

BIG *little ears*

What a rhino lacks in vision and looks, it makes up for with an acute sense of hearing and smell, supplemented by intelligence and charm.

Looks, in any case, are a subjective thing, and there are those who have found a baby, in particular, hard to resist. Anna Merz went the whole hog and shared her bed with the abandoned black rhino Samia (here at 18 months).





A place apart

Lewa Downs – 45,000 acres of plains and arid thorn bush with deep valleys – is a cattle ranch, owned and run by the Craig family, which supports an astonishing range of wild creatures, from greater kudu to elephants. The original 5,000-acre Ngare Sergoi Rhino Sanctuary was completed in March 1984. The cattle remaining within benefited because the 8ft electric boundary fence meant they were no longer confined in bomas and could graze at night. Tourism benefited, because the rhinos were a great added attraction.

The rhinos we introduced bred successfully, and in 1988, the sanctuary was doubled in area. Four years later, the whole of Lewa Downs was turned into a rhino sanctuary, to include the 16,000 acres of government-owned Ngare Ndare Forest Reserve to the south. A single elephant could, in just one night, wreck an entire crop on any of the adjacent smallholdings. With the extended fence in place, this danger was removed – a great step forward in public goodwill towards our project.

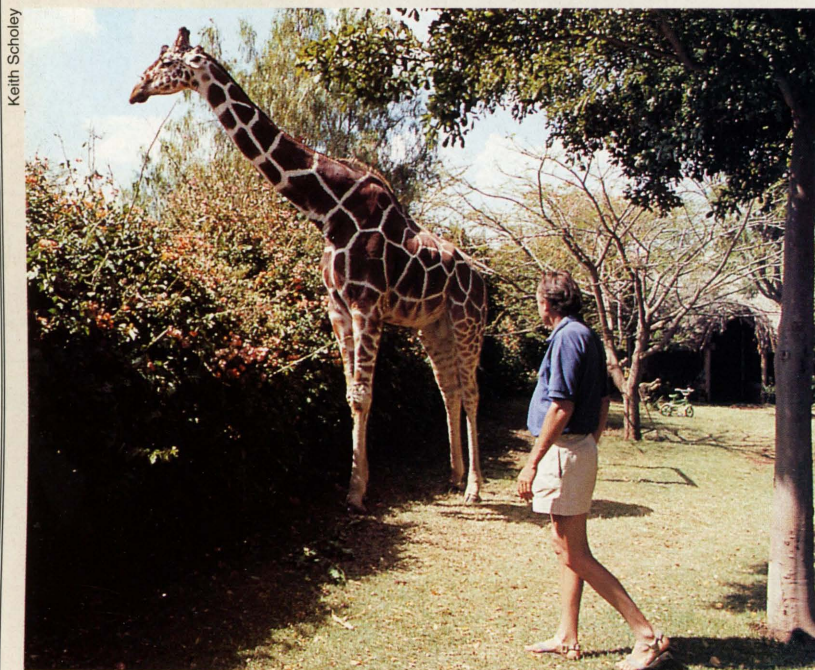
Finally, in April 1993, the Craig family turned their private property into the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy. A team at the University of Pretoria is helping determine stocking rates and advising on how to manage the land to maximise the carrying capacity for

the black rhino.

It is essential that the conservancy should benefit those who live on our periphery. We want to help create a market for local handicrafts and artefacts. We have helped build four primary schools on our periphery, and are planning a few basic health-care centres on our boundary.

Local children already come to see our wildlife, and their visits could be extended if we could provide overnight facilities. Children cannot appreciate the beauty of their heritage if they never see it.

Our aim is to become financially independent within five years and no longer have to depend on donations for the huge expenditure needed to keep our rhinos safe. To achieve this, we have to raise the capital to build a small tourist lodge. We hope our guests will leave not only with good photos, but with compassion for these great creatures, and with the determination to fight so that all endangered wildlife will have a future. We want to prove that domestic stock can share land with wildlife without suffering. That wildlife can benefit local people. And that these arid rangelands can prosper if properly managed. The conservancy came about because of the development of a very important idea – that this generation is responsible for holding land in trust for future generations.



Roger the giraffe – just one of Lewa Downs' residents with less than conventional habits.

