe of Hottentots only, intervened. Certain animals, as well as plants, confine themselves to certain districts of the same country. The animal above mentioned was never known to have passed the Orange river. It would appear also that in Northern Africa it has its limited range; for, since the time of Julius Caesar, when one was publicly exhibited in Rome, it has been lost to Europe till within the present century. The accounts given of it by ancient writers were looked upon as fabulous. The gnou is found only in certain parts of Southern Africa; and the blue antelope (the *leucophaea*), which confined itself to the banks of one small river in the vicinity of Zwelendam, is now entirely lost to the colony [Barrow means the species is extinct]. The springbok, seen in the northern parts in troops of thousands, never made its appearance in any part of the district of Zwelendam.

The Bosjesmans have no knowledge of any doubts concerning the existence of such an animal as the unicorn; nor do they seem to think there is any thing extraordinary that a beast should have one horn only. The colonists take it for granted that such an animal exists beyond the limits of the colony. Father Lobo, in his history of Abyssinia, describes the unicorn as a beautiful horse; but Father Lobo was considered as a person worthy of little credit, because he related things that were new. A modern traveller through the same country, in detailing some of the same circumstances touched upon by the former writer, has met with no better success. The schooled mind is apt to feel a propensity for

rejecting every thing new, unless conveyed to it through the channel of demonstrative evidence, which, on all occasions, is not to be obtained; whilst, on the other hand, credulity swallows deception in every flimsy covering. The one is, perhaps, equally liable to shut out truth, as the other is to imbibe falsehood. Nature's wide domain is too varied to be shackled with syllogism. What nations, what animals, what plants, and other natural productions, may yet be discovered in the unknown parts of the globe, a man, who has studied nature in the closet only, would hardly be supposed presumptuous enough to form a conjecture; yet such is the bias that the reputation of a name begets with the multitude, that the verdict of half a dozen generally decides the question.

Of all the accessible parts of the earth, the interior of Southern Africa is the least known to Europeans. A few paltry establishments of the Portuguese lie widely scattered along the two coasts; and the Dutch have colonized a few hundred miles from the southern angle along the two shores; but neither the one nor the other have supplied any information of the interior. . . . [These relations] shew at least how imperfect is the knowledge of the natural history of parts bordering immediately on the colony of the Cape, and that much yet remains to be discovered to an attentive traveller.



4

The Eland and the Puff Adder

WILLIAM J. BURCHELL
(circa 1810)





29. An impala buck drinking from a pool. Photograph courtesy of Leonard Lee Rue III.



30. The cheetah of East Africa. Photograph courtesy of Leonard Lee Rue III.



31. A bull elephant in East Africa. Photograph courtesy of Leonard Lee Rue III.



22

To Lake Naivasha

THEODORE ROOSEVELT
(circa 1908)





In an obscure essay entitled "My Life as a Naturalist" Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919) once wrote that "while my interest in natural history has added very little to my sum of achievement, it has added immeasurably to my sum of enjoyment in life." The "sum of achievement" in Roosevelt's life is nothing short of remarkable. Born the sickly, asthmatic son of an old-line aristocrat in New York, Roosevelt early on sought refuge and strength in nature. After a rigorous program of mental and physical self-development that included constant reading, writing, weight-lifting, and boxing, Roosevelt entered Harvard University in 1876 and went on to graduate with honors. He served in the New York Assembly from 1882 to 1884 but left suddenly for North Dakota in 1884 after his wife died while giving birth to his daughter. He lived on the Elkhorn Ranch, now a national monument, from 1884 through 1886 and wrote the first of his nature books there (*Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* [1888]). Roosevelt went on to serve as a member of the U.S. Civil Service Commission, the president of the New York City Board of Police Commissioners, and as U.S. Assistant Secretary of the Navy. Commissioned a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. army, Roosevelt led his 'Rough Riders' up San Juan Hill in Cuba during the Spanish-American War (1898). Partly as a result of his military success, Roosevelt was elected Governor of New York the next year and joined William McKinley in the White House as vice president in 1901. With McKinley's assassination Roosevelt assumed the presidency and was reelected in 1904. Roosevelt traveled to Africa in 1909 with his son Kermit in order to collect specimens for the national collection in Washington. His account remains as lively today as when it was written. In this passage the naturalist provides readers with a compelling portrait of the wild plains of East Africa.

