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A Day in an African Reserve

Text and Photographs: **A.J.T. Johnsingh**





Southern African Aloe *Aloe marlothii* which grows in rocky and open places with orange flowers



Strelitzia Nicolai, a banana-like plant with a woody stem

The large male White Rhino was resting, with his legs folded, on his belly and sternum. The *Acacia* tree under which he rested provided scanty shade and yet he appeared to be comfortable with his world. His tail seemed very small when compared to his immense size. His large right ear flapped occasionally, indicating that he was either troubled by some flies or that he was trying to keep himself cool by flapping his ears. We stopped our vehicle at the edge of the road and watched. The mid-July weather on that noon in the Reserve was pleasantly warm, as patches of light rain clouds blocked the view of the sea-blue sky. The terrain around the *Acacia* tree was undulating with low hills, with patches of *Acacia* woodland and knee-high golden grass in unburnt areas, and with shallow valleys. To me, it looked more like the landscape of eastern Gir. Several vehicles going along the game road, hardly 60 m from the Rhino, stopped and people either peeped through the window or opened the top of the vehicle and looked around to have a clear view of the animal and the landscape. The noteworthy aspect of this tourism was that the people were

exceedingly silent and only whispers went around when they wanted to convey a message to their colleagues. The Rhino continued to rest and flap the ear unbothered by the attention showered on him.

While attending the fourth International Wildlife Management Congress (2012), held in Durban, South Africa, from July 9–12, 2012, I had an opportunity to make a day visit to the 960 sq. km Hluhluwe-Umfolozi (H-U) Reserve, 280 km from Durban. I was driven to the Reserve by Shomen and Jayanthi Mukherjee, former students of Wildlife Institute of India who were doing their post-doctoral work in Durban. We were also accompanied by Satish Kumar, a faculty from Aligarh Muslim University, who had made a presentation in the Congress on the denning behaviour of the Indian Wolf. We left from Durban for the Reserve at around 4:00 a.m., at which time the darkness of the early morning and the incessant downpour restricted our visibility for the first 100 km, preventing us from looking at the landscape. Only while returning in the afternoon could we see the picturesque undulating lush green landscape dominated by sugarcane

fields, neatly planted rows of hybrids of *Eucalyptus grandis* and *E. europhylla* on either side of the road, and small settlements with clumps of trees. The two species of plants that attracted my attention were *Strelitzia Nicolai* (banana-like plant with woody stem), which grew profusely in moist areas, and *Aloe marlothii* (single-stemmed Southern African Aloe, which grows in rocky and open places), with very attractive orange flowers.

Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Reserve is the largest protected area in the KwaZulu-Natal Province in South Africa. It is an amalgamation of the two reserves, Hluhluwe and Umfolozi. Both these reserves were established in 1895 in the decade when the Zulu kingdom was conquered by the British. The habitat in Hluhluwe is more hilly with a predominance of savannah woodland. Umfolozi is carved out of two large valleys of the Black and White Umfolozi river and it is a thinly forested grassland landscape. Amalgamation of the two reserves took place in 1989, nearly 100 years after their first notification, by a corridor (30 sq. km), which is less rugged and more open. Around the period when the reserves were established, European farmers were



An adult Nyala male (left) and female Nyala (right) found in Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Reserve

settling in Zululand. They acquired land cheaply around Hluhluwe and Umfolozi, and when they raised livestock there was heavy mortality as a result of the disease called *nagana*, which is transmitted by the Tsetse fly. This resulted in a programme to eradicate all game animals as it was perceived that once the game animals are killed the Tsetse fly would be devoid of nourishment and would die. Conservationists could not fight against this massacre (reportedly 100,000 animals were killed), and eventually with the introduction and application of DDT, which killed off the offending fly, this unscientific and deplorable method of disease control came to an end.

