

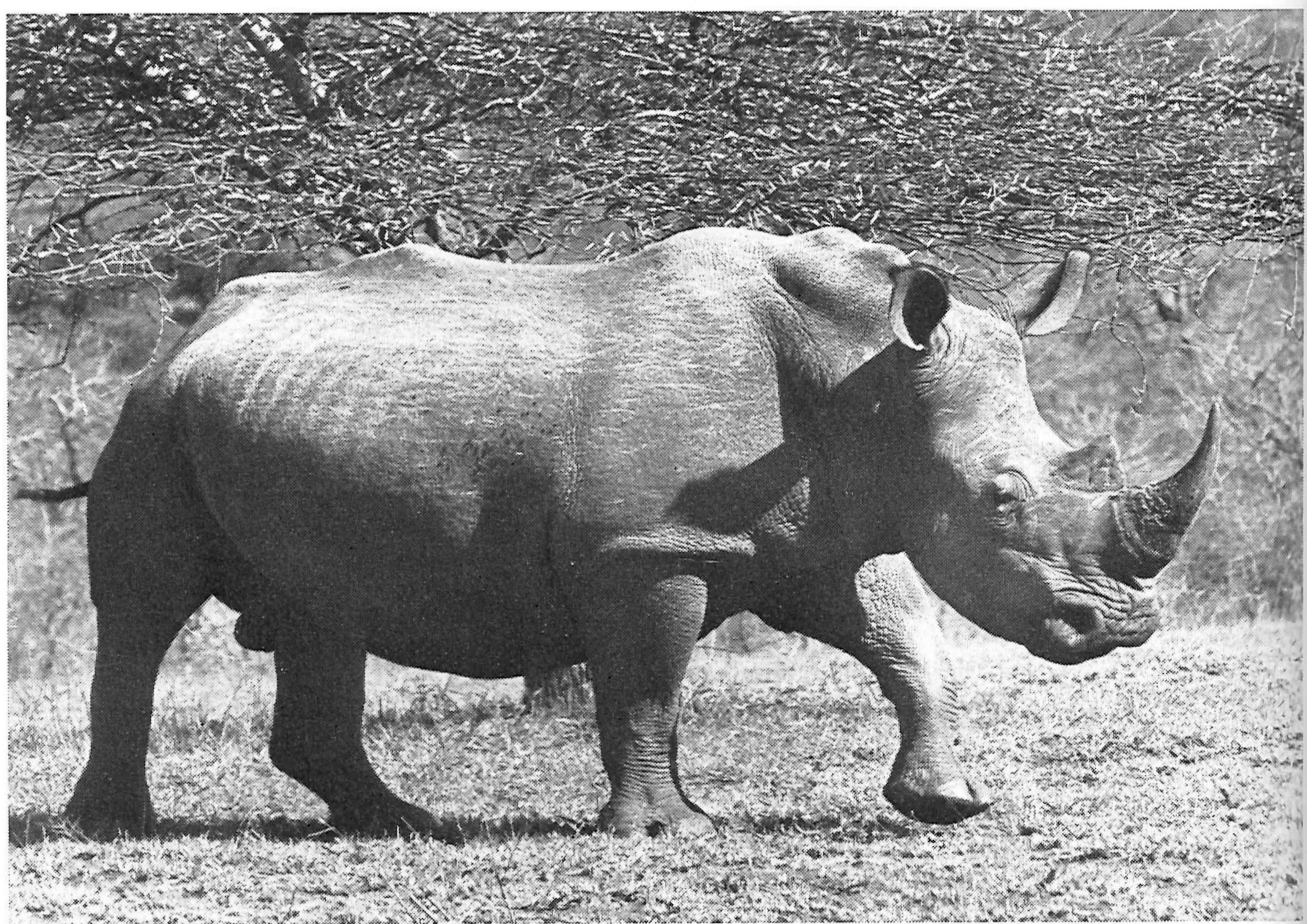
# RHINO BY THE THOUSAND

*Written and illustrated by DUDLEY D'EWES*

ALL roads to the twin game reserves of Hluhluwe (pronounced Shlooshloowy, with accent on the second syllable) and Umfolosi (Oomfolawsi, and the accent on the penultimate syllable) in Zululand, Natal, South Africa, are haunted by small African boys displaying animal carvings for sale. More than half these carvings are of rhinoceroses. Whether crude, as the majority are, or products of obvious talent, they all have in common a head that seems grossly over-developed. Such an animal, one thinks, would hardly be able to lift its head from the ground. Once having been vouchsafed a close-up view of a white rhino, the pride-of-place exhibit of these reserves, one perceives that the African eye had been true; *Ceratotherium simum* is a creature with an apparently disproportionate ration of head.

You seldom see them when they are at peace, except with their heads down, while their wide mouths continuously crop the short grass that is their favourite food. In his authoritative book *The White Rhino Saga* Ian Player, Chief Conservator for Zululand, records that the head alone of a 4,413lb specimen weighed 410lb. The head-down posture, however, is not due simply to the weight of the head; when you have to keep a two-ton body alive and well, and your main food is short grass, you have to spend a lot of time feeding.

Fortunately for both tourists and for zoology there are plenty of white rhino to be seen in these two reserves, especially in Umfolosi. At the last aerial count of which I have seen a report, in 1970, there were more than a thousand in Umfolosi alone; and that was after the export of some 800 animals during the previous few years. In fact the rhino are now thriving so well under enlightened protection that it is essential to thin them out to avoid over-population. Shooting is unthinkable, so that present policy, dating back for the past decade, is capture after darting with tranquillizers. White rhino from Umfolosi have been moved to many other African reserves, formerly in their range, where their numbers, once nil, are steadily climbing again. They are now also being exported to zoos and safari parks in other parts of the world, and the trade seems to have become stabilised as a regular source of income for the Natal Parks, Game and Fish