From *African Game Trails* (New York: Scribners, 1910).

From this camp we turned north toward Lake Naivasha. The Sotik country through which we had hunted was sorely stricken by drought. The grass was short and withered and most of the waterholes were drying up, while both the game and the flocks and herds of the nomad Masai gathered round the water-courses in which there were still occasional muddy pools, and grazed their neighborhood bare of pasturage. It was an unceasing pleasure to watch the ways of the game and to study their varying habits. Where there was a river from which to drink, or where there were many pools, the different kinds of buck, and the zebra, often showed comparatively little timidity about drinking, and came boldly down to the water's edge, sometimes in broad daylight, sometimes in darkness; although even under those conditions they were very cautious if there was cover at the drinking-place. But where the pools were few they never approached one without feeling panic dread of their great enemy the lion, who, they knew well, might be lurking around their drinking-place. At such a pool I once saw a herd of zebras come to water at nightfall. They stood motionless some distance off; then they slowly approached and twice on false alarms wheeled and fled at speed; at last the leaders ventured to the brink of the pool and at once the whole herd came jostling and crowding in behind them, the water gurgling down their thirsty throats; and immediately afterward off they went at a gallop, stopping to graze some hundreds of yards away. The ceaseless dread of the lion felt by all but the heaviest game is amply justified by his ravages among them. They are always in peril from him at the drinking-places; yet in my experience I found that in the great majority of cases they were killed while feeding or resting far from water, the lion getting them far more often by stalking than by lying in wait. A lion will eat a zebra (beginning at the hind quarters, by the way, and sometimes having, and sometimes not having, disemboweled the animal) or one of the bigger buck at least once a week—perhaps once every five days. The dozen lions we had killed would probably, if left alive, have accounted for seven or eight hundred buck, pig and zebra within the next year. Our hunting was a net advantage to the harmless game.

The zebras were the noisiest of the game. After them came the wildebeest, which often uttered their queer grunt; sometimes a herd would stand and grunt at me for some minutes as I passed, a few hundred yards distant. The topi uttered only a kind of sneeze, and the hartebeest a somewhat similar sound. The so-called Roberts' gazelle

was merely the Grant's gazelle of the Athi, with the lyrate shape of the horns tending to be carried to an extreme of spread and backward bend. The tommy bucks carried good horns; the horns of the does were usually aborted, and were never more than four or five inches long. The most notable feature about the tommies was the incessant switching of their tails, as if jerked by electricity. In the Sotik the topis all seemed to have calves of about the same age, as if born from four to six months earlier; the young of the other game were of every age. The males of all the antelope fought much among themselves. The gazelle bucks of both species would face one another, their heads between the forelegs and the horns level with the ground, and each would punch his opponent until the hair flew.

Watching the game, one was struck by the intensity and the evanescence of their emotions. Civilized man now usually passes his life under conditions which eliminate the intensity of terror felt by his ancestors when death by violence was their normal end, and threatened them during every hour of the day and night. It is only in nightmares that the average dweller in civilized countries now undergoes the hideous horror which was the regular and frequent portion of his ages-vanished forefathers, and which is still an every-day incident in the lives of most wild creatures. But the dread is short-lived, and its horror vanishes with instantaneous rapidity. In these wilds the game dreaded the lion and the other flesh-eating beasts rather than man. We saw innumerable kills of all the buck, and of zebra, the neck being usually dislocated, and it being evident that none of the lion's victims, not even the truculent wildebeest or huge eland, had been able to make any fight against him. The game is ever on the alert against this greatest of foes, and every herd, almost every individual, is in imminent and deadly peril every few days or nights, and of course suffers in addition from countless false alarms. But no sooner is the danger over than the animals resume their feeding, or love making, or their fighting among themselves. Two buck will do battle the minute the herd has stopped running from the foe that has seized one of its number, and a buck will cover a doe in the brief interval between the first and the second alarm, from hunter or lion. Zebra will make much noise when one of their number has been killed; but their fright has vanished once they begin their barking calls.

