



A Rhino Tale

By Kirk O'Keefe



Our rhino - Left to right - The author, PH Sean Kelly, Themba, Sibusiso, Richmond and James.

Suddenly, the rhino came. Time slowed to a crawl. I could see the folds of his skin move with each step. Puffs of dirt and little sticks squirted out from under each foot and floated behind him. He hit a black thorn and its trunk was sheared off with pieces of the trunk and branches going up and away. Splinters floated through the air.

Occasionally, I could hear him grunt over the crashing of the brush he was flattening as he strained to go even faster. Just before the rhino reached where I was laying on my chest with my chin on the ground watching him piston his way towards us I thought, "this is it". He went by about a foot to my left with a whoosh! The crashing of the bush behind me slowly began to fade away. Looking at my Professional Hunter, I realized that slow-motion time was over. Pandemonium was the best way to describe the trackers behind us who had scattered through the black thorn like a bevy of quail. On standing up, I checked to see if my sphincter and bladder had lost any of their natural tightness - everything was in order. A tingling rush came over my whole body from the top of my head to the tips of my toes.

Now that makes for a tale; but, it never happened. What follows is what *did* happen while on safari in South Africa.

I hunted a White rhino cow with a dart gun in September 2005 with Gary Kelly Safaris, PH Sean Kelly at Bonwa Phala, located just west of Bela Bela, Limpopo (Warmbad, Transvaal for old timers). Early the first morning I met Pretoria veterinarian Andre Uys who explained in great detail what I was to do. Andre had a Marlin Stainless Model 880SS .22LR rifle with a PNEU-DARTING, Inc. .50 Cal Dart Model 193 system installed directly on top of the Marlin, and a Bushnell Holograph Sight attached to the top of the two barrelled assembly. The Marlin used a clip fed 22LR blank for propellant and the holographic sight had a

green ring and spot turned on by pressing a button. The entire rig was surprisingly light and easy to point and shoot.

Andre loaded the dart we were to use with 2.4mg of M99 (*etorphine hydrochloride*) an equal amount of Zuparone, animal tranquillizer, and then a little water to fill the injection chamber. The dart was about four inches long, had a one inch needle about an eighth of an inch in diameter with two fixed wires at a thirty degree angle to inhibit falling out. In the rear of the dart was a telemetry unit powered by two hearing aid batteries which were held in by a red cap with a rim to seal the dart barrel. Andre carried the dart gun until the final stalk, handing me the gun with the safety on and the holo' sight off. My job was to turn on the sight, push the safety off when I was in position to shoot with absolutely nothing in the way - not a twig, piece of grass, a bug, ANYTHING - and place the dart in the rhino's shoulder crease about a third of the way down. Under no circumstances was I to hit any human with the dart. Andre carried an antidote if any of the dart fluid got on anyone - but there was nothing he could do if anyone was struck with the dart and injected as it would be fatal. Following dart injection the rhino would run several kilometres with us in hot pursuit using the telemetry unit to follow if the trackers lost the track. As the medication took effect the rhino would begin an excitation period (silly trot) followed by stargazing (standing) and then would fall over. We had to get to the rhino while it was stargazing and manoeuvre it to a safe position on its chest where it would be stabilized before picture

taking, measurements, and blood tests including one to check to see how many months pregnant she was. The darting would be concluded by the administration of an antidote when everyone was well clear and behind a stout tree. After several practice shots using a water filled practice dart at 35 and 40 yards I was pronounced ready. So with the shooting and safety instructions rattling around between my ears we began our hunt.

We began by first checking the water holes in the area. We found a number of fresh tracks of bulls and other cow calf, but it wasn't until about two hours after starting our morning hunt that we joined Themba and Sibusiso who had located the cow tracks we were after. And no, I have no idea how the trackers could distinguish one track from another!

At that point, we began our trek through leafless black thorn (*wait-a-bit*) and scattered dry grass. The four trackers were in front carrying day packs filled with gear and water, next was Sean who packed a .458 Dakota loaded with 500 grain solids, then myself, and last Andre, who carried the dart rifle and a belly pouch filled with medical paraphernalia.

From time to time the trackers would get 'birdy', stop and peer ahead with their binoculars and Sean would glass using his 10x40 Zeiss. The wind continually shifted so Richmond, Sean's Zulu tracker, would occasionally shake his small bag filled with wood ash to keep track of the direction of the wind relative to our direction of travel. A warthog went by us with a purring noise. It was getting hot and I developed a light sweat whenever we moved fast through the thick thorn bush. About an hour into our track we passed into a *terminalia* forest that had thick knee-high grass underfoot. Rhino typically feed at night, bed until seven, and feed again until about nine when they begin to look for a place to lie up during the heat of the day - usually by ten o'clock. However, they can move to several bedding spots during the day particularly if they hear or smell anything suspicious. Their sight is quite poor, so if you don't move, even when as close as thirty yards they won't spook, unless something else causes them to be suspicious.