A WHITE RHINO ON THE MOVE. The broad muzzle of the white rhino distinguishes it from the more unpredictable black rhino

Preservation Board, which administers them.

This is in strong contrast to the plight of the species at the turn of the century. In the 1890s there was a concerted attempt by hunters (sometimes at the instigation of museums and other scientific institutions) to try and shoot the last of these splendid animals. In 1893 the famous hunter, F. C. Selous, recording that the species had formerly been very plentiful, said its numbers were then so depleted that "I cannot think that the species will survive very far into the coming century".

Then, in 1894, a shooting party in Zululand, by bagging six of the few remaining specimens in the region of the Black and White Umfolosi Rivers, and thus reducing hopes for survival of the species to despair, provoked such a public outcry that the government (Natal then being still a British colony) was

forced to take action; the 71,000 hectares that now comprise the reserves of Hluhluwe and Umfolosi were proclaimed as game reserves. Shooting was no longer permitted there.

That, unfortunately, was not the end of destruction, for in the early days there was little policing, and African poaching was rife, as well as encroachment by cattle. Between the wars, too, the area was almost denuded of wild life by an ill-starred campaign of mammal destruction aimed at the tsetse fly.

But from the time, ten years ago, that fencing became possible and supervision was exercised in earnest, the general game population, as well as that of the rhino, has grown remarkably. A visit to either of these reserves is always rewarded with views of zebra, nyala, impala, duiker, waterbuck, bush pig and warthog plus, for those willing to look, smaller creatures such as lizards, tortoises, fresh-water turtles, as well as the usual series of bushveld birds. In Umfolosi there has been a most successful attempt to re-introduce giraffe, small herds or family parties of which are nearly always included in the day's visual bag.