Death by violence, death by cold, death by starvation—these are the normal endings of the stately and beautiful creatures of the wilderness. The sentimentalists who prattle about the peaceful life of nature do not realize its utter mercilessness; although all they would have to do would be to look at the birds in the winter woods, or even at the insects on a cold morning or cold evening. Life is hard and cruel for all the lower creatures, and for man also in what the sentimentalists call a "state of nature." The savage of today shows us what the fancied age of gold our ancestors was really like; it was an age when hunger, cold, violence, and iron cruelty were the ordinary accompaniments of life. If

Matthew Arnold, when he expressed the wish to know the thoughts of Earth's "vigorous, primitive" tribes of the past, had really desired an answer to his question, he would have done well to visit the homes of the existing representatives of his "vigorous, primitive" ancestors, and to watch them feasting on blood and guts; while as for the "pellucid and pure" feelings of his imaginary primitive maiden, they were those of one meek, cowl-like creatures who accepted marriage by purchase or of convenience, as a matter of course.

It was to me a perpetual source of wonderment to notice the difference in the behavior of different individuals of the same species, and in the behavior of the same individual at different times; as, for example, in the matter of wariness, of the times for going to water, of the times for resting, and, as regards dangerous game, in the matter of ferocity. Their very looks changed. At one moment the sun would turn the zebras of a mixed herd white, and the hartebeest straw-colored, so that the former could be seen much farther off than the latter; and again the conditions would be reversed when under the light the zebras would show up gray, and the hartebeest as red as foxes.

I had now killed almost all the specimens of the common game that the museum needed. However, we kept the skin or skeleton of whatever we shot for meat. Now and then, after a good stalk, I would get a boar with unusually fine tusks, a big gazelle with unusually long and graceful horns, or a fine old wildebeest bull, its horns thick and battered, its knees bare and calloused from its habit of going down on them when fighting or threatening fight.

On our march northward, we first made a long day's journey to what was called a salt marsh. An hour or two after starting we had a characteristic experience with a rhino. It was a bull, with poor horns, standing in a plain which was dotted by a few straggling thorn-trees and wild olives. The safari's course would have taken it to windward of the rhino, which then might have charged in sheer irritable bewilderment; so we turned off at right angles. The long line of porters passed him two hundred yards away, while we gun men stood between with our rifles ready; except Kermit, who was busy taking photos. The rhino saw us, but apparently indistinctly. He made little dashes to and fro, and finally stood looking at us, with his big ears cocked forward; but he did nothing more, and we left him standing, plunged in meditation—probably it would be more accurate to say, thinking of absolutely nothing, as if he had been a big turtle. After leaving him we also passed by files of zebra and topi who gazed at us, intent and curious, within two hundred yards, until we had gone by and the danger was over; whereupon they fled in flight.

The so-called salt marsh consisted of a dry watercourse, with here and there a deep muddy pool. The ground was impregnated with some saline substance, and the game licked it, as well as coming to water. Our camp was near two reedy pools, in which there were big yellow-billed

ducks, while queer brown herons, the hammerhead, had built big nests of sticks in the tall acacias. Bush cuckoos gurgled in the underbrush by night and day. Brilliant rollers flitted through the trees. There was much sweet bird music in the morning. Funny little elephant shrews with long snouts, and pretty zebra mice, evidently of diurnal habit, scampered among the bushes or scuttled into their burrows. Tiny dikdiks, antelopes no bigger than hares, with swollen muzzles, and their little horns half hidden by tufts of hair, ran like rabbits through the grass; the females were at least as large as the males. Another seven-foot cobra was killed. There were brilliant masses of red aloe flowers, and of yellow-blossomed vines. Around the pools the ground was bare, and the game trails leading to the water were deeply rutted by the hoofs of the wild creatures that had travelled them for countless generations.

