

FILMING RHINO IN KENYA

THE black rhino is credited with being a blundering, stupid, and treacherous animal: short-sighted, and altogether a beast to be avoided. My experience may be limited, but it extends over twenty-five odd years in Kenya, and at most times I have found the animal tractable, if treated with due respect. True enough, some individuals will charge "at sight"—or, more correctly, "at scent," for it is when they suddenly get one's wind that they become tiresome; but such are the exception rather than the rule. However, one must be prepared to study each individual as one comes upon it; they are just as variable as are human beings, temperamentally. In this brief article I shall attempt to indicate how, out of several met with during recent months, very few were at all troublesome.

I well remember my first experience with rhino: it was not of deliberate seeking. My companion and I were collecting birds in the Tsavo area, once famous for its man-eating lions. The bush is very dense in parts, and some of the clumps are impenetrable, and just as I shot a sunbird on the outside of one of these clumps, a rhino dashed out from the other side. . . . I didn't wait to see which way he was going—I fled, and, fortunately, the rhino went in the opposite direction! Two days later I had another experience when shooting francolin near the same spot. A bird got up and pitched on the far side of a bush; I went round

dampener to the wonderful exploits of the day, nor to the enthusiasm with which the story was recounted. To the question: "Did you see the rhino?" the reply came: "Rhino?—the place was full of them: lion also, and great herds of the plains game." Here was an opportunity not to be lost, so I there and then arranged for my son to visit the spot with me the next Sunday. An early start saw us well on our way, and by nine a.m. we struck across country to the water holes. No rhino was visible this side of the dry water-course, not even my old acquaintance of the rhino-thorn. Crossing the river bed, we skirted along the dongas, and suddenly, about a hundred yards distant, we came upon four rhino asleep under a thorn tree. Testing the wind, we altered our course slightly, and came up-wind toward them. Great creatures, lying on their sides, for all the world like four rounded grey boulders, on which sat, or scrambled, attendant oxpeckers or tick-birds. At twenty yards we declutched and stopped the car, and watched the beasts through binoculars. No signs of awakening; just an occasional twitching of an ear as an oxpecker seized a tick from near that sensitive organ. In this bunch was an old bull, a three-quarter-grown bull, a cow, and a six months old calf.

Although the engine of the car was running, they took no notice, for the wind was blowing strongly from them to us. We photographed them as they lay asleep. Presently a tick-bird,



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"THEY CAME AT A TROT TOWARDS THE CAR." THE FEMALE HAD EXCEPTIONAL HORNS

to flush it again, and there, in full view, not twenty yards away, was a bull rhino just rising to his feet and facing me. He had my wind, and charged. I slipped round the thorn bush and up the nearest tree—how, I could never imagine; the rhino thundered past, and went straight into the scrub. I think he was as scared as I, for he didn't return. But it is of the various rhino I have encountered during March of this year that I can write with intimate knowledge. The experience was exceptional, and the photographs obtained are testimony of what can be done with judicious care, and the help of a motor car.

The Southern Game Reserve of Kenya justly claims to be one of the most wonderful game countries in Africa. I have already written an account of that small portion of the Reserve known as "Lone Tree," which abuts on to the boundaries of Nairobi, capital of Kenya, an area which, at no distant date, will be declared a sanctuary in perpetuity. The game therein is plentiful and varied, but, as a result of the drought which continued up to the end of March, vast herds were concentrated on a few water-holes just south of Nairobi and within an hour's run by car.

Occasionally rhino put in an appearance; and for many years I have known of a solitary old bull, a sulky fellow, who spent most of his time among a patch of rhino-thorn (a low-growing semiscadent acacia which is quite impenetrable) in this area. He just stood or lay-up in the thorns, knowing that he could not be molested. Many an hour have I waited patiently for him to come out into the open, but without success; I have given him my wind, but still he refused to budge. A surly fellow.