Just as we began to approach the spot where they were bedded, a *go-away* bird began its loud calls from a tree off to our right. The rhino ran so we proceeded to their bed. Sean and Andre called this a 'bump' - it would get harder to get onto the rhino after each bump as they realized that they were being hunted.

The rhino's bed roughly consisted of a ten foot oval of rumpled grey sandy dirt cleared of leaves and twigs that showed the imprint of their bodies and feet. After a fifteen minute break we resumed tracking, but had a tough time of it in the knee high dry grass, the trackers frequently spreading out to search until one got a definite track or some fresh dung. We continued tracking for about an hour until just after eleven, when it became apparent that the rhino were spooked, at 32°C (90°F) it was getting

too hot to safely dart an animal. Tracking through the grassy forest was a slow process, and the rhino were increasing the distance between us.

We started our afternoon hunt a bit early because the Gary Kelly Safaris chief tracker, Themba, was fairly sure that our rhino had bedded down in a favourite spot amongst some tall *tambuti* trees. Driving near the area we began a cross country walk through the brush with the wind in our favour. Just short of an hour into our trek we approached the bedding area only to find, that while the rhino had been there, she had moved. Following their tracks, we located them about 200 yards farther into the *tambuti*, fast asleep.

Andre inserted the dart into the dart gun, closed the Marlin bolt on a blank and handed it to me with the safety on. I turned the sight on, and keeping the muzzle pointed well away from Sean, followed him on our final stalk. At about 90 yards we began a low crawl until we were on our knees behind a bush with a dense wall of thick brush on our right. The rhino was standing facing to our left about 35 yards away with a gentle breeze quartering from our left. Unfortunately, there was no shot as she was behind the branches of a bush covering her head, neck and shoulder. The feet of her half-grown bull calf could be seen on her far side. Just as we were contemplating what to do next, a cow and calf exploded from under a tree about 15 yards to our right and both pairs disappeared into the bush.

Everyone gathered up where the rhino had been standing and we chewed over what had happened. Sean took a hard look at the head high bush that had prevented the shot, walked over and rendered it to a stub saying, "that will never happen again!"

During our wait to let things calm down a bit I couldn't help but wonder if this second 'bump' was beginning to make the rhino aware that it was being hunted. When we resumed tracking, just how the trackers could distinguish between the two rhino calf pairs, and the bull that had joined in was remarkable. When the rhino we were after turned into an area of dense sickle bush we broke it off, concerned that we might 'bump' them again before seeing them.

Our other morning and afternoon hunts were pretty much like that described above but without the excitement of a close encounter. We always started about four hours behind the rhino and closed the distance until either the temperature got too hot, the rhino went into bush that was too noisy or dense to successfully get close enough to dart, or it got too late to successfully conclude the chase, stabilization and photo session after darting.

One evening after supper, Andre and Sean showed up with the news that Andre had to leave to treat a rhino and calf burned in a wild fire. As it later turned out, they only had black ash on their feet, but at the time it seemed like an emergency situation. Andre had arranged for Hendrik Hansen, a vet from Bela Bela to



Running off the calf. Sean crouched at left, vet Hendrik next to darted rhino, with Themba and Sibusiso bringing up the rear.

fill in for him. Sean indicated that he had done some excellent work for Gary Kelly Safaris before, was experienced and quite competent. While Hendrik's dart gun was the same as Andre's, it used a Lynx Holographic Sight with a bright red dot.

The next morning we joined up with the waiting Themba and Sibusiso where the rhino had crossed a dirt track through the bush, four hours ahead of us. We began a long trek to the south following the feeding rhino. Hendrik had loaded his dart gun and was carrying it on safe over his shoulder behind me. The trackers silently pointed out wet grass clumps dropped by the feeding rhino as they meandered about. Sean would stop for a conference about every thirty minutes and we were making good progress in catching up. Occasionally, the trackers would lose the track and have to spread out to regain their trail. Then the rhino stopped feeding and began heading for a place to bed for the day. Unfortunately, the wind was quartering over our left shoulder, so after a conference we began a series of wide loops to the left of their track. When we hit their tracks another conference would occur and off we would go on another large loop. The rhino gradually began to turn into a *terminalia* and *sickle-bush* forest that allowed us to see 100 yards but was noisy due to crunchy leaves and twigs underfoot. By now it was getting towards eleven, a time when the high temperature would normally force us to break off, but Hendrik gave us the go-ahead to continue.

As we made our fourth loop striking their track, it was obvious they were heading for a bed not too far away. Sean and the trackers huddled, having their usual conference in whispered Zulu, when an eland spooked in front of us. Now the slight breeze was in our favour and was nearly face on. Following the track, we came upon where the rhino had bedded down, and then had run in a short half-circle nearly back to where they had first started into the thick bush before bedding down again.