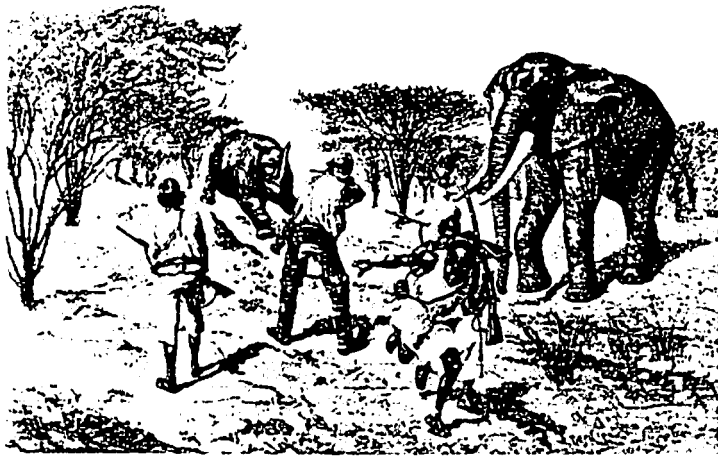
The day after reaching this camp, Cunnighame and I hunted on the plains. Before noon we made out with our glasses two rhino lying down, a mile off. As usual with these sluggish creatures we made our preparations in leisurely style, and with scant regard to the animal itself. Moreover we did not intend to kill any rhino unless its horns were out of the common. I first stalked and shot a buck Roberts' gazelle with a good head. Then we off-saddled the horses and sat down to lunch under a huge thorn-tree, which stood by itself, lonely and beautiful, and offered a shelter from the blazing sun. The game was grazing on every side; and I kept thinking of all the life of the wilderness, and of its many tragedies, which the great tree must have witnessed during the centuries since it was a seedling.



Hunting Gorillas

CARL AKELEY
(circa 1920)

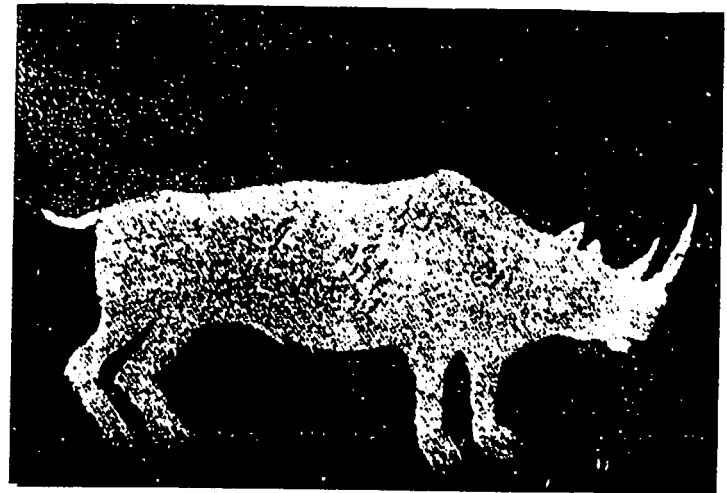




16. Count Teleki being charged by both a rhinoceros and an elephant. From *Discovery of Lakes Rudolph and Stephanie*, by Ludwig von Höhnel (London, 1894).



17. Mount Kilimanjaro. From *Discovery of Lakes Rudolph and Stephanie*, by Ludwig von Höhnel (London, 1894).



18. A Bushmen rock painting of a rhinoceros. From *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*, by William Burchell (London, 1822).



19. The Sphinx and Great Pyramid near Cairo. From *Die Altägyptischen Pyramidentexte*, by Kurt Sethe (Berlin, 1913).



20. Horus, god of the sky, had the head of a falcon. The killing of raptors was outlawed in ancient Egypt, the first known instance of governmentally sanctioned protection of wildlife. From *Die Altägyptischen Pyramidentexte*, by Kurt Sethe (Berlin, 1913).

observe gorillas at short range had turned out to be possible. We had caught such fascinating glimpses of the gorillas' home life that I knew that someday, after we had finished the general survey, I would have to return to Kabara with Kay to answer the many questions that filled my mind.