Fortunately, even during this period, the White or Square-lipped Rhino (primarily a grazer) survived and now the Reserve has a population of nearly 1,000 rhinos (White Rhinos in northern Africa are critically endangered). Periodically, when the population of rhinos goes beyond a certain limit, a prescribed number are translocated to other reserves. Depending upon requests, some are donated to zoos. There is also a population of the much more elusive and endangered Black or Hooked-lipped Rhino (largely a

browser) in the Reserve. By the beginning of the 20th century, it was thought that because of over-hunting, the lions were extinct in the Reserve. Gradually, however, lions from nearby areas immigrated to the Reserve and now there is a population of nearly fifty that helps in controlling prey numbers. The genetic vigour of the lions is maintained by periodic reintroduction. Leopards and cheetahs also help in controlling prey numbers. Reintroduction of the African Wild Dog – which has drastically declined all over Africa as a result of conflict with expanding human population, habitat fragmentation, and disease contracted from domestic dogs – has not met with much success. Presently, this Reserve, although a malarial area, is the most popular conservation and tourism showpiece in KwaZulu-Natal province. The reserve is totally fenced, devoid of human settlements, and has a 250 sq. km wilderness area where no development is allowed and to which the only access is on foot. The wilderness area was set aside in the 1950s on the initiative of former Game Ranger and well-known conservationist, Ian Player. On April 30, 1995, the then

President Nelson Mandela visited the Reserve to celebrate its centenary.

Our visit was brief, yet we saw a remarkable number and diversity of large mammal species. Even near the Nyalazi gate, we saw two White Rhinos. There are five species of rhinos in the world – White and Black rhinos in Africa, Indian, Javan, and Sumatran rhinos in Asia. Rhinos are primitive looking mammals surviving from the Miocene era (23–5 million years ago). All the rhino species are currently threatened by poaching for their horn, which is used in traditional medicine in Asia. Interestingly, the horn is made of thickly matted hair that grows from the skull without a skeletal support.

One noteworthy aspect of the management in the Reserve is the wise use of the cool season burning to create conditions of spring (as one Range Officer remarked) for the ungulates. Burning is done on a rotational basis; an area burnt this year may not be burnt for the next two to three years. The most common animal we saw in the burnt areas where the tender grass was sprouting was the Impala, one of the graceful antelopes of Africa that fortunately occurs in thousands in many



Warthog – the name comes from four large wart-like protrusions on the head that serve as fat reserves



A herd of elephants spotted near Nyalazi gate

countries. It is the preferred prey of all the large mammalian predators: Lion, Leopard, Cheetah, Hyena, and African Wild Dog. In an unburnt patch, with an abundance of tall and soft grass turning golden yellow, there was a large herd of buffaloes feeding dispersed in the grassland. Along the road, in several places, the strong smell of rhino, buffalo, and elephant permeated the air.

Around midday, we reached Mpila camp (there are six lodges and three

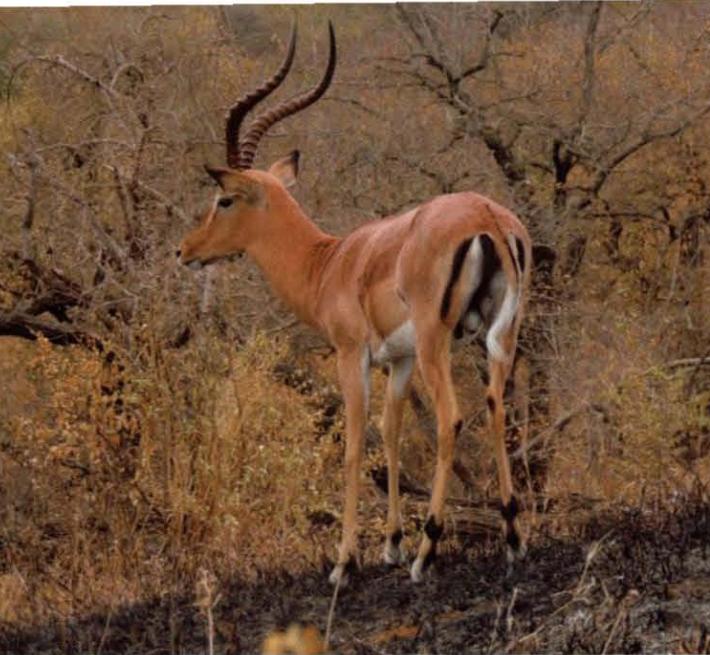
camps in the Reserve) atop a hillock and wandered around the camp. The view from the camp was magnificent. As we parked our car, we noticed a group of Vervet Monkeys stealing food from the open windows of a car. While we were following a group of Crested Guinea Fowls and trying to take their picture, a lion roared in the valley below and my thoughts went to Gir protected area where I have walked on numerous occasions and have listened to lions in