When, on occasion, I have been asked where one might have the chance of seeing rhino within a reasonable distance of the town, I have directed the enquirer to this spot; and when my son put the question to me on behalf of a party he wished to take out, I told him of this "pet rhino," and said that, with any luck, provided they went early, they might just catch a glimpse of the fellow. They visited the spot one Sunday, and the result of the outing was communicated to me as a result of circumstances which might have proved tragic. At about eight p.m. my son turned up, dirty and dishevelled, with the request: could he borrow my car? His car had skidded, turned turtle, and was a wreck, some ten miles out. Beyond a shaking and a few bruises, none of the party was injured. The accident did not act as a

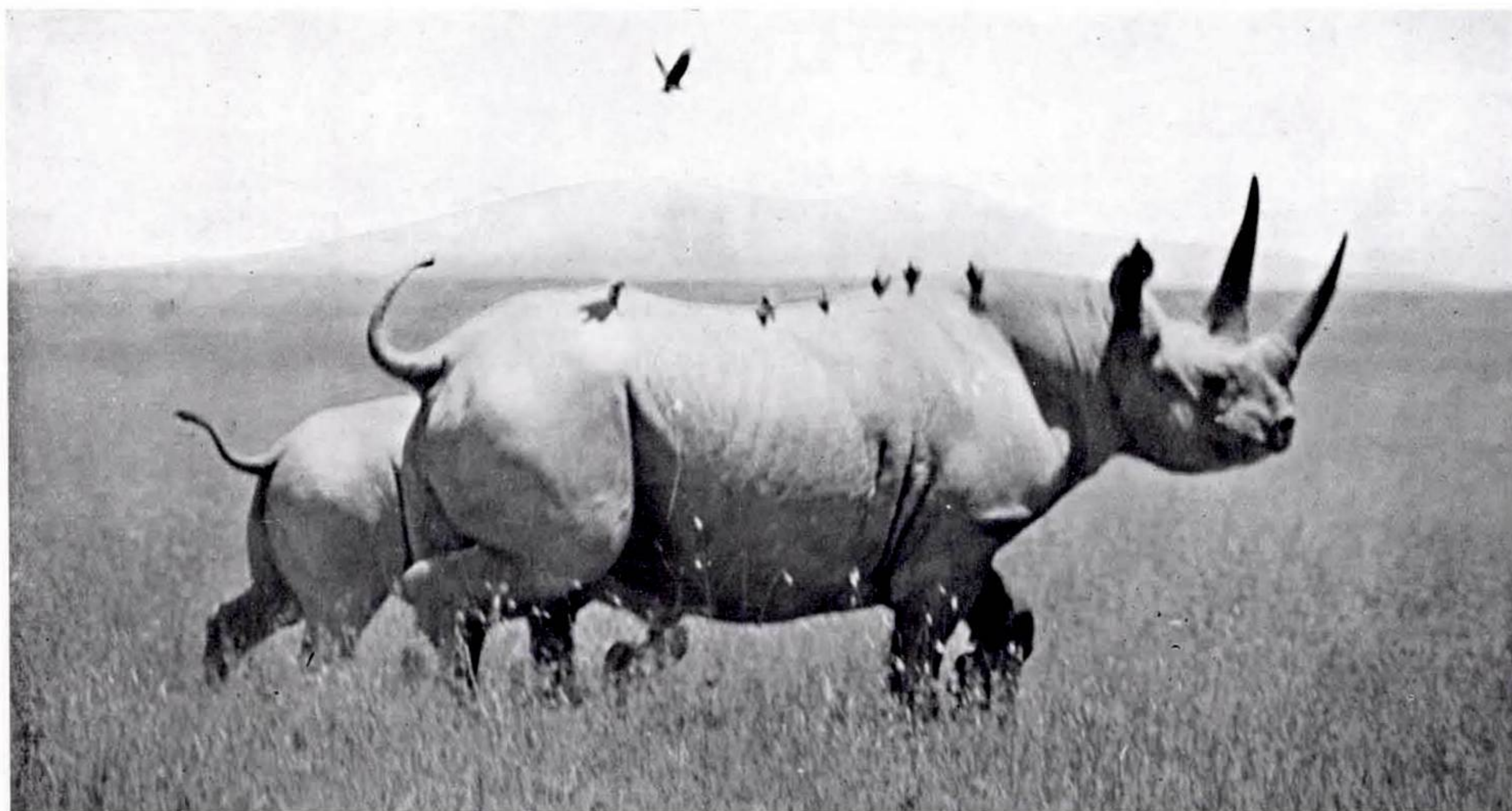
who got an extra hard flick from an ear, gave the alarm; simultaneously all four animals got to their feet and faced in our direction. The old bull turned and made off into the nearest cover; the remaining three came at a trot towards the car, then stopped, snorting.