The End of the Pleistocene

ROGER CARAS
(circa 1971)





Roger Caras (1928-) graduated from the University of Southern California with a Bachelor of Arts in Cinema after serving in the army during the Korean War. Since that time he has worked as a special environmental correspondent for ABC-TV, where he reports regularly on the evening news and prepares documentary specials on wildlife and conservation issues. His nature books include *The Custer Wolf* (1966), *Monarch of Deadman Bay: The Life and Death of a Kodiak Bear* (1969), *Panther!* (1969), *Source of the Thunder: The Biography of a California Condor* (1970), *The Endless Migrations* (1985), and *Mara Simba: The African Lion* (1985). His writing awards include the Joseph Wood Krutch Medal (1977), the John Burroughs Medal (1969), and Israel's Oryx Award for Wildlife Conservation (1984). Roger Caras and his wife Jill first visited the Mara with Joy Adamson, author of *Born Free* (1960), in 1971. So enamored was Caras of the northern Serengeti that he visited the region twenty-two more times over the next thirteen years. In this chapter from his book *Mara Simba* Roger Caras provides readers with a special sense of the beauty and the power that is the Mara Maasai.

From *Mara Simba, The African Lion*, by Roger Caras (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985).

The people call it E-Mururuai, "the place of the sacrifice, the holy place." No one is quite sure why it came to be called that, but it is a name from *opam oitie*, "very long ago." It must not be changed, for the powers that made the place from out of nothingness would be disturbed and perhaps angry. Since it is far older than human memory, it is sacrosanct. It is a shallow cut between two low hills, in the Narok District of southern Kenya, just south of a place called Ang'ata Naado, "the long plain." It is the reserve *Maasai Mara*, and the indigenous people are the Maasai. They are the almost legendary pastoral nomads of the central portion of the Great Rift Valley. The Rift is, except for the vast ocean basins, the largest geological feature on earth. It extends on a diagonal, southwest to northeast, from Southwest Africa to at least the Middle East or all the way to the center of the Soviet Union, depending on which expert's standards you accept.

As the enormous Rift Valley slashes across Tanzania and up into Kenya it smooths out into the rolling Serengeti Plains. The plains are known as Serengeti only in Tanzania; where they climb north into glorious uplands the word Serengeti vanishes, a victim of European politics. Before World War I a line was drawn just south of the upland sweep to keep colonial Germans and British apart. The Serengeti Uplands became Maasai Mara in Kenya, English territory.

The Maasai tribesmen have never understood European politics, although they have always understood the Europeans themselves much better than most tourists and not a few explorers and missionaries believed. So, the Maasai have drifted back and forth with their flocks and herds across what, to them, is a wholly meaningless boundary. It has gone on for centuries, at least since the 1600s when pastoralists speaking a language known as Kalenjin, or perhaps it was Maa back then, moved south from far drier lands in the north. They moved out onto the plains where rivers ran toward cuts in distant hills and the grass was as high as the armpits of a tall warrior. The Maasai and their herds and flocks drifted with the wet and dry seasons, millions of head of game beside them, and the lions fed on both domestic and wild animals. Probably then known as *il-Maa*, they moved onto the stage where the last act of the Ice Age was being played out. In time, probably because people who visit Africa need tales to tell, the Maasai became fabled as warriors, stock raiders, and the inveterate enemies of peaceful endeavor. Most of that is fiction. The Maasai are proud, stubborn, and perhaps even arrogant, but they always accepted a peaceful alter-

now because of the heavy traffic in their horns and other parts. The Moslems of India believe that a ring made of rhinoceros skin worn on the right hand will cure hemorrhoids. In India they believe that a man dipping his parts in rhinoceros urine will perform his masculine role with greater pride and zest. Vendors outside houses of prostitution provide beakers of urine to entering clients. For these absurd reasons mighty rhinoceroses die at a rate that has brought them to the edge of extinction. In India the "street value" of the horn from a single rhinoceros is about ninety thousand dollars, for it is said to cure virtually all ills.

