

Early photographs of the greater one-horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) in the wild

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Abstract

Despite recurrent obstacles in photographing animals in the wild, there are a few early examples. A dead rhinoceros shot in Assam by Wilfred Dakin Speer was photographed in 1862. An image of a living rhinoceros in Nepal was published in the *Illustrated London News* of 1906. This was followed by black and white photographs taken in 1909 by Victor Brooke of a rhinoceros attacking his elephant in 1911 during the tour of King George V in Nepal, and in 1923 by George Miller Dyott for the Vernay-Faunthorpe expedition of the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Those taken in 1932 by the Swedish photographer Bengt Berg in Jaldapara, West Bengal, are among the best of early attempts in the wild.

Résumé

Malgré les obstacles récurrents liés à la photographie des animaux dans la nature, il existe quelques exemples antérieurs. Un rhinocéros mort abattu en Assam par Wilfred Dakin Speer a été photographié en 1862. Une image d'un rhinocéros en vie, prise au Népal a été publiée dans l'*Illustrated London News* de 1906. Ensuite suivirent des photographies en noir et blanc prises en 1909 par Victor Brooke, d'un rhinocéros s'attaquant à son éléphant, puis en 1911 lors de la tournée du roi George V au Népal, et en 1923 par George Miller Dyott pour l'expédition Vernay-Faunthorpe de l'American Museum of Natural History à New York. Celles prises en 1932 par le photographe suédois Bengt Berg à Jaldapara, au Bengale occidental, sont parmi les meilleures premières tentatives prises dans la nature.

Introduction

Nowadays it is relatively easy to take a photograph of a rhinoceros in the wild. Depending on the species, once the animal is traced, all it takes is a basic camera and these days even mobile (smart) phones. To take a photograph of professional quality more skill is involved, and the best results are achieved using a telephoto or zoom lens, just because it may be hazardous to get close enough. However, it isn't a major achievement, and tourists like myself are able to get decent snaps using simple equipment.

This is due to technical advances. In the days when photographic equipment and film were in more experimental stages, the cameras were large

and cumbersome often requiring tripods, the subject was best "captured" if it remained stationary because a film had to be exposed for several seconds if not minutes, and also had to be at close range to be visible. Even then circumstances might produce an indifferent image while climate and transport could affect the images captured on plates or films.

A rhinoceros in the wild was therefore not an easy subject even if somebody had the rare chance to reach their habitats. It is not going to stand still on command, and it is not going to be happy to be approached within a few meters. To write about a "first ever" photograph in any combination is almost as hazardous as walking up to a wild rhinoceros. In my experience, as soon as the words are written, somebody will try, often successfully,

to find an earlier example. That is not as bad as it sounds, at least we will have learned something new about the early days of photography.

Earlier I discovered what must be the first photographs taken of a rhinoceros in the African bush. The explorer James Chapman (1831–1872) took these of a dead black rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*) on 13 May 1862 on the Botletlie River (now Boteti River) in central Botswana and on 12 June 1862 near the Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe (Rookmaaker 2006). Early photographs of the Indian rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) were taken in the Zoological Gardens in Regent's Park, London, first in 1856 by an unknown photographer, followed in 1864 by Frank Haes (1832–1916) of London and soon after this by Frederick York (1823–1903) of London (Edwards 2012).

In this paper I will highlight an early example of a dead rhinoceros in the Indian jungle, and proceed to rare images of living rhinos photographed in both India and Nepal.

Captain Speer in Assam in 1862

Captain Wilfred Dakin Speer (1835–1867) of Thames Ditton, was an officer in the First Middlesex

Regiment in the United Kingdom. He had joined Charles Darwin (1809–1882) in 1858 on a petition regarding the administration of the natural history collection of the British Museum (Darwin 1858). Speer went on an adventurous sporting exhibition from September 1859 to May 1862 to India, crossing the Himalayas into Tibet, returning “with a number of most interesting photographic views of the places he had visited” (Anonymous 1870). He went on a second journey from November 1864 to June 1865.

A photograph “Rhinoceros shot by late Captain Speer in Assam, 1862” (Fig. 1) was published in part 5 of the *Sports of the World* edited by Frederick George Aflalo (1870–1918) in January 1903 illustrating a chapter by Kinloch (1903:164). As there is no reference to the event in the text, it is likely that Aflalo sourced the photograph from the Speer family. The rhino is shown lying on its side with the head facing the camera, surrounded by over 30 “native” assistants. As Captain Speer is absent from the picture, he is likely the one operating the camera. If the dates are correct, meaning that the photograph was taken in the first months of 1862, this photograph of a dead rhino in the wild is earlier than that attributed to Chapman in Botswana.