As I stood in the back of the open lorry next to Godot's travelling crate, I talked to him as one would to a horse. From inside came the strangest and most varied little squeaking noises, out of proportion to the great size of the animal. As I talked, so he squeaked. He was not behaving like either a stupid or an anti-social animal. Was it possible that the rhino's intelligence had been so seriously underestimated?

It was a bitterly cold night in March 1984, and I was travelling north from Nairobi in the company of a large male black rhino caught by the Kenya Capture Unit a month earlier in the Kitengela, the conservation area adjacent to Nairobi National Park. He had had to be captured because he persisted in leaving the park boundaries and straying into an area where he was in danger of being killed by poachers. His captors had called him Ngethe, but I had already renamed him Godot because I had waited so long for him – the sanctuary we were headed for had been a year in the building, and there followed many attempts at tracking down suitable candidates for transfer to the sanctuary before we heard about Godot. Before and behind us drove armed escort vehicles. Since his capture, Godot had been locked in a small, heavily guarded corral, but from now on, he would be our responsibility – the first rhino to enter the Ngare Sergoi Rhino Sanctuary. The excitement was almost outweighed by the fear of him being killed on the way.

My involvement with rhinos had started a few years earlier, though I had been interested in African wildlife a lot longer than that. From 1958 to 1976 I lived in Ghana, and for the last 10 years of that period I worked in my spare time as an honorary game warden for the Ghana Wildlife Department. During that time I saw with what horrifying speed extinction can happen to all sorts of creatures. Then my husband Karl and I moved to Kenya to retire. And this was the decade during which Kenya's black rhino population plummeted. I knew nothing about rhinos and had never given them a thought in West Africa, but now I was outraged that Kenya should be desecrated by the rotting corpses of these magnificent animals, each with the end of its nose hacked off and the rest of its body left for the vultures. These rhinos were being slaughtered for one reason only – their horns, which had become one of the most valuable commodities on Earth.

I might never have got beyond this stage of feeling like a helpless bystander were it not for an extremely fortuitous visit as a tourist to Lewa Downs (see left). That was in September 1982, when I was still living in Nairobi. I had approached many other landholders for help in doing something positive for the beleaguered rhino, without success, but within weeks of me broaching the idea with the Craigs, they had given permission for the creation of the Ngare Sergoi Rhino Sanctuary (named after the river that ran through it) on their land.

Throughout 1983, work on building the sanctuary fence and buildings went apace, while my husband and I spent much time driving to and fro from Nairobi, and I tried to learn all I could about rhinos. I read about their eating habits and their digestive processes, but found virtually nothing on their social habits – in fact, I was told that they *had* no social habits, and were short-sighted, bad-tempered and stupid. Even so, none of these seemed to be good reasons for allowing an animal that had evolved over many millions of years to become extinct.

Eleven fascinating years have passed since I moved to live at Lewa Downs and first met Godot, and I now know that the rhino is not only a beautiful and magnificent animal, but also a highly intelligent one. This seems to come as a surprise to almost everyone I tell – other than our trackers. My first tracker, the wise old Errada, told me in the very early days that the senses of a rhino were akin to those of an elephant. (Like most of our trackers, Errada is a Ndorobo – a term coined by the Maasai to refer to the traditional hunters and gatherers who live in the forests nearby.) But elephants have never had the PR problem that afflicts the unfortunate rhino. The elephant has a highly manipulative trunk to which we can relate. And the Indian elephant has for many centuries been semi-domesticated. The rhino has no trunk, a very unusual profile and very bad eyesight. It does have strengths, but not the sort we can easily appreciate. We live largely through our eyes, and have a huge vocabulary to deal with what we see, but only a tiny one to deal with what we smell. The rhino lives in a world of smells and sounds. But this does not mean that it is inferior or stupid.

The elephant analogy also breaks down when it comes to social behaviour. The elephant is a herd animal and the rhino travels in pairs or small groups. When a female has a calf, she becomes solitary for at least the first six months. The calf will continue to remain with her until she has another – at least four years later. There must be some good reason for this very long period of maternal care. I believe it is not to teach the calf what to eat, but to teach it social behaviour – how to behave in the small group of rhinos it will join. The longer the period of mother-child interdependence, the more intelligent the animal and the more it depends on learned rather than instinctive behaviour.