The rhinos will soon be gone from the Mara because Somali poachers have worked their way down through the entire length of Kenya to hunt in the Mara, rob it of its rhinoceros, and shoot at game wardens who get in their way. It is not a land of peace, as the Maasai would prefer it. Greed has come to the land of grasses, herbs, and legumes. It is not a greed that has arisen there like everything else, from the soil. It is a foreign greed feeding the insatiable madness of foreign markets. The Maasai hunt only predators, like the lion, to protect their herds, and are not a significant party to the senseless destruction that has invaded their land. Poachers and anti-poachers use aircraft and hunt each other with automatic weapons. The Maasai and their herds stand aside, apart, but are called warlike.

There are elephants in the Mara, too, often large herds of them, and the signs of their destructive ways are everywhere. A small herd can convert a forest to a savannah in less than a quarter of a century. At times only a few elephants, the *il-tomia* of the Maasai, will be seen, but then, suddenly, there will be forty, the bulk of the herd, if such it is, appearing from nowhere. Elephants for all their enormous size are like apparitions. Ghostlike, they drift into a valley, eat, quietly uproot trees, pull up grass with their trunks, and then are gone like the wind that sighs through the grass. It is certain that they have gone toward the rain, but their movements are secret and often unseen. That anything so large can come and go like a wraith in eerie silence is in itself awe-inspiring.

It is its taste for the nutrition-rich grasses that eventually does the elephant in. Each elephant grows seven sets of teeth in its lifetime. It pulls grass up by the roots, and the grains of sand that come up with the plants grind down the elephant's teeth and make the multiple new sets essential to an animal that may live between sixty and seventy years. When the last set of teeth is so badly worn that the elephant can no longer process tough hillside grasses, the animal moves toward water where the plants will be softer, making the giant less dependent on its ability to grind and chew. Since elephants digest only half the food they consume, vast quantities of food must be eaten every day. The day comes when the elephant crosses a line: it no longer has the strength to process the amount of green matter it must have, and it starves to death or simply deteriorates. Most dead elephants are found near marshes and

other areas where pulpy waterside vegetation, much of it giant grass, can grow. Even in an old age the elephant is not attacked by other animals. It is one of the very few animals in the world that dies of old age. There are no cats left on earth that can attack an animal that is between eight and eleven feet high at the shoulders.

Cape Buffalo inhabit the Mara by the thousands. Peaceful when in herds, and these herds often contain hundreds of animals, the great buffs are unaccountably cranky and extremely dangerous when alone, particularly the bulls. That is when the Maasai must fear them, when the lone bull buff steps out from behind a tree. He is likely to charge, anxious to kill, made mean in part, perhaps, because of the lions that stalk the herd constantly paying no mind to how big the buff area. Many lions die trying to kill big buff, but many buff are killed by lions. Each can feed a whole pride of lions. When lions and the buff meet it is a fearsome collision. The gods of the grass must choose between titans.

In the deeper-cut rivers of the Mara there are hippopotamus, great lumbering gray beasts that are far more aggressive than the maligned rhino who want only to be left in peace. The hippos claim plots along the riverbank and territories with easy access to the breeding females who gather in an area known as the creche. The best spots are held by the biggest and most aggressive bulls. The constant "yawning" motions portrayed in so many tourist photographs and seen on postcards are not yawns at all. They are threat gestures from bulls to all other bulls, and even to men, on the riverbank. They say, simply, "Stay away." A boat drifting through hippo territory is likely to be bitten in half if it crosses into a mature bull's riverine claim when cows are near. The bull hippopotamus does not distinguish between species. Only its claim matters, and its strength. That strength is primeval, and so is the dull wit that controls it. Its purpose is reproduction and so serves the species.

Two cats of substantial size besides the lion prey on the herds of the Mara. These are the leopard and the cheetah. Leopards, or *ol-owuaru oti*, can weigh two hundred pounds, but usually they weigh considerably less. They ambush game from trees; they stalk it relentlessly and carry their prizes up into acacia trees where other cats cannot come, for the leopard is the Mara's only true climbing cat of any size. Lions may rest on lower limbs to escape biting flies, but that is another thing.