We backed slowly and got the cameras working, the rhinos meanwhile walked calmly through the grass, stopping now and then to look at us. They soon halted in a patch of low-growing thorn bush, and we worked our way slowly toward them, keeping the wind in the right direction. It was not easy to traverse that rock-strewn veldt with larva boulders hidden in the grass, each one just grazing the sump of the car; but we managed to advance to within a few yards and fire off a few films before they moved off again. These three animals were not at all perturbed at the car, but leisurely moved along, leading us, however, to more broken ground where it became impossible to manœuvre the car without fear of damage. Many a time our way was barred by boulders, and we were forced to turn aside and come up to our quarry a little bit too much in the wind; and after a time they went off into impossible country, where we left them.

Turning back towards the river bed we espied two more rhino asleep in the thorns, and these we approached with never a movement on their part until we were nearly on top of them. A second female, with remarkable horns, very similar to the first one, with the hind horn longer than the front one; and a youngster, not so old as the one first encountered. These animals gave us wonderful opportunities for photography both with ciné and still cameras.

They were more obliging than the first lot, and kept to the smoother veldt, and as they moved about one could follow and work the camera as the car slowly kept pace with them. Only once did the mother face up and come toward the car: a warning not to take liberties. Two hours at close quarters with rhino seldom more than twenty yards off gave one splendid chances for observation and photography of which full advantage was taken.

A few days later we visited the rhino ground again. They were not in their former haunts, and we traversed the countryside for miles, bumping over boulders until the old car creaked and groaned under the strain. With glasses scouring the veldt, we closely examined every grey mass projecting from the grass;



A RHINO AND HER CALF. TICK-BIRDS IN ATTENDANCE

many were investigated, only to prove to be a boulder or a low thorn in blossom. At last we found a solitary grey hump out in the bare veldt; uncertain of its nature, we approached slowly, when presently a tick-bird appeared on top, then another—a sure sign as to the nature of that grey bulk. Again testing the wind, we worked round a little, and then we noted an ear flick. Approaching nearer, we noted that the beast was a female with identical horns to the second we had encountered on the previous visit; but where was the calf? In manoeuvring the car closer we bumped into an unnoticed stone and had to reverse; in doing so she heard us. She was up in a flash, faced us, and snorted; the calf rose from behind her—he had been lying beside her, completely hidden by her great bulk. Not too good-tempered this morning, apparently, so we decided to go easy with her. Giving her time to settle down, we edged the car toward her. She behaved splendidly, and at ten paces we were able to film and photograph her without difficulty. The youngster always sought protection behind its mother. Rough going put a stop to further photography, and we let them wander off into a rocky donga.

Further search brought us in contact with a particularly fine male lying out in open short grass. He had already heard us approaching at a distance, and when we drew near he was on the *qui vive*, and, though still lying down, faced our way. A quick snap, and he was up and putting distance between us. There was nothing amenable about him: he preferred the