My first lessons I learned from Godot, but I also learned much from the many other black rhinos that followed his path to the sanctuary, where our skilled trackers enabled me to see so much. Even so, the average rhino is so terrified of humans that at the slightest whiff of our scent they bolt. Had it not been for Samia, I would have missed a lot.

Samia, a black rhino calf, was born in the sanctuary on 15 February 1985 and immediately deserted by her mother. It was not easy to hand-rear her, despite the fact that, in Ghana, I had had much experience with orphans of various species. For the first six months of her life, I feared almost daily that she would die; she had unending tummy troubles and a very subnormal temperature. Perhaps in part because of the traumas of her early life, she and I developed a very close bond. I have raised monkeys and chimps, among others, but none were more affectionate, were more fascinating or, to my total astonishment, showed more intelligence than Samia.

I would seldom have been close enough to a wild rhino to witness the manipulative capacity of their upper lip, which is like a tiny, incipient trunk. Samia unendingly surprised me with her capacity to open doors and gates and to carry and manoeuvre objects around. Once her horn started growing, that, too, was used to open or manipulate things such as car doors. Once her horn was big enough, she very quickly discovered that, with its help, she could extract the horse food from my four-wheel-drive by opening its rear door. When we put an electric wire round the garden to deter her from coming into the house, she dealt ►

Thinking ahead. The goal of Lewa Downs is not just to keep relocated rhinos safe, but to produce more rhinos for the future.

Gerry Ellis





The black rhino (above) can be distinguished from the white by its much narrower mouth and prehensile lip – invaluable for gaining access to foliage and garden gates. Dutch-speaking people, on first encountering the white rhino, called it the 'weit' rhino, meaning 'wide'. The name stuck. Lewa Downs is home to both species, but the more endangered black predominates.

Opposite:
The ever-affectionate Samia, with the author.

with this unfamiliar hazard with sense and determination. First she burnt her nose on it and was most upset. But she had seen where I fiddled with the fence to connect it, and so she went to the same place and, after a few false starts, unhooked it with her horn.

An even more startling insight into Samia's intellectual capacities came when I decided that I must try to help her develop her sense of smell. I gave her the slip one day and hid. First she ran around calling for me. Then she went to the garden gate, opened its bolt with her upper lip, and released the dog – who put his nose down and came straight to me, with Samia hot on his tail. By no stretch of the imagination can this be described as instinctive behaviour, and many times since, she has used the dogs to find me.

The rhino is more closely related to the horse than to any other domestic animal, and much of the body language it uses is very similar. Ears sharply pricked mean great interest. Tail up, or in the case of the white rhino, curled, means action and alarm. Ears flat back means trouble, and if the nose is wrinkled, the lips drawn back and the whole body tensed, a fight or a charge is imminent.

Like many other animals, the rhino uses its droppings and urine as a means of communication. When the female is in season, she will scrape in her droppings once or twice with her hind feet with great vigour and spray her urine onto trees and bushes. She will also urinate a great deal more than usual. A dominant male black rhino will always energetically scrape in his own droppings and in those of any female in season. The scrape of the black male looks very similar to that of the white male, but is made by scraping backwards with

'Samia is truly a rhino of two worlds, part of a wild group but still responsive, affectionate and protective towards me.'

each hind foot in turn; the white will drag the toe of each hind foot forwards. I am quite sure this is a sign of male dominance and that he is claiming the females within the area rather than the area itself. Our trackers have a different theory: they say the rhino has a deep respect for the elephant, and the elephant resents it if another animal can produce a dropping whose volume competes with its own; by scraping the dropping, the rhino is disguising its size and will thus escape the jealousy of the elephant.

Rhino vocalisations are very varied, but normally very quiet, and so one seldom hears them unless the animal is extremely close, or in a captive situation. The exception is when the animal is enraged – then it can make the most awe-inspiring noises. This I learnt one night to my cost. I was sleeping on top of the Land Rover when two males, Godot and Womba, had a major battle all around me. One was roaring like a lion, the other trumpeting like an elephant. It was terrifying. Several battles later, Godot pushed Womba down a steep hillside, and he died a few days later of a ruptured spleen and multiple internal injuries.