The cheetahs of the Mara are plentiful and are the swiftest mammals of all. With little stamina but with the incredible power to move from a standing-stalking pose to a run of almost seventy miles an hour in a few seconds, they take the smaller gazelles. They must drag their prize behind a fallen log to hide from marauders or eat it where they have made their kill and take their chances. Life is dangerous for their cubs.

There are hyena in force, secretive python, flotillas of crocodiles, packs of Cape hunting dogs, jackal, bat-eared fox, and cats called serval and caracal, the latter related to the bobcat and lynx. Small African

image alone, I thought, if you could remember it in its fullness, would carry you beyond anger. With that, or the image of gemsbok, lithe, resplendent in the stone deserts, you could return to Delmas. I had no idea how those men on trial, as composed, as eminent, as dignified in that other stone desert, would survive; but I understood how they could. Without even asking. It is what you are given out here. These gifts, the healing.



In the Country of Grasses

TERRY TEMPEST WILLIAMS
(circa 1987)





Terry Tempest Williams (1955–), a naturalist-in-residence at the Utah Museum of Natural History in Salt Lake City, is the author of three widely acclaimed nature books: *Pieces of White Shell: A Journey to Navajoland* (1984), *Coyote's Canyon* (1989), and *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (1991). One of the most gifted of the younger generation of American nature writers, Williams emerged nationally with the publication of her most recent book *Refuge*, which chronicles the tragic effects of open-air atomic testing in the 1950s on her family (her mother, grandmother, and aunt died from cancer). The book also examines as a parallel theme the natural history of an endangered salt marsh near her home. In this essay, first published in *VII Magazine* in 1987, Terry Tempest Williams records her experiences on the Masai Mara Reserve in southwestern Kenya. Not surprisingly, Williams finds resonances between the Serengeti ecosystem and the natural history of the North American Great Basin she knows so well.

From *VII Magazine*, October 1987).

Traveling, for a naturalist, into unfamiliar territory is like turning a kaleidoscope ninety degrees. Suddenly the colors and pieces of glass find a new arrangement. The light shifts, and you enter a new landscape in search of the order you know to be there.

As a naturalist who calls the Great Basin home, I entered the Serengeti Plains of Africa with beginner's eyes. The sky arched over me like a taut bow. George Schaller describes the Serengeti as "a boundless region with horizons so wide one can see clouds between the legs of an ostrich."

This is true. It is also true that the Serengeti ecosystem is defined by the hooves of migrating wildebeests. It covers the borders of Tanzania and Kenya like the stretched skin of an animal—25,000 square kilometers of open plains and wooded grasslands harbor one of the last refuges on earth where great herds of animals and their predators can wander at will.

I chose to wander in the northern appendage of these plains, in an area known as Maasai Mara.

The Mara is Kenya's most stunning reserve. It is wild, uninterrupted country capable of capturing one's spirit like cool water in a calabash. And it appears endless as its southern boundary is contiguous with Tanzania's Serengeti National Park.

The Mara belongs to the Maasai or the Maasai to the Mara. The unbilical cord between man and earth has not been severed here. They are a fierce and proud people who pasture their cattle next to leopard and lion. The Maasai are fearless. They know the songs of grasses and the script of snakes. They move like thin shadows across the savannah. A warrior with a red cloak draped over his shoulder stands silhouetted against the sun. Beef-eaters, blood-drinkers, the Maasai are one of the last strongholds of nomadic life.

Samuel Kiplangat was my guide in the Mara. He is Maasai. The stretched holes in the lobes of his ears are like small windows and a reminder of the traditional life he has left behind. But he has not abandoned his native intelligence. Samuel felt the presence of animals long before he saw them. I watched him pull animals out of crypsis with his eyes. I saw him penetrate stillness with his senses.

When traveling to new country, it is a gift to have a guide. They know the nuances of the world they live in. Samuel smells rain the night before it falls. I trust his instincts and borrow them until I uncover my own. But there is danger here. One can become lazy in the

pocked, and gnarled. Volcanic boulders lie on the land like corpses of stone. Even if we don't see rhino, I say to myself, it is good to know where they live.

