

# NATURAL HISTORY

THE MAGAZINE OF THE  
AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

---

VOLUME LIX

---

1950

---

TEN ISSUES A YEAR

*Published by*

THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY  
NEW YORK, N. Y.



*Drawing by Museum Illustrators Corps*

# MONSTER of the *Mist Forests*

TANGLED forests clinging closely to the contours of mist-shrouded slopes; ravines of blood-red rock; filmy plumes of water plunging into foaming and tortuous stream beds — this was the stronghold of the monster of the mist forests.

While I waited still and motionless, the guttural chuckle of a colobus monkey echoed through the jungle, and intermittently the throbbing call of a touraco emanated from some hidden perch. From the distance came the sound of the breaking of brush and the muted trumpeting of an elephant. Night was enveloping the East African forest with the rapidity that is typical of the passing of equatorial dusks and dawns.

Suddenly, from up the trail, muffled footsteps advanced, sucking and sloshing in the ooze. A blustering wheeze of uncertainty rent the air. Then a heavy form detached itself from the forest and the increasing gloom.

A heavy pause, a violent snort, a sudden turn, and the massive African black rhinoceros charged through the brush, downing everything in its path. Here, indeed, was nature's counterpart of the Sherman tank

By KEN STOTT, JR.

*General Curator, Zoological Gardens of San Diego*

As it stepped into the clearing, four yards of massive, wrinkled power and two menacing horns became apparent. This was the monster himself—the African black rhinoceros!

Once he had emerged from the forest, he broke into a swaggering trot and made his way to the water-hole with all the grace of a Sherman tank. He stopped on the bank and lifted his head to sniff the air cautiously. Eventually satisfied that all

was as it should be, he lowered his head and began to guzzle his evening drink.

The resulting sounds were scarcely indicative of proper table manners. He slurped and gulped with all the gusto of a truck driver over a cup of steaming coffee, and when at last he had slaked his thirst, he did the truck driver one better. He swallowed in his cup!

Gingerly, he waded into the water and lowered himself into the mud,

apparently wished to have a hand in the rearing of his offspring.

The scene was in Kenya's northern desert, near Wamba, and I watched it from the vehicle of Hugh and Jane Stanton, who were conducting me on a brief tour of the Northern Frontier District.

They made a tender sight, this rhino family. Mother, father, and half-grown baby stood testing the air suspiciously about three hundred yards away.

Stanton howled gleefully, "Now for some real sport!"

Somehow, I didn't quite like the sound of that. I had a very uncomfortable feeling that Stanton's idea of "real sport" might differ from mine.

He started the car, turned it around, and headed toward the rhinos.

They stood their ground for a minute, snorted audibly, then scattered as we drove into their midst. We stopped and they stopped, one on each side of us and the third in front. Once again we began to move, and when we started, they started, this time converging upon the car. It was the beginning of a wild game of tag among the "four" of us, and it was one in which I did not care to be "it."

The three leathery, armor-plated monsters presented a thoroughly unpleasant picture as they rolled toward us from their separate directions, and the thought of the picture our vehicle might offer if they reached us was even worse. Apparently Hugh considered the same possibility, for he slammed

his foot on the accelerator with a vengeance.

Off we went, with the rhinos on our tail, about a hundred feet behind us. Finally, they appeared to be thoroughly tired and stopped short in their tracks. Wheeling the car around, Stanton drove toward them again. At about eighty yards, he turned the car sharply to the right and, slamming on the brakes, switched the motor off.

"There's a picture for you!" he shouted.

I had completely forgotten about the camera in my hand and, at the moment, taking a picture was the last thing in the world I wanted to do. The rhinos, snorting and pawing the ground, were obviously on the verge of a charge.

"Let's get out of here. The heck with photography!" I yelled back.

Stanton shook his head firmly. "Not until you've taken your pictures."

I swore at Stanton, I swore at the rhinos, and I swore at the camera, but apparently I had no choice in the matter. I pointed the camera at the rhinos and without the slightest hope of getting a decent exposure (and caring not in the least) I began snapping pictures. Then all at once, the rhinos charged!

Mr. C. B. Perkins, one of my co-workers at the San Diego Zoo, has often sarcastically observed that I create the impression of existing in a perpetual state of imminent danger, regardless of where I am or what I am doing—and perhaps he is not without some justification. I wish, however, that on this occasion he might have shared in the adventure (and I vaguely remember wishing it at the time). Even now I do not like to imagine what might have happened had our engine failed or had we dropped into one of the all too numerous pig holes.

The rhinos throttled toward us like a trio of jet-propelled steamrollers, and I held my breath while Stanton ground on the starter. After a hysterical sputter, the car jerked into motion and away we went at a speed of nearly thirty miles an hour. The rhinos followed close behind, with their wicked horns aimed at

▼ THE MENACING HORNS of the black rhino are more dependable than its eyes. Notoriously bad sight keeps the animal on the alert, and any unfamiliar sound or scent will send it into uncontrolled panic



and when half-submerged, he began to thrash with gay abandon. Legs, head, and tail were tossed in every direction as he rolled from side to side on his back.