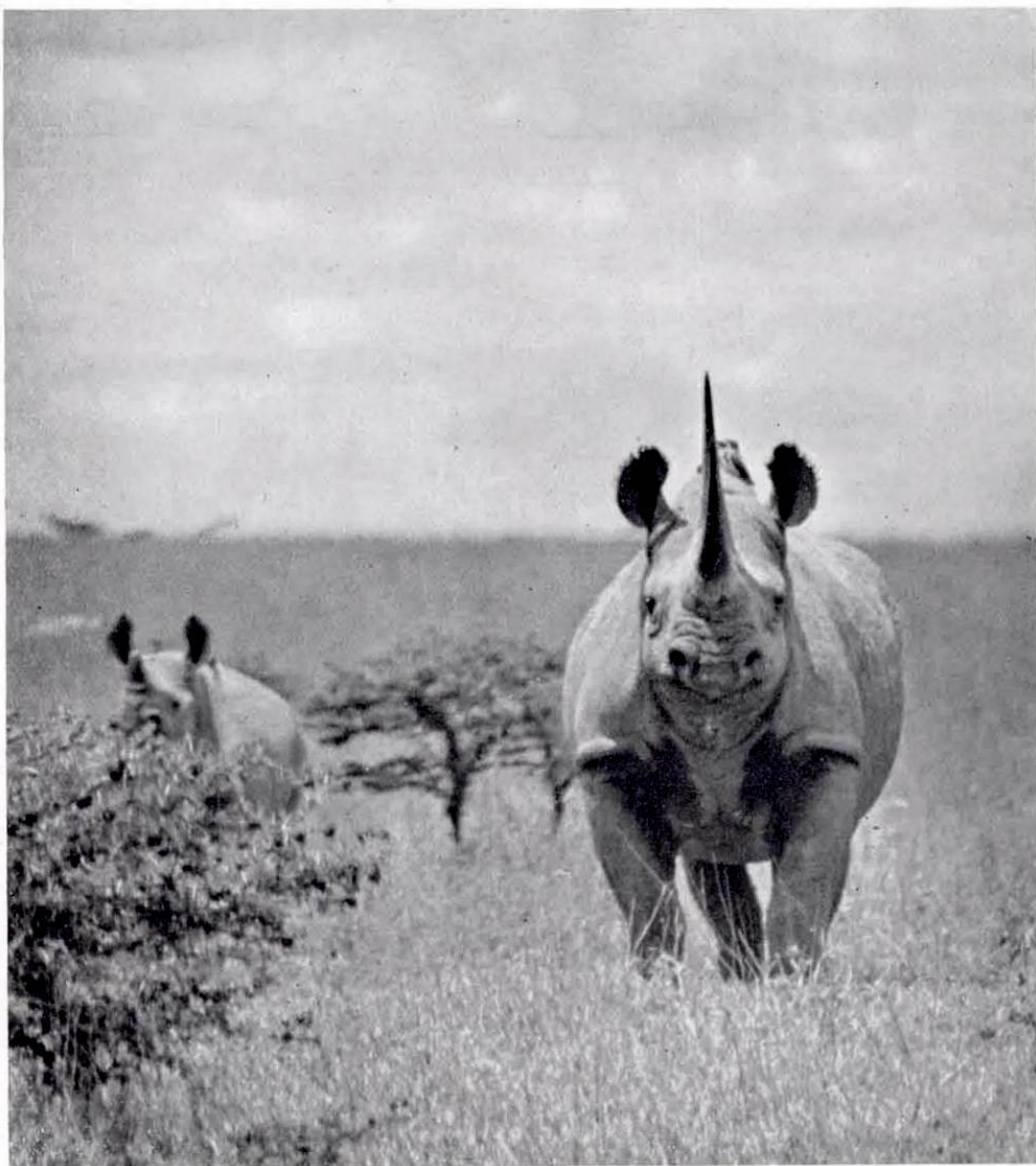
open country to our company, no matter how harmless! Two more bulls were located, and they promised well; but fate was against us. Burst tyres (brand-new ones at that) and three punctures in succession put a stop to further photography for a while, and back we went to the water-holes to locate the punctures and partake of lunch.

This accomplished, we again set out, and were fortunate in finding a second cow and calf in thorn bush. From the very beginning she showed signs of truculence; she came straight for us, but, luckily, stopped short. The ground was impossible, so we allowed them to walk off on to more open veldt.

After half an hour we bumped our way toward them; but she was annoyed, and showed it by short charges toward us, but never seriously intending a bump. We decided that she was best left alone!

A further bull, the ninth rhino for that day, showed up at a hundred yards. Locating the direction of the wind, we started to move toward him; he had seen us, and at that distance came straight to meet us. Obviously he was not a gentleman to be trifled with, and the nature of the ground made the risk not worth while.

In this very limited area of the Game Reserve we have noted no less than eleven rhino. This experience was just one of those rare opportunities which, through the agency of nature, presented itself for a short while. It is unlikely that there will be such a concentration of game for many a long day.—V. G. L. VAN SOMEREN.

