NATURAL HISTORY

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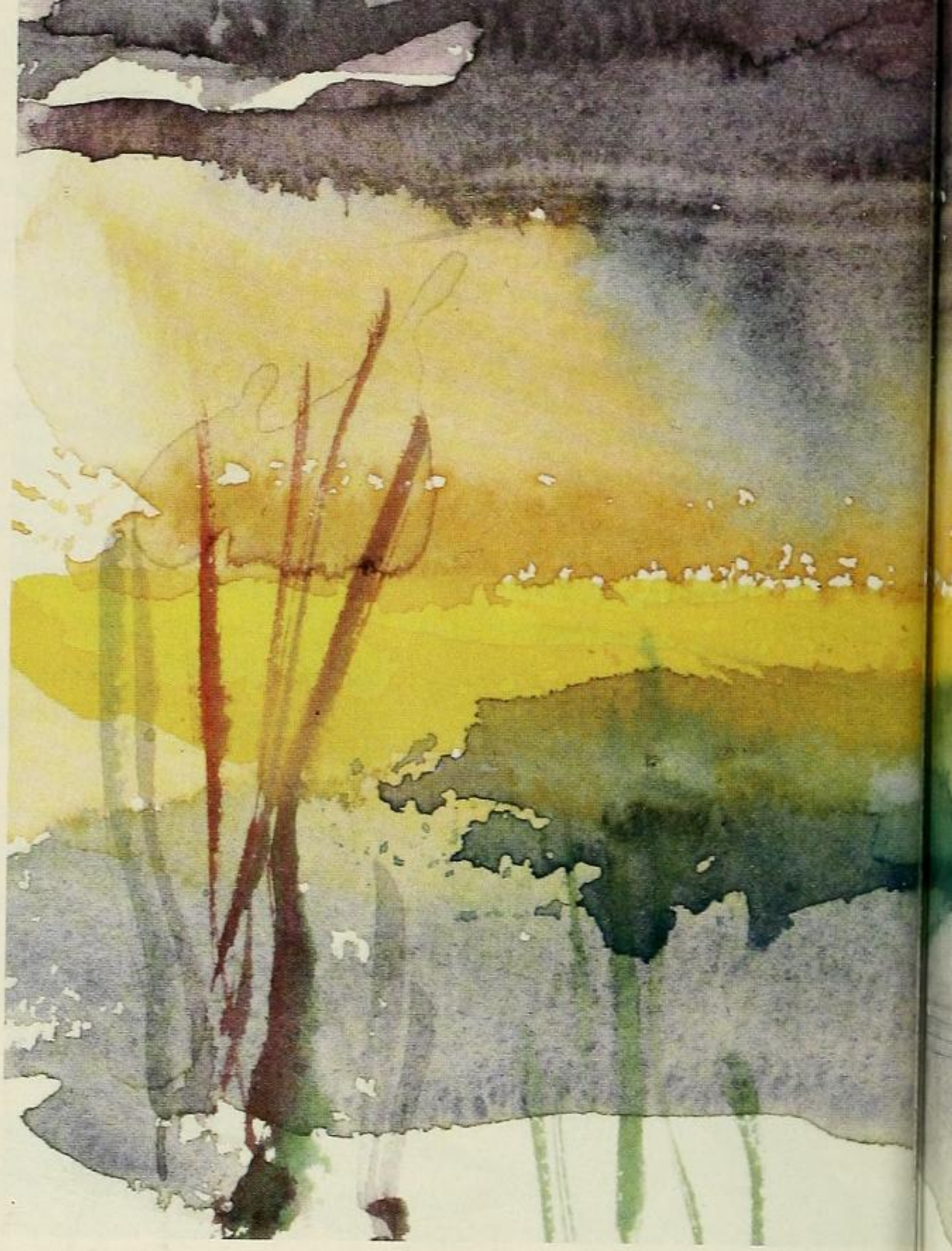
Maria is extraordinarily sweet, for a rhinoceros. I will always be grateful for her part in my education in the particular and subtle language of the African bush. Last year, I traveled to Kenya's Tsavo East National Park to paint wildlife and was soon enchanted by the landscape. The broad band of the Yalta Plateau rose a thousand feet above my campsite. Blown everywhere by the wind, brick-red dust from the park's lateritic soil colored the brush and its inhabitants, coating elephants and leaves alike. But as beautiful as the area was, the thick brush made it difficult to approach the animals. Even when I could get within painting distance, the animals tended to run away.