Then after a moment he stopped, sat up on his haunches, and looked about himself in a most apologetic manner. He rose to his feet and, as daintily as before, tiptoed from the wallow to begin his nocturnal foraging.

It was now quite dark. Only the light from the moon overhead lent a shadowy detail to the landscape. The rhino, a vague black form, lumbered about the clearing, pausing now and then to nibble at the leaves of some low-growing shrub. In the darkness he resembled an animated boulder, and as such he was not particularly exciting. The time had come to take matters into my own hands.

With a flip of the thumb, I switched on a powerful flashlight, and the rhino stood motionless in a pool of light. Had I been on ground level, this action would have been nothing less than foolhardy, but here in the lofty security of Treetops Inn\* I had ample reason to feel safe. Treetops, a glorified blind constructed in the branches of a giant jungle fig tree, is an ideal place for even the most timorous of sightseers to view Africa's most cantankerous game without an iota of danger.

After a moment of immobility, the rhino was galvanized into action. He squealed at the top of his lungs and, wheeling frantically, tried to escape this terrifying blaze of unknown origin. All at once he charged, first one way, then another, pausing between charges to squint at the light with his weak little piglike eyes.

Finally, when he could stand it no longer, he barreled out of the clearing as fast as his stubby legs could carry him. With no attempt to find one of the several trails that converged upon the clearing, he merely made his own as he galloped along, pushing down anything and everything that stood in his path. Long after he had disappeared from view, I could hear his panic-stricken

squeals and snortings and the violent crashing of brush.

Incredible though it seemed, this mighty beast was scared stiff—the same animal that has been known to derail locomotives and overturn trucks. With my own eyes, I had only a short time before seen a rhino rout a herd of the dread African buffaloes. It was hard to believe and even harder to understand.

The answer came a day or so later from a veteran trapper, Hugh Stanton.

"The rhino's really a very mild-tempered fellow," he told me, and when I appeared skeptical he went on to explain, "He possesses notoriously bad sight. Consequently, the old boy's got to be constantly on the alert, depending almost entirely on his senses of smell and hearing. Any unfamiliar sound or scent sends him into uncontrolled panic. Frequently when he appears to be charging, he actually thinks he's running away from the danger."

"This," I remarked, "must be very comforting to anyone who happens to be in his path."

Stanton ignored my sarcasm. "Of all the animals I've collected for zoos," he continued, "I'd call the rhino by far the most responsive. I've found it possible to tame a full-grown rhino within a month of his capture. It's all a matter of mutual understanding. Treat him gently and quietly and you'll have a perfectly reliable pet."

All of Mr. Stanton's opinions may well be true (and I for one would hesitate to contradict them), but a rhino remains a formidable adversary in the bush. Rhinos are most active during the hours from dusk to dawn, at which time they are difficult to discern and thus avoid, being as dark as the night itself. During the day, they usually retire to the depths of the forest or, if they are plains-dwellers, into the densest thornbush thickets. Once they have entered the vegetation they become almost invisible. The nondescript gray of their leathery hides serves as excellent camouflage. Thus, an innocent traveler can stumble upon a rhino before detecting its presence, and in the resulting encounter

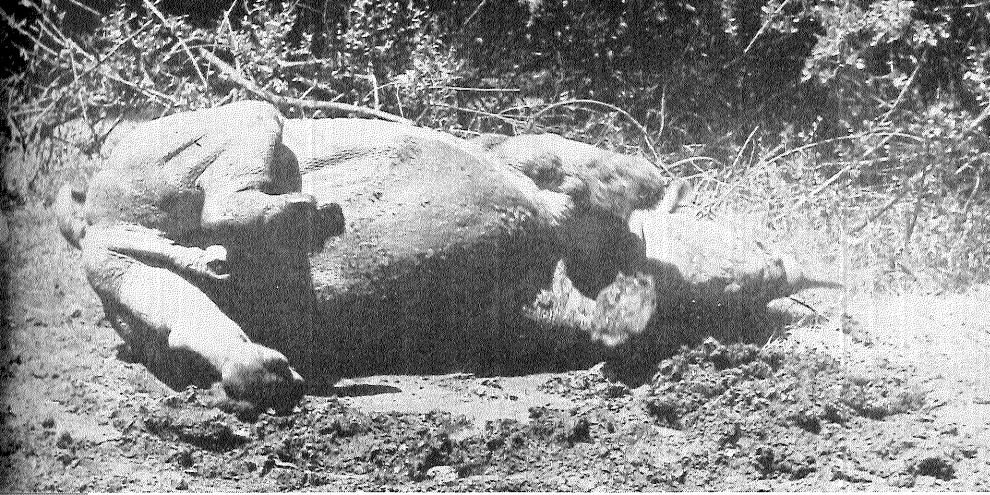
it is sometimes difficult to convince the beast that one's intentions are harmless.