After signals to keep as quiet as possible, we slowly walked through the bush and looked to our right hoping to see the rhino. Soon the trackers went 'birdy', and sure enough, there was the rhino bedded down under a bush, about 80 yards away. I got a look at her horn and gasped! It was awesomely long and thrust forward on her nose. With a silent admonishment from Sean to be very quiet, Hendrik handed the dart gun to me and we began our final stalk.

Leaving Hendrik and the trackers we looped back, parallelling our initial stealthy approach. At about the point where I thought we had gone too far, Sean made a hard left and we began to crawl through the grass and brush,



Pulling the rhino out of the bush and onto her chest.



Wetting down the rhino whilst Hendrik quickly draws some blood.



Locating the telemetry dart. It was found within half a kilometre of the downed rhino.

carefully pushing aside twigs and leaves with a finger, and avoiding bunches of dry grass. A light breeze was quartering in from our left so I figured we were in good shape.

With a slow-motion crawl we got behind a 'V' shaped bush about 35 yards from the rhino. Her calf was behind her. Sean had a clear view behind the left part of the 'V', but I was directly behind the right branch. Sean mouthed, "shoot". I didn't have a clear shot and her head was turned towards us obscuring the crease I was to aim for. Sean again mouthed, "shoot". At this point I decided that I had to take the shot so started to move to my right. Sean grabbed my arm and motioned for me to come towards him. As I moved a foot or so towards him, I placed my left knee on a clump of dry grass. When the grass crunched the rhino stood. I was determined to shoot, so quickly aimed and fired at the rhino's shoulder as it started its run, initially to the left and then straight away from us. The dart hit with a familiar "whack".

The 'crack' of the .22 blank, and sound of the dart hitting home was heard by everyone, and they soon joined us, and then took off at a dead run following the rhino. I handed the empty dart-gun back to Hendrik, and set off after them, but wasn't up to jumping over bushes and running headlong through the thorn bush. So after about a kilometre everyone began to pull away out of sight. Then Hendrik passed me going like a scalded cat through the bush. He had folded his tracking antenna and stowed it in his pack so I figured that we had no telemetry to help us locate the rhino. Richmond had dropped back, and was going at an easy trot, so I followed him for about two kilometres until we met up with Sean and Sibusiso coming back to get us. Sean said the rhino was stargazing so we picked up the pace and soon had the rhino in view.

Stopping behind a tree about 75 yards from the rhino I could see Hendrik with his hand on her rump. The rhino was standing facing to our left with its horn through a bush. The trackers were shouting and waving at the bull calf as it ran back and forth trying to protect its mother. Getting out my camera I began to take pictures of the action. It took a lot of yelling and throwing of sticks to run off the calf. Fortunately, he finally disappeared from our sight and sound with two trackers in hot pursuit.

The dart had hit between two ribs about five feet back of where I had aimed. If I had hit a rib it would not have injected - a 50% chance. Lady Luck had smiled and I was grateful.



The recovered telemetry dart. It was cleaned up and made 'safe'. The author has kept it as a memento of his hunt.

Hendrik placed a red-tipped needle into a vein on the back side of her left ear and injected some medication to stabilize her. Sean and the trackers worked fast to put a strap around her left hind leg, a wet towel over her eyes, and a strap over her head behind her rear horn, and then proceeded to pull her out of the bush and down on her chest. Hendrik pronounced her stabilized, and after a few strokes of a panga to clear part of the bush obstructing photos, off came the straps and towel. Sean quickly measured her, 33 2/8" front horn and SCI gold.

Photos were next, Sean took charge positioning everyone and switching cameras back and forth. With that out the way, Hendrik took several blood samples and then began to prepare to resuscitate the rhino from the darting. A five gallon container of water, carried by a struggling tracker through the bush, arrived and was poured over the rhino. The rhino was then given a close inspection for wounds and parasites. With this done Hendrik told us all to clear out. When each of us was safely behind our own tree, between 75 and 100 yards away, he administered the antidote and backed off about 50 yards. The rhino stood up, collected itself and, after a few minutes Hendrik sent it on its way with a stick and a shout. When it disappeared into the bush we turned and began our trek back on its trail to locate the dart and recover the telemetry unit.

Starting near where I had darted her, Hendrik had his telemetry antenna out and within a half kilometre found the dart where it had been badly bent and ripped out on a bush. Extracting the unit, he placed the dart in a vial for safety. After cleaning it at camp, he gave it to me as a memento.

Upon reaching the truck the cool box was opened and everyone had a well-deserved bottle of water or coke. We were standing around talking about what had just happened when up came the rhino. I had the truck between me and the rhino but everyone else scattered like a bevy of quail.

Seems like I started this tale talking about quail..! 🐔

FOOT NOTE

I hunted in South Africa during the month of September 2005 with Gary Kelly Safaris, P.O.Box 252, Bela Bela, Limpopo RSA www.gksafaris.co.za, gksafari@global.co.za booked through Bill Williamson, Fair Chase Safaris Ltd, (512) 345-4891 www.fairchaseltd.com, billww@fairchaseltd.com.

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