I had a frustrating first week, but then Kenya Wildlife Service rangers from the park's Rhino Release Program kindly undertook my education. These rangers monitor the black rhinos that have been introduced into the park since the program began in 1993. (In the 1980s, intense poaching and severe drought had virtually eliminated Tsavo's original black rhino population.) The rangers use radio collars to monitor the movements of the introduced rhinos, and when the transmitters run out, they track the animals the old-fashioned way—on foot. I was to walk with them.

Maria, with her unusual tolerance of people, had chosen the immediate vicinity of the release program's base camp as her home range. The rangers refer to her as "Mother of the Camp" and consider her proximity



Looking for M

she pricked up her ears and turned to face us. Then she lay down for a nap.

Maria

Story and paintings by Deborah Ross

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a sign of good luck. And so she seemed for me, too. On my very first day out with the rangers, we found her standing by a low acacia tree, her horns backlit by the morning sun as she pricked up her ears and turned to face us. After watching us for a while, Maria sighed and lay down for a nap. It was ten in the morning, and the sun was hot. My guide said it was time to leave Maria to her rest.

As we trekked back to camp, I was thrilled and optimistic about the coming days. Little did I know that two months of searching would pass before we would meet up with Maria again. But the process of looking for her proved enormously rewarding, and soon the search captured my

ript," and—perhaps most important—how to move silently through the bush.

Travel and Reading

Travel to Kenya's Tsavo National Park is easily arranged through a travel agent. The park's "tented camps" provide large canvas tents, some with showers. Walking safaris—offered by these camps and led by Kenya Wildlife Service rangers—are the best way to experience the park's wildlife. Galdessa, a tented camp near the Galana River, faces the spectacular Yalta Plateau and is located within the home range of the rhino Maria. Less costly, public campgrounds are also available. For those who prefer indoor living, there is Voi Safari Lodge, where hyraxes scamper up and down the stairs and among the dining room tables. An excellent book on black rhinos is Horn of Darkness: Rhinos on the Edge, *by Carol Cunningham and Joel Berger (Oxford University Press, 1997).*

full attention. My guides taught me how to keep downwind of animals (it helps to kick up a small cloud of dust and check which way the wind blows it), how to read "bush script" (telling the age of a footprint, for example, by the sharpness of its edges), and—perhaps most important—how to move silently through the bush.

As we tracked Maria, we encountered many of the other animals living in this dense and magical landscape: a crocodile slipped into a water hole at our approach, and a startled yellow-billed stork flew off; a hippo, objecting to our intrusion, burst out of a small pool and lumbered away. We also followed giraffe tracks circling round and round an acacia and read the movements of a large snake slithering across the road. Once, our own passage through the brush flushed out a pair of grouse. Sergeant Richard Eleu, the ranger who took charge of my bush education, knelt down, pointing out what at first appeared to be a cluster of leaves at the base of a small bush but turned out to be four grouse chicks huddling together, camouflaged in their stillness.

On my last day with the rangers, Sergeant was determined that I would see Maria one more time. (As a mark of respect for his long service protecting rhinos all over Kenya, everyone referred to Sergeant by his title.) We followed her tracks, confident we would find her when she stopped for her midmorning nap. But 10:00 A.M. came and went, and still the tracks went on. Soon the tracks revealed that Maria had joined up with two other rhinos, known to the rangers as Ruto and 284. We made our way up a small rise and climbed some rocks that gave us a 360-degree view of the surrounding plain. No rhinos in sight. Disappointed, we began to retrace our steps. And there, on the trail, were the rhino tracks, overlapping ours. The rhinos had sneaked around behind us.

Redoubling our efforts, we soon heard loud chewing just beyond us in the bush. We crept silently, circling around the sound until we were downwind. Then Sergeant beckoned to me to climb on top of a termite mound, and there was Maria, looking petite and sweet next to 284, a huge rhino known to have a bad temper and a tendency to charge. With her ears pitched forward in my direction, 284 was snorting and looking very ominous.

The setting was not conducive to painting, but fortunately I had my camera with me. Sergeant urged me to take some pictures. The clicks of my Nikon seemed alarmingly loud. It was time to leave. □