

ENCOUNTERS

of a rhino kind

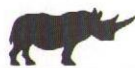


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Go for it . . . have a bash at it! And, in so adopting the black rhino strategy, I found courage to assuage my compulsion to write about rhinos my way – an appreciation of rhino experiences to date that have left indelibly lasting impressions on me as an ordinary scientifically unqualified environmentalist.

That bushveld dash of spice – the black rhino. He features little in black or indigenous poetry and is seldom painted successfully. It is hard to anthropomorphise him and thus endear him to the masses. In short, his mighty aura will be little experienced by most of us before we lose him forever. I cannot boast of ever having fled a charge, but the bush would be bland without him.

In tune with the present air of gloom and despondency, the first black rhino I ever saw was appropriately enough, a dead one. I was seventeen, and the remote and rugged Chizarira Game Reserve in the Zambezi Valley was an exciting place to walk through and experience, boasting a healthy black rhino population and with only occasional minor predation by Batonka tribesmen. This particular rhino had been speared outside the Reserve, fleeing back to eventually succumb on top of the ridge where we now



stood. Vulture whitewash covered the fetid bush for metres in every direction, and the vegetation had been flattened and demolished by his desperate struggle. His horns were still intact (later to be removed by rangers) and the only visible wound was the tiny spear slit on his shoulder.

There followed happier encounters, mainly in the Zambezi reserves of Mana Pools and Chewore. Mana's rhinos dwarfed by towering *Acacia albida*, draped with scarlet flame Combretum creeper, remain vivid. The spoor we followed up the Angwa still evokes spine tingles. How I now wish I had recorded them all the more intensely.

Then I discovered a rhino who was extra special. An indelible dream rhino, daubed in fugitive tones of ochre on hidden granite near Salisbury, and strangely enough in a rolling grassland area. The boulder chats mobbed me harshly as I peeled away the spiny thorn thicket hiding him. His body had faded, but there was the high horned head, with the quaint ears. A tiny hennaed image which got under my skin for ever because I had found him myself. Respectfully, I let the bush fall back and never reported the find. I now hear that the area is industrial location and suburban sprawl.

I left Zimbabwe and immediately spent eight months in Umfolozi getting to know Zululand's rhinos with their strange diagnostic side lesions. Here I met, among others, Jeremy Anderson and Peter Hitchins. I marveled at Peter's growing resemblance to his favourite beast; the more he inhaled euphorically of his favourite snuff, sundried rhino dung, the more his nostrils flared and wrinkled and his grimacing visage reminded me of a rhino!

I took many pleasing rhino shots in those months and admit to occasionally gently revving them with human devilment. It does not take much to elicit typical rhino over-reaction, and an animal several hundred metres away would immediately start searching me out. With that attitude to life's minor provocations, his temperament is his own worst enemy.



Speared Chizarira rhino



Rock art rhino near Salisbury



Umfoloji female and calf



Face to face in dense thicket - Itala

My two most recent black rhino were spotted over Easter 1989 in Itala Game Reserve, browsing high on a hill, uncomfortably close to the boundary fence, with the bright ribbon of the Pongola river stretching far beyond them. They made me recall those early Itala days whilst we were stationed there when the first rhinos were introduced from Zululand. Unsettled and cantankerous, their presence inhibited my roaming in the bush with two young sons. I felt restricted and went anti-rhino for a while.

I recall once urinating on a rhino path when I was pregnant, and our amazement when we returned to see the violent reaction my scent had provoked. Bushes chaotically rent apart, road deeply scored with scrape marks and fresh dung scattered everywhere! I resolved to further avoid those Itala rhino. That is, until we drove right under one's nostrils on a chill winter July morning, and he won me over forever. We had started the steep, rocky descent down to the Pongola through glowing-leaved mixed *Combretum* woodland, scattered with towering *Aloe marlotbii*. Suddenly there was a black rhino next to the truck and he wasn't running. I looked into his glistening nostrils, where his warm breath vaporised in soft mists around his head. He stood there for a long time, amongst the towering primitive aloes, examining us calmly and unaggressively. What a magical, gentle moment. Perhaps he was too inoffensive for his own good, for some months after he was found dead with horn wounds from a rival.

The magic of Itala is enhanced by the old kraal sites, vacated when new farms were added on to the reserve. These delightful sites of haunting atmosphere with their broken clay pots, crumbling stone walls and overturned grinding stones, are visited by the black rhinos who are attracted by the presence of the bitter milky euphorbia hedges.

Finally, may I pay tribute to that khaki rhino in tackies. Spray-urinating enthusiastically and defecating with gusto, eight Napac actors noisily took over the stage to entertain and enthrall the audience, perhaps affronting the more genteel, with their *Horn of Sorrow*, an hour of uninhibited mime, dedicated to furthering the case for rhino survival and aimed at all colours, creeds and classes of South Africans.

