

CURIOSITY IN ANIMALS

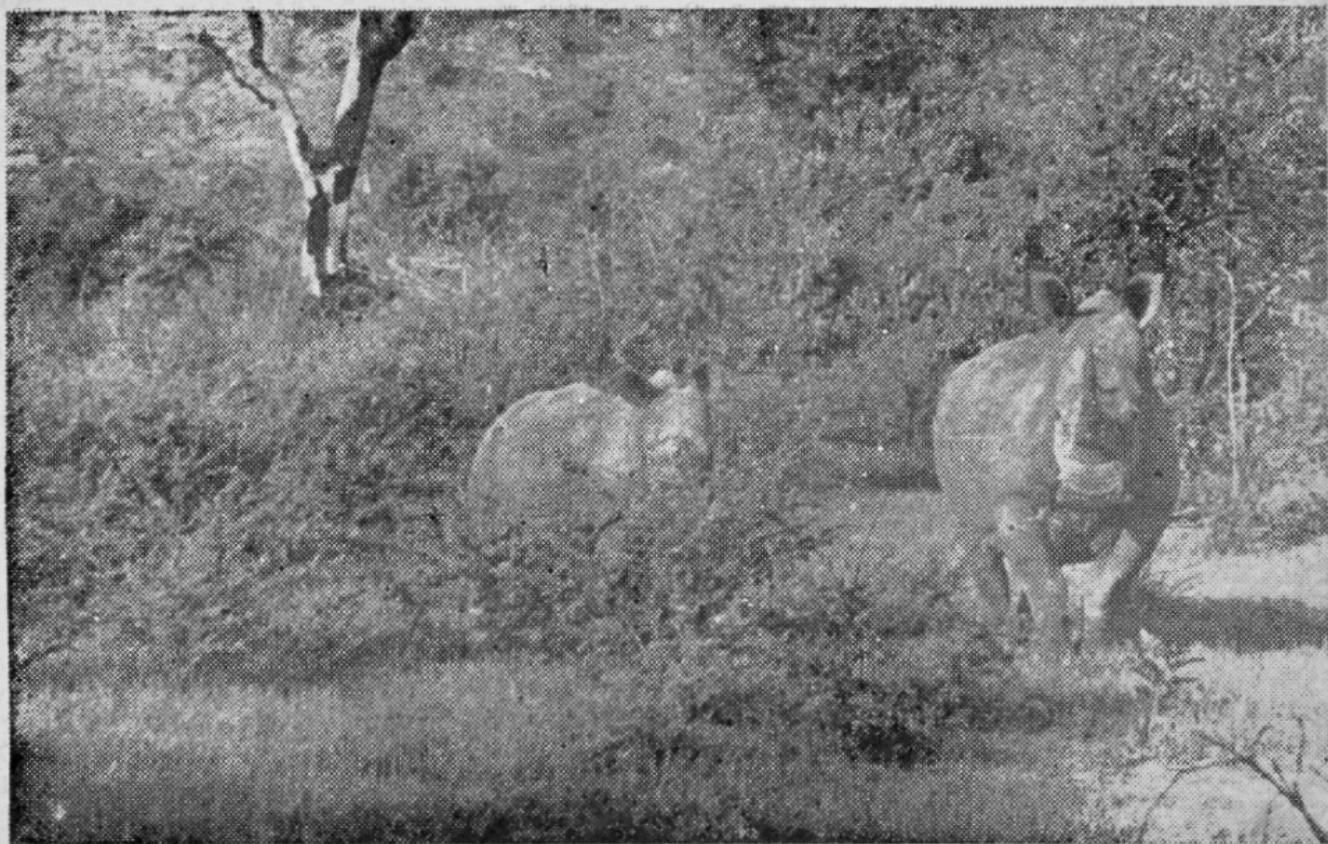
By T. R. H. OWEN.

The relative merits of stalking with camera or rifle are not a profitable subject for argument, if only because any reasonable man can quite well use both as occasion serves. But an undeniable advantage of photography is that it is more difficult. For every ten occasions when you can approach to within the hundred yards necessary for shooting there will be only one when, by exercising every particle of craft and endurance, you can reach that thirty yards which even with a telephoto lens is needed to yield an effective picture.

Though craft and endurance may do much there are conditions which will defeat them. The well-intentioned photographer is not the only thing which may stalk animals and animals know it; and comparatively seldom do they put themselves in a position where the ground and the cover make close approach easy. Naturally they differ greatly in approachability; the pachyderms are simple, with weak sight: the eyes of most other animals merely vary between keen and very keen, though their range of vision varies, being smallest among the pigs and after that the cattle and probably longest in desert and mountain game. In any case the odds are all against the stalker.