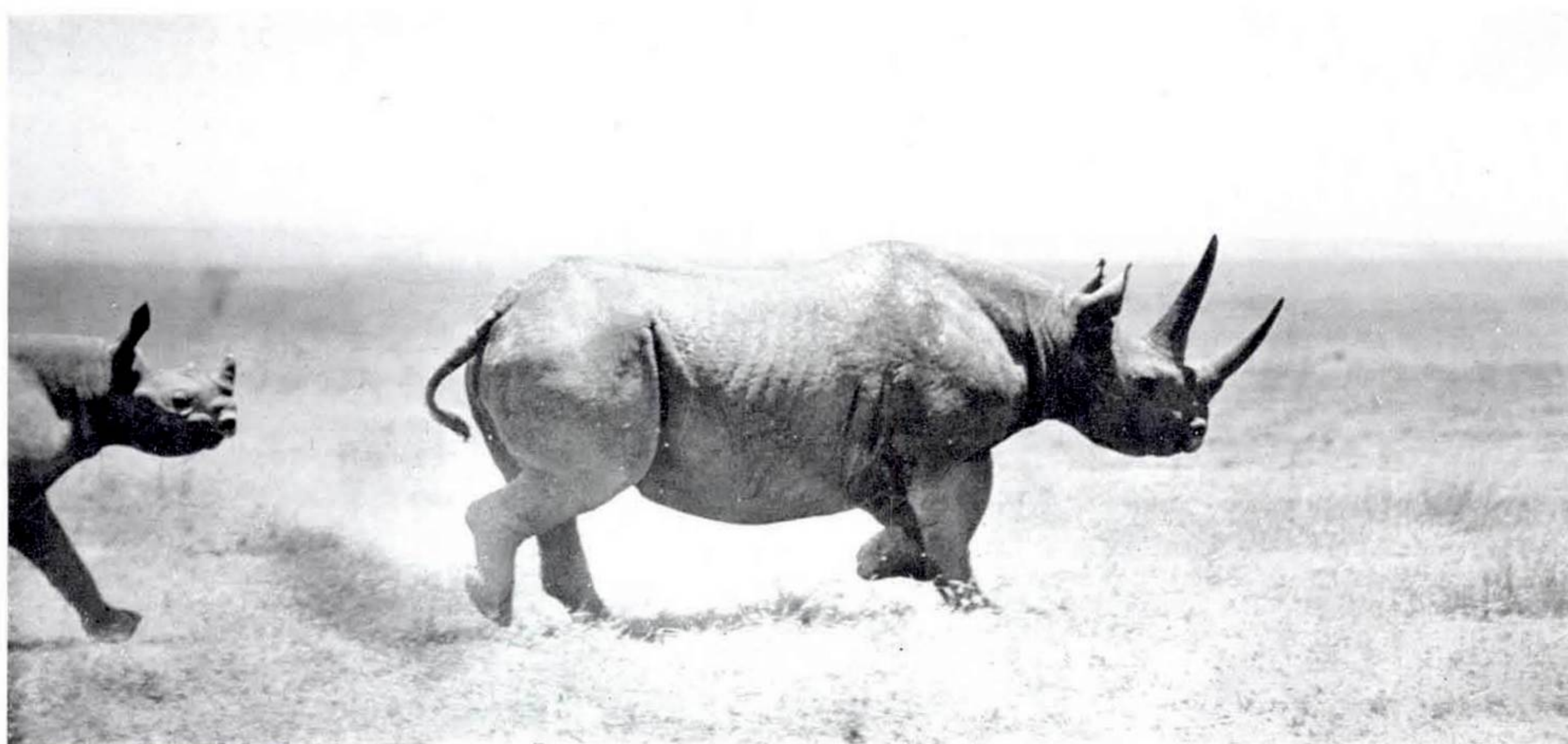


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A SECOND COW AND CALF

"From the very beginning she showed signs of truculence"

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"AT TEN PACES WE WERE ABLE TO PHOTOGRAPH WITHOUT DIFFICULTY"



NEARER STILL. "THE YOUNGSTER ALWAYS SOUGHT PROTECTION BEHIND ITS MOTHER"