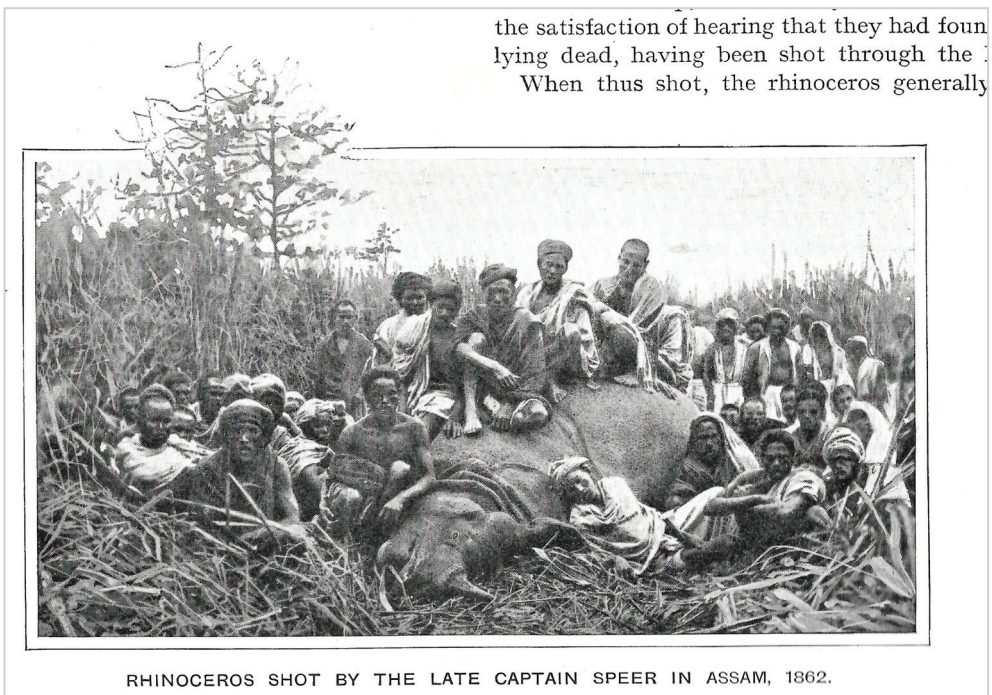


Figure 1. “Rhinoceros shot by late Captain Speer in Assam, 1862” (*The Sports of the World*, 1903, p. 164).

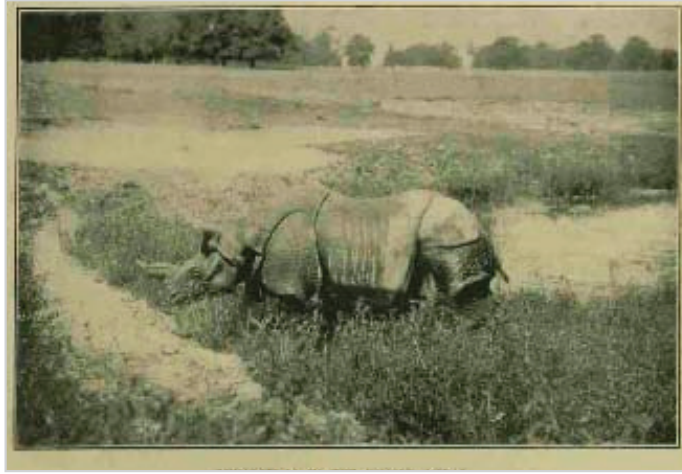


Figure 2. "Rhinoceros in the jungle, Nepal" from the *Illustrated London News* (10 February 1906).

The Illustrated London News of 1906

The popular *Illustrated London News* of 1906 included a page with four photographs of curiosities of big game hunting (Anonymous 1906). They supplied no additional information, and the images were credited to "the Illustrations Bureau" of 12 Whitefriars Street, London. This agency probably maintained a large series of photographs, and the provenance of the rhinoceros in the jungle is not recorded in the magazine. One of the photographs shows a rhinoceros in Nepal, standing on the edge of a pond, exhibiting a large forward-sloping horn (Fig. 2).

Probably unconnected, there is another reference to a photographer in Nepal around that time. The British consul to Nepal from 1905 to 1916, John Manners-Smith (1864–1920) mentioned that rhinos were reportedly quite common on the Rapti River (Manners-Smith 1909). Francis William Gordon-Canning (1854–1920) of the Pursa Indigo Factory in Champaran, Bihar had been there with the express goal to take photographs of the rhinoceros.

Victor Brooke in Cooch Behar in 1909

From 11 to 17 February 1909 the Viceroy Gilbert, 4th Earl of Minto (1845–1914) was hunting in the North Kamrup Reserve (now Manas National Park). Among his retinue was his military secretary Victor Reginald Brooke (1873–1914). While out riding on elephants on

Sunday 12 February 1909 Brooke was injured by a rhinoceros, as told by Minto (1934:274): "The same day Victor Brooke had a different and very dangerous adventure. He was always casual as to personal safety, and when he saw a female rhino and her calf emerge from the jungle he did not shoot but hurriedly grasped his kodak, being excited about obtaining a photo. On sighting the elephant the rhino charged, and these huge beasts met with a tremendous concussion, like two battleships ramming each other; the shock was terrific." The photograph which Brooke took before the rhino reached the elephant was published a few years later (Brooke 1911). It may not be the clearest image, but definitely one showing unusual action (Fig. 3).