But animals have one quality which may be taken advantage of, their curiosity. This curiosity does not in my experience extend to scent. Where their noses are concerned man is man, and one whiff of him is nearly always enough to send beasts off or at least to make them too nervous to allow successful operations. With sight however it is different, and they do not always trust their eyes. Nearly every creature has a measure of curiosity, strongest I think in females—as among mankind, which often conflicts with the sense of fear. The balance differs according to the degree of persecution or security the animals enjoy, and it differs with species. The cattle probably have a greater measure of curiosity than any other genus (how often has the fisherman or the picnic party cursed those cows which will come nosing intrusively round); but it is present in all and may be played upon.

A man on his two legs cannot be mistaken. Seen at a big distance a herd may not take alarm at him, but they know he is in the offing and any subsequent manifestation is likely to be associated with him. But when the herd, feeding carefully in an open space, have had no other evidence of his approach and the first thing they see a strange figure on its belly and with an odd object on its head, appearing obliquely (for it often pays not to make too direct for the quarry) some fifty or sixty yards away, its identity is not comprehended, and the instinct of curiosity is as powerfully aroused as the instinct of caution. Only once can I remember acting a part and being taken (I believe) for another creature, and that was in stalking a bird, to wit a Nile cormorant perched on stump in the water close to a bare mud bank. On



RHINO. PHOTO LT. COL. W.A.H. FORBES

that occasion did me the honour of mistaking the log and ugly prone brown figure waddling slowly down towards the river for a small crocodile. But normally direct simulation is not possible and curiosity is aroused by the creature's non-comprehension. Under these conditions a herd will often stay looking at the stalker while he draws very much nearer. Sometimes the whole herd is fixed looking at him. Sometimes a number will stand and gaze while others, reassured by their fellows' immobility, begin to graze or loaf unconcernedly. Sometimes one or two, bolder or more possessed by the 'Satiable Curiosity of the Elephant's Child' will walk up to inquire more closely. I have known a waterbuck stride to within a dozen yards to give a slight condescending stare at the prone figure ; she might almost have been looking through a lorgnette and her mildly contemptuous snort when the inspection was over was in keeping with the impression.

Sometimes you can see fear and curiosity competing, the animal wanting to run yet tied by the desire to watch and uncertain which course to take ; or the moods alternate, and a herd may suddenly swerve and bolt for a few paces, then stop and come walking back for another look.

This trait should be made full use of, and anything bizarre in one's clothes, appearance or even movements is likely to make the strategy more effective. If a man had the unlimited energy and ability to perform a series of cartwheels round and round a herd in narrowing circles he could probably end by catching with the hand almost any animal in creation.

There is one occasion when the stalker need scarcely appeal even to the curiosity of his quarry, and that is when it is intent upon something. Lovemaking and fighting will make a creature oblivious of all outside itself. I have known gazelle, and larger antelopes too, chase each other around within a few yards of the human observer and without noticing his presence. But there are other things as well, and the blasé attitude of an animal under these circumstances can be surprising. I had a recent example of this. In the southern area of the Bahr el Ghazal along the Ibba river there is a salt-lick, that is to say a very slight depression of perhaps two acres, lying sixty yards from the deep-banked stream, with some saline property in the soil which attracts animals, especially after rain. Such licks are scattered sparsely in many areas and are a good draw for game. A shower had fallen and I walked thither under a dull and cloudy sky, to see if anything was afoot. Some waterbuck were on the lick ; but at that moment a buffalo grunted on the far side of the river and a herd appeared, strung out, coming at an eager pace along the top of the bank. I threw myself down on the near bank, and the herd of some thirty or forty, trotting to a point opposite, trundled down into the shallow water, across it thirty yards from us, and up our bank making for the lick. Several saw me, but merely gave a glance and passed on. Once they were gathered on the lick I approached with caution, to within twenty five or thirty paces of the nearest beasts.

There was a little cover and they did not descry me. Eventually, to get clear of twigs and grass, I rose to the knees and finally stood up. Two or three cows looked with mild interest ; another crotchety old cow turned and made for the group of waterbuck, shaking her head and chivvying them off the lick as a constable might tell a band of urchins to get a move on. But about the human figure there was no concern, let alone fear or truculence ; they disdained to take notice, so keen were they on enjoying their condiment.

Such disregard is almost a blow to the vanity : but it is a blow which the stalker could put up with more often than it occurs !