



Rhinos...
...and the return
of Malawi's wildlife

Bentley Palmer



Run Rhino Run away from the bullet & the gun

Zimbabwean songwriter, Bud Cockcroft, wrote these poignant words about the threat to black rhino from poachers in the Zambezi Valley.

Bentley Palmer, the writer of this book and one of the key architects of a lauded rhino conservation project in Malawi, believes passionately *"that these magnificent creatures will not survive to roam the African plains unless we all work together to protect them. Our responsibility is to educate often-deprived communities that cash in the hand for a poached rhino horn is, in the longer term, worth much less to them than the tourism value of a freely roaming rhino."*

This remarkable book by the man now known in Malawi and far beyond as the 'rhino whisperer', is dedicated by him to the black rhinoceros and the many other endangered species for which he has done so much - to allow and encourage survival in their natural habitat.

The photographs of species both rare and now, thanks to Bentley and his colleagues, more commonly seen, make this book a mandatory purchase for all who love the African bush and its original indigenous wildlife.

ISBN 978-999081429-3



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ISBN 978-99908-14-29-3

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Photography ©

Bentley Palmer / Central Africana Limited, Blantyre

Design and typesetting by

Petra Filip, Wild Vanilla, Cape Town

Print production by

SA Media Services, Cape Town

Printed and bound by

Star Standard, Singapore





The Majete Story

Since the rehabilitation project began in 2003, African Parks have made great strides in returning Majete to a world-class reserve

In the late 1990's the Majete Wildlife Reserve, situated in the Lower Shire Valley, was a conservation failure, similar to the Liwonde National Park in the late 1980's. Majete was unfortunately in more dire straits. Dr Anthony Hall-Martin, who had been working with the African Parks Network since the year 2000, decided to take action before the park was beyond salvation and established a management and funding partnership with the Department of National Parks and Wildlife.

The objective of the partnership was to rehabilitate Majete so that it could once more become a place that showcased Malawi's proud wildlife heritage. The basic elements of the partnership are that African Parks gives money and management expertise, while the Department of National Parks and Wildlife provides seconded law enforcement and assists with the restocking of Majete by providing animals from other national parks.

Since the rehabilitation project began in 2003, African Parks have made great strides in boosting Majete to become a world-class reserve.

Anyone lucky enough to visit this paradise tucked away in the south-western corner of Malawi can see the evidence of ten years of successful hard work.

Majete Wildlife Reserve is, in contrast to Liwonde National Park, extremely rugged terrain but is none-the-less very good black rhino habitat. The vegetation is predominately *brachystegia* woodland. It includes broad-leaved, semi-deciduous trees that lose their leaves at the end of winter and are bare for two to four weeks before growing new leaves for spring. There is also *combretem/terminalia* woodland, deciduous woodland where the dominant trees are of the *combretn* genus, and several small thicket areas.



'Julia' with her first calf 'Nangondo' who later went to Majete, before export to South Africa as part of the initial rhino stocking exchange



'Namagogodo' a young Liwonde bull and a candidate for removal to Majete in years to come for gene pool improvement

Photo Roland Bischoff

Black rhino were re-introduced to Majete in August 2003. We moved 'Chimpanje' and 'Rydon', both males, to Majete to correct the unbalanced rhino sex-ratio in Liwonde, and also to re-establish another black rhino population in Malawi.

In 2007 'Nangondo', another male from Liwonde, was sent to South Africa in exchange for six South African rhinos that were eventually moved to Majete. All the Majete rhino cows have now produced calves from 'Chimpanje', the dominant bull originally moved from Liwonde. With these successes the future of Malawi's ongoing Black Rhino Project looks positive. 'Lundu', an unrelated male rhino brought up from South Africa, has now been rotated with 'Chimpanje' to improve the Majete gene pool.

African Parks has fenced Majete and re-stocked it with elephant, Cape buffalo, eland, sable antelope, waterbuck, Lichtenstein's hartebeest, impala, warthog and zebra. Most of the animals were provided by Liwonde and Lengwe National Parks. Some eland, zebra and hartebeest were purchased from Zambia.



This is the temporary *boma* built by our small team with Dr Pete Morkel for our 'Little Sausage'. It is similar to the *bomas* previously used for sending rhinos to Majete