King George V in Nepal in 1911

King George V (1865–1936) visited Nepal by the invitation of Maharaja Chandra Shamsher (1863–1929) from 18 to 28 December 1911 (Fortescue 1912; Rookmaaker et al. 2005). There were several photographers in the camp, including Ernest Brooks (1875–1957), George Percy Jacomb-Hood (1857–1929) and professionals of the firm of Herzog and Higgins. There are two albums from the collection of Queen Mary in the Royal Commonwealth Society (preserved in the Library of the University of Cambridge) containing many photographs, without annotations of dates or photographers. One of the albums "Indian Tour 1911–1912" has a picture of a rhinoceros walking in the grass, with some elephants in the background (QM21, no.219) (Fig. 4).

The Vernay-Faunthorpe Expedition of 1923

The Vernay-Faunthorpe Expedition was organized to collect a series of mammals for the new exhibition spaces of the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Led by John Champion Faunthorpe (1871–1929) and Arthur Stannard Vernay (1877–1960), the group spent a week on the Gandak River on the western side of Chitwan, from 10–14 March 1923. The party also included the photographer George Miller Dyott (1877–1960), who was responsible for capturing the events on film (Dyott 1923). He took several photos of a female rhinoceros which had been named ‘Lizzie’ together with her half-grown calf (Figs. 5, 6). One was published in the museum’s magazine (Faunthorpe 1924) and another appeared in *The Times* newspaper of London (Faunthorpe 1923).

Dyott, probably as a first, also took moving pictures, (and one of the first documentary films of rhinos). These were compiled on his return as a silent 16 mm film “Jungle Life in India” lasting 20 minutes, containing a few scenes showing the rhinoceros in the field. The first private view of the film was on 1 November 1923 at the St. James’s



Figure 4. A rare depiction of a living rhinoceros in the jungles of Nepal, running away from the elephants and hunters. Unsigned photograph in RCS Album (University of Cambridge, QM 21, no. 219).

Picture Theatre in London, with a lecture by Dyott, and then shown to the public in the Philharmonic Hall for four weeks, beginning 5 November (Vernay 1923a, b). The first showing of the film in the USA was on 21 December 1923, when Faunthorpe presented a lecture in the American Museum of Natural History (Osborn 1923).



Figure 3. Female rhinoceros and calf charging towards the elephant carrying Victor Reginald Brooke on 12 February 1909 (*Illustrated London News*, 30 December 1911).

Bengt Berg in Bengal in 1932

The Swedish zoologist, photographer and cinematographer Bengt Magnus Kristoffer Berg (1885–1967) had obtained permission to take photographs on the banks of the Torsa River in today’s Jaldapara National Park, West Bengal, India. He spent about a month in the jungle in February 1932, taking pictures of rhinos and tigers with his heavy professional cameras. His black and white photographs taken in the jungle in Bengal are stunning, including a male rhino chasing a female, and a mother rhino followed by her young calf (Figs. 7, 8). In total 22 different photos of rhinos were published as a result his expedition. A selection of the images was first included, with explanatory text, in a book published in Swedish in 1932, translated into German and Danish, but never into English (Berg 1932, 1933).

Conclusion

Taking a good photograph of a rhinoceros in the wild is a thrilling experience. It always involves a challenge,



Figure 5. The female *R. unicornis* named 'Lizzie' in the Gandak Valley of Nepal followed by her half-grown calf. Photo by Dyott (*Natural History*, New York, 1924).



Figure 6. A second view of the mother rhino Lizzie with her calf (*The Times*, London, 7 September 1923).



Figure 7. Male rhino chasing a female in Jaldapara, India, photographed in 1932 by Bengt Berg (1932, p. 176).

not only finding elusive animals but also to get exactly the right exposure. Many great pictures have been taken over the years. The public taste changed from sport hunting trips to photographic safaris. Marius Maxwell (1888–1936) explained that photography of wild animals, including the iconic pachyderms, could become a new way to experience adventure and wonder for wildlife. Maxwell working in Kenya was ahead of his time when he wrote: “Rather it has been my desire to secure photographic records...incidents such as are found in the writings of well-known

hunters, and to illustrate these experiences by actual photographs...giv[ing] me opportunities to obtain an accurate shot with the camera instead of the rifle” (Maxwell 1924).

Acknowledgements

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»Där kom hon äntligen med skatten i släptåg.«

Figure 8. Mother and young one in Jaldapara in 1932 photographed by Bengt Berg (1932, p.137).

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