There are also black rhino in both reserves, but these are far more secretive than the white, and are seldom seen. This is just as well, since their behaviour is (in the delicate words of game-reserve officials) far less "predictable" than that of the white. There are also lion in Umfolosi and cheetah in both reserves, but one can never be sure of seeing them. Lions can be seen in many other African reserves, but these are the only parks where close-up views of white rhino are possible; and for them Umfolosi is the better of the two. Hluhluwe is more beautiful and more bosky, being a splendid example of a well-wooded subtropical landscape. The very wealth of trees and shrubs that makes it a fine landscape militates against good game-viewing because for many miles there is good cover right up to the road verge.

In Umfolosi much of the country is open savannah, which is ideal for viewing game. The scattered trees provide shade, encouraging the animals to remain in view even in the heat of the day; and the relatively close cropping by the white rhino ensures that there is not too much high grass to obscure one's view of smaller things like the pigs.



ZEBRA CROSSING IN HLUHLUWE RESERVE. Zebras are always to be seen in both Hluhluwe and Umfolosi reserves



A HERD OF IMPALA ANTELOPE IN HLUHLUWE. Behind is a typical landscape, with a patch of thick bush with open hillside

In both reserves there are special hides, built for visitors, giving splendid views over water-holes. When we were there it had recently rained heavily and the water-holes attracted nothing except hundreds of doves and a few fresh-water turtles. With a drink in every hollow, the animals were well dispersed. There was no difficulty, however, in finding white rhino in Umfolosi. There are so many that there must at any time be numbers of them beside some of the roads that criss-cross the veld, leading from the overnight camp to picnic places on the banks of the two rivers, the White and Black Umfolosi, that are the main boundaries.

In many years of game-viewing my wife and I have known few thrills quite so keen as watching one of these plump immensities of flesh peacefully and audibly cropping grass to within 20 yards of our stationary car. They are not, of course, as big as African elephants, though they are plumper, giving a greater impression of solidity; but their usual indifference to men and cars means that there is none of the nervous tension always present when in the vicinity of wild elephants.

whose "unpredictability" many people have found to be as dangerous as that of the black rhino.

The white rhino, intent on food, will come near enough for you to see the flies behind their ears, the dried mud on their flanks from the last wallow, and the lighter grey lines on their slatey grey sides drawn by the stiff branches of the thorn trees under which they pass with apparent indifference to scratches. As I said earlier, their normal posture is head-down, but any sudden noise, such as re-starting a car engine, will bring the head up and send them off, usually for a short distance only, at what for so heavy a creature is an extraordinarily graceful trot.

Umfolosi as a game reserve has the further distinction of being the only such place in southern Africa where a wilderness area has been set aside for safaris on foot. Small parties led by professional game wardens spend from three to six days walking through an area of 24,000 hectares (about 60,000 acres) to which vehicular access is normally denied. These small parties can fully savour the atmosphere of untamed, unimproved, un-

spoilt Africa, and see the animals as the pioneers saw them. Those who have had this experience all speak enthusiastically about it.

Accommodation in the reserves is in huts where all basic necessities are provided. There are no restaurants or food shops, but camp cooks are provided to cook provisions brought by visitors and to bring hot shaving water in the morning, as well as to make tea, fill vacuum flasks, and so on. There is also no public transport in the parks; it is best for overseas visitors either to hire a car or to book themselves as part of a small safari group.

The two reserves are about an hour's drive apart. Hluhluwe is 265 kilometres north of Durban, of which 214km, as far as the small town of Mtubatuba, are tarred. Umfolosi is 10km farther. The dirt roads from Mtubatuba and in the parks are sometimes rough, and always slippery after rains; but that adds pungency to the African atmosphere and experience. All enquiries should be addressed to the Reservations Office of the Natal Parks Board, P.O. Box 662, Pietermaritzburg, 3200, South Africa.



TWO OF THE COMMONER LARGE MAMMALS: A BUSH PIG AND A FEMALE NYALA ANTELOPE. These two species are invariably included in the day's visual bag