The vast majority of the noises rhinos make I learnt from Samia. She produced an endless range of squeaks and wonks, and in due course I learnt what many of them meant. If terrified by anything (when she was little, it was usually cows), she would emit a ►

The rhino assortment

Beginnings

Rhino history stretches back 50-60 million years. Up to 300 species have been found worldwide, with the exception of Australia, Antarctica and South America. These early rhinos were both varied and versatile. *Hyrachus* was about the size of a collie and built for running; at the other end of the scale, *Baluchitherium*, standing 16 feet tall and weighing 20 tons, was the largest land mammal ever.

Now only five species are left, three in Asia and two in Africa. All are endangered, and together they number fewer than 10,000 animals – down from millions at the beginning of this century.

Five on the edge

In India and Nepal lives the **greater Indian one-horned rhino**. In Java its smaller relative the **Javan rhino** numbers about 50 animals, and there may also be a few left in Vietnam. In the mountainous forests of Sumatra, Borneo and Malaya, a few **Sumatran**, or **hairly**, rhinos still survive. Two years ago, it was thought that there could still be 600 left, but now it is feared there may be fewer than 200, widely scattered and nowhere in sanctuaries.

In Africa there are two species, the **black** and the **white**, the black being divided into four races, or subspecies, and the white into two. The northern white rhino is down to 31 animals in Garamba in Zaire, but the southern numbers about 5,000 in South Africa. The black rhino has suffered one of the worst population crashes of any

large mammal. In Kenya between 95 and 98 per cent of the population was poached in a decade. In 1980, there were still viable populations of black rhino in 17 African countries. Now there are only five: South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Kenya. Just three years ago, there were an estimated 3,000 black rhinos in Zimbabwe; now there are believed to be only 260. In Kenya, there are about 400 black rhinos left, and most of these are in government or private sanctuaries.

Blacks and whites

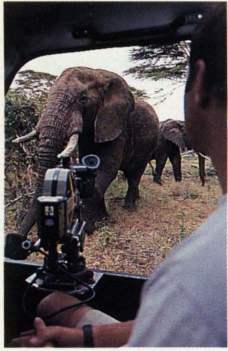
The black rhino is smaller and more versatile than the white. The white grazes only and prefers short grass. The black both browses and grazes, and eats an incredibly wide range of plants, including species poisonous to most other animals. When grazing, it prefers long coarse grass. The white has a very big, long head with a square lip and a massive hump on its neck – making it one of the very few mammals that is unable to swim. The black has a much smaller head with a pointed upper lip like an incipient trunk. It has no hump and is more agile than the white rhino – it can negotiate rocky or mountainous terrain with ease. Both species have poor eyesight and excellent hearing and sense of smell. Animals of both species are highly individual in temperament, but the black is usually more nervous, more highly strung and more easily stressed.



One of a very few Sumatran rhinos left – they need a sanctuary, too.

Frans Lanting/Minden Pictures





On air

The relationship between humans and the wildlife of Lewa Downs – particularly Samia, Gilbert the elephant and Roger the giraffe – forms the basis of *Invasion of the Tree Smashers*, the second film in BBC1's *Natural Neighbours* series, shown in October.

Action

To contribute to the efforts of those at Lewa Downs, send a donation to Ngare Sergoi Rhino Trust, c/o H R Hall OBE, La Landelle, Route des Landes, St Ouen, Jersey JE3 2AE, Channel Islands.

To find out more about the conservation of rhinos and other endangered species on Lewa Downs and elsewhere in Kenya, send an sae to *Natural Neighbours Factsheet*, PO Box 229, Bristol BS99 7JN.

To enquire about staying at Lewa Downs, or for any more information, contact Anna Merz at Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, PO Box 56923, Nairobi, Kenya.

Author

Anna Merz founded the Ngare Sergoi Rhino Sanctuary, now incorporated within the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, and still lives and works there, campaigning for the future of all rhinos.

high-pitched scream like that of a rabbit in a trap. She also had a considerable range of snorts, which showed alarm or anger in various degrees and served as a warning as to what she was about to do next.

Our use of language has created a profound barrier between ourselves and all other creatures. We tend to regard it as the only means of communication and have forgotten that there are other and older methods. In recent years, many fascinating discoveries have been made about communication among whales and dolphins. It has also been learnt that elephants communicate by infrasound, and that their tummy rumbles may be meaningful communication and not just a part of the process of digestion.