Samuel points out a dung heap around a small bush. Tracks surrounding the mound indicate spreading of the dung. A well-trodden path is also apparent. I later learn from Samuel that because rhinos are solitary and nomadic, they have a complex olfactory system of communication. These "laboratories" are an indirect means of keeping in touch.

I am fascinated by what Samuel sees and what I am missing. In the Great Basin I can read the landscape well. I know the subtleties of place. Horned lizard buried in the sand cannot miss my eyes because I anticipate his. A kit fox at night streaks across the road. His identity is told by the beam of my headlights. And when great horned owl hoots above my head, I hoot too. Home is the range of one's instincts.

As a naturalist, I yearn to extend my range like the nomadic lion, rhino, or Maasai. But in remote and unfamiliar territory, I must learn to read the landscape inch by inch. The grasses become braille as I run my fingers through them.

Samuel is listening. I listen too. My attention is splayed between hoopes and hyenas. Suddenly, there is rumbling. Samuel nods. Elephants. A herd of a dozen or more, young and old, thunder through the underbrush. Trunks flaring, waving up and down, ears fanning back and forth, tusks on the front end, tails at the rear. These were animals I had never imagined wild. As they pass, I focus on their skin. It is a landscape unto itself. The folds and creases in the hide become basin and range topography.

In the scheme of the savannah, the elephant breaks into forests and opens wooded country to the vegetation and animals of the plains. The rhino depends on the elephant to create a transition zone from woodlands to grasslands. Under natural conditions, a new generation of elephants would migrate to another area and repeat the cycle of vegetative succession. But with man's encroachment there is not much space left for the emigration of elephants. The land becomes abused, and rhinos are left with less options for range. Even in Maasai Mara, whose appearance is primordial, natural equilibrium is shifting.

Samuel and I follow a bushfire. The smoke is a serpent winding down the siria Escarpment. My eyes burn. Suddenly, Samuel freezes. "Rhinos," he says. "Two rhinos."

Through the wildebeests, through the zebras, topi, and gazelles—I see two beasts of color of pewter moving quickly over the ridge. I guess them to be a mile away.

As we advance closer and closer, the anticipation of seeing rhinoceros is like crossing the threshold of a dream. The haze lifts and there they are—two rhinos, male and female, placidly eating grass with prehensile lips. Their prehistoric skin is reminiscent of another time. It is

the spirit of the animal that stands. Two rhinos, their eyes hidden in the folds of their armor. Oxpeckers perch on crescent horns. I catch the female's eye. She does not waver.

My vision blurs. Who would kill a rhinoceros? It seems clear that the true aphrodisiac is not found in their horns but in simply knowing they exist.

Only a few minutes of daylight remain. We leave. I look back one more time. From a distance, they have become outcroppings of stone. Two rhinos on the Serengeti Plains.

In *Out of Africa*, Isak Dinesen writes about what it means to be an outsider in Maasailand. She says, "I feel that it might altogether be described as the existence of a person who had come from a rushed and noisy world into still country."

We have forgotten what we can count on. The natural world provides refuge. In the Great Basin, I know the sounds of strutting grouse and the season when sage blooms. A rattlesnake coiled around the base of greasewood is both a warning and a wonder. In Maasai Mara, marabou storks roost before sunset and baboons move in the morning. The dappled light on leaves may be leopard in a tree. These are the patterns that awaken us to our surroundings. Each of us harbors a homeland, a landscape we naturally comprehend. By understanding the dependability of place, we can anchor ourselves as trees.

One night, Jonas Ole Sademaki, a Maasai elder, and I sit around the fire telling stories. Sparks enter the ebony sky and find their places among stars.

"My people worship trees," he says. "It was the tree that gave birth to the Maasai. Grasses are also trustworthy. When a boy is beaten for an inappropriate act, the boy falls to the ground and clutches a handful of grass. His elder takes this gesture as a sign of humility. The child remembers where the source of his power lies."

As I walk back to my tent, I stop and look up at the southern cross. These are new constellations for me. I kneel in the grasses and hold tight.