rapt silence. A group of baboons was walking along the ridge beyond the valley where the lion was roaring. It appeared that they were not bothered by the roar of the lion.

The Mpila camp is protected by an electric fence to keep away elephants. The staff in the camp said that all other animals including Lion and Hyena walk through the camp at night. There were many Warthogs, which belong to the pig family, feeding on the grass around the



A view of Umfolozi river within the Reserve



Impala, the most elegant and abundant antelope of Africa



Plains Zebra is one of the most attractive wild herbivores of Africa

neatly maintained chalets. The name comes from the four large wart-like protrusions on the head of the Warthog that serve as fat reserves, and are used for defence when males fight. I was lucky to see some Nyals, the South African Spiral-horned Antelope. The females had rusty brown coats. Only the males have the horns, but both males and females have a white chevron between their eyes, which is much more conspicuous in the males. Adult males look even more magnificent with a prominent crest of hair running from the back of the head to the end of the tail. Another line of hair runs along the midline of the chest and belly. As we came out of the camp, we drove into a group of Common or Plains Zebra, one of the most attractive mammals of Africa, which was not shy of our vehicle. Although threatened by habitat loss and hunting, the Common Zebra is more abundant than the other two – Grevy's and Mountain zebras – which are critically endangered.

As the afternoon advanced, we drove back to the entrance. On the way, a herd of Blue Wildebeest was seen coming to the Umfolozi river to drink. A pair of male zebras was observed at a distance in burnt grassland fighting – chasing, kicking, and biting – which raised lots of dust. While

driving inside the Reserve in our small vehicle, we were keen to see elephants, but were rather afraid to meet a large bull on the road face to face. We did not realise that we were ordained to get a magnificent view of the elephants. In the past, they had been killed off from the Reserve, but there is now a population of four hundred, which has grown from the reintroduced stock. As we drove past the Nyalazi gate and came on the road (R 618), we saw a group of four elephants, with a bull, peacefully feeding on the left side of the road unmindful of the traffic. We stopped, quickly took some pictures, and drove off to Durban.

As I travelled, I reflected on the news that till mid-July 2012 that year nearly 300 rhinos were poached in South Africa, which has about 20,000 rhinos. It was feared that at this rate the number of rhinos poached would exceed the number poached in 2011, which was 448 (the number of rhinos poached in 2010 was 333). This rise in the poaching incidents of all species was attributed to the recent arrival of a large Chinese population in Africa. Related to rhino poaching, the dedicated South African Government had made 176 arrests till July 2012, and they were making efforts at the national and international level to significantly control

this heinous activity. I hoped against hope that the determination of the South African Government would eventually win over this evil. ■

Postscript: Poaching is on the rise in Africa. In January 2013, in Kenya, an entire family of eleven elephants were machine gunned from air. Poachers came in a helicopter and took away the ivory. The black market trade in ivory and rhino horn is reported to be eight billion dollars a year and this growth in poaching is attributed to the spike in the economic growth in Asia. The Vietnamese believe that rhino horn can cure cancer. One kilogram of rhino horn powder is now worth 65,000 US dollars. One pound of ivory is worth a thousand US dollars. It is feared that this unethical war on wildlife may severely affect the economy of many African nations as they directly depend on wildlife tourism and trophy hunting for their revenue.



A.J.T. Johnsingh is the first Indian to do a study on a free-ranging large mammal, the Dhole. He represents the National Wildlife Board and National Tiger Conservation Authority. He works for Nature Conservation Foundation, Mysore and WWF-India.