It was two years before it dawned on me that Samia was trying to communicate with me by the way in which she regulated her breathing. At first I thought that I must be imagining it, but gradually I learnt that certain patterns of breathing indicated certain things – a sort of Morse code. Excited by this, I started to try to watch more closely rhino cows and calves when together and other rhinos when they met up with each other. Certain definite patterns emerged that obviously had as much meaning to the rhinos as did snorts and squeaks.

At three and a half years of age, I weaned Samia and she started to live the life of a normal rhino. But still, to my unbounded joy, she remains my friend. She is truly a rhino of two worlds, part of a wild group but still responsive, affectionate and protective towards me. In April 1993, she was mated by a very wild bull that we had captured in the north of Kenya in January. That he had survived in a poacher-infested area was a miracle. That he feared and loathed people went without saying. What can it feel like to be the sole survivor in a vast area where once your species was common? Yet despite this, on several occasions he has followed Samia home. His presence outside the garden gate does cause complications, because while he is there no one can get in or out; nor can the track past my house be used. But from these visits I have learnt so much.

I have experienced the unbelievable thrill of standing just the other side of the gate, not more than eight feet from them, and watching what happened. At that distance he could see me very well. He could also smell me, and both sight and smell offended him greatly. He stood tense, every muscle in his body trembling with agitation. But Samia stood between us, nose outstretched to his and breathing in a sort of Morse code which was more than a method of getting oxygen, and he replied to her by the same means. It was quite obvious that she was able to control his behaviour, and on subsequent occasions she has definitely prevented him from charging.

Despite its obvious intelligence and ability to communicate, the rhino has its limitations – it cannot understand wire snares, poisoned nails placed in planks on the paths it uses to come to drink, or submachine-guns. Because of the ridiculous value placed on their horn, all five species of rhino are today facing the likelihood of extinction. In the Middle East, their horns are used as status-symbol dagger handles. In much of the Far East, their horns are powdered and used for a variety of medicinal purposes.

The French writer Romain Gary said, "The great mammals symbolise man himself. Those who allow inconvenient uneconomic beasts to be destroyed will be equally careless of uneconomic inconvenient humanity." Is this what we wish to be said of our generation – that we allowed the wonder and splendour of great beasts to disappear? ■

Samia

15 February 1985

Between three and four o'clock in the afternoon Solia gave birth to a calf near the north fence and wandered away from it almost immediately. We could just see the long little ears poking above the grass and hear tiny bird-like mews.

16 February

Solia did not come near the calf all day. I fed it in situ.

17 February

The calf appeared weaker and was showing signs of dehydration. At 5.30pm we decided I should take her home. A stable was prepared with warm, dry grass for bedding and the calf was installed. She took some milk but was very cold and very weak. I wrapped us together in a blanket for the night, but even so it was chilly and uncomfortable – and the mosquitoes were bad. At about midnight I decided it would be a lot warmer and more comfortable if I took her to bed with me – Karl was in Nairobi – but even in bed, I could not get her warm despite blankets and hot-water bottles.

18 February

I fed her by bottle five times during the day. She is still very cold and dehydrated, and is not at all happy if I am out of her sight. I have named the calf Samia, concocted out of the name of my beloved dog Sambo and that of her mother Solia. Karl returned and remained fairly calm at the thought of having to share his bedroom with a little rhino.

21 February

She seems a little stronger. She makes three different noises: a small squeak when she follows me, a more desperate one if I leave her and a little 'huff-huff' if she gets stuck at the single step up into the house.

22 February

I am increasing her feeds. She is very calm and affectionate. During supper, which we eat by the fire for her sake, she climbed onto my lap and then onto the table, causing a considerable crisis with the soup. She made a big mess during the night, her first proper output – Karl slept through this rather noisy event.

23 February

I took her for a slow walk down to the drift and she sat on my lap and crunched a blade of grass. There was a series of defecatory crises during the night.

24 February

She is still taking her bottles well and clings to me trustingly, but her bowels are very loose and I am worried. We got a message from Daphne Sheldrick, who has raised four orphan rhinos, saying we must change the calf's diet. There were more crises during the night and Karl trod on one of them en route to the loo himself, which resulted in minor matrimonial complications.

6 March

She had diarrhoea so badly and Karl was so upset that she and I slept in the bathroom. The mess I had to clean up in the morning was fairly spectacular. I dare not upset her by