The black rhino is found in a variety of habitats: the lowland deserts, the upland bush and plains country, and even in the forested mountain ranges; but he is commonly looked upon as a denizen of the first two only. This may be due in part to the fact that game photographers, because of the nature of the forest habitat, have been forced to limit their activities to the other two, where the light and climate are better. But even fairly authoritative natural history texts sometimes dogmatically restrict the distribution of the black rhinoceros to the drier, open terrain of Africa south of the Sahara. Regardless of the cause, the black rhino, as far as the layman is concerned, has erroneously emerged as a creature of bush and desert only. Nonetheless, it is in reality every bit as much at home in the densest of East African mountain forests, and in some such areas it is extremely abundant. Hunters maintain that the mountain-dwelling rhinos develop longer horns than their lowland kindred, but otherwise they differ neither in appearance nor habit.

Wherever it occurs, the black rhinoceros is primarily a browser. It feeds on succulent aloes and euphorbias, as well as on the leaves of acacias and other scrubby trees. It is innately fond of wallowing, perhaps because of the hordes of insect parasites that dote upon it. Even the omnipresent tickbirds seem utterly incapable of coping with the situation. Although the rhino is a great wanderer, it is seldom found far from water; and according to native lore it possesses a remarkable memory for local geography, which guides it unerringly from one watering and wallowing place to the next.

Sociologically speaking, the black rhino is essentially a lone wolf. Only during the breeding season does one rhino customarily join forces with another. In but a single instance was I privileged to observe more than a solitary bull or a mother and calf at one time. In this case, a father rhino

\* See "Treetops," by Lt. Col. and Mrs. William J. Morden, NATURAL HISTORY for May, 1949.



▲ **WALLOWING** in the mud is great sport for the rhino—and possibly great necessity. The hordes of insect parasites that dote on the beast seem unable to cope with this activity

our rear bumper. We veered to the right to miss a boulder and swerved to the left to avoid a thicket, all the while heading for the road. The rhinos meanwhile had begun to slow down and, just as we reached the road, they lost interest in the chase and dove into a thicket.

As we resumed a normal speed, the color (or lack of it) on Stanton's face gave me a certain degree of comfort. Mrs. Stanton, who had remained tensely silent throughout the entire episode, now patted her brow delicately with a handkerchief and said, "Wheeeu! There was a moment there when I thought about pig holes." A moment! I concluded that any remarks I might make would be better left unsaid.

There is no more dutiful a parent than a mother rhino. She sometimes keeps her baby with her for several years—long after it is quite capable of fending for itself. Only a very young rhino is in danger of being preyed upon by other beasts and then only by lions. But the mother rhino looks upon her child as a precious but completely helpless infant, even when it is almost as large as she. Any cause for alarm, and she moves in front of the baby, daring the intruder to come one step nearer her beloved charge.

Other than man, the black rhino has few enemies. However, one notable exception, or so legend has it, is the elephant. Professional big game hunters insist that the two are deadly foes and that the elephant invariably emerges victorious from

any conflict between them. A rhino, it is said, will never remain in the presence of an elephant. This seems open to question since on several occasions I have watched specimens of both species drinking from the same small water hole without the slightest indication of incompatibility.

The reactions of a rhino to other forms of animal life is entirely unpredictable. Sometimes it may drink or forage amidst a group consisting of several different species of animals and yet appear oblivious to their proximity. On other occasions it obviously wants the area all to itself and makes no bones about the matter. Whether this contradiction in attitudes is due to individual variation in disposition or merely the

momentary state of the mind of the beast, I do not know.

One evening I watched a rhino charge directly toward a herd of buffalo, scattering them in all directions; and in another instance, a female rhino and calf sent a group of ten giant forest hogs scrambling away from a water hole. The rhinos were not content to drink until the forest hogs had entirely abandoned the clearing in which the muddy pool was located.

Numerically, the African black rhinoceros occupies a regrettably precarious position, and it has disappeared altogether from regions in which it was once common. That its numbers have dwindled so rapidly is due in part to the ravages of trophy hunters, in part to the inevitable encroachments of civilization, as well as to systematic slaughter of game of all types in the current and perhaps misdirected campaign to control sleeping sickness.

It is not inconceivable that the day will arrive when the black rhino has been entirely eradicated in the more open and accessible parts of its range, surviving only in the tangled mountain forests, which now constitute but a small part of its native haunts. Barring the removal of the jungles themselves, the black rhino may survive there almost indefinitely—a relic of the distant past, an awesome and incredible monster of the mist forests.

▼ **THE BLACK RHINO** is essentially a lone wolf, and only during the breeding season is it customary for one rhino to join forces with another

Photographs by Hugh R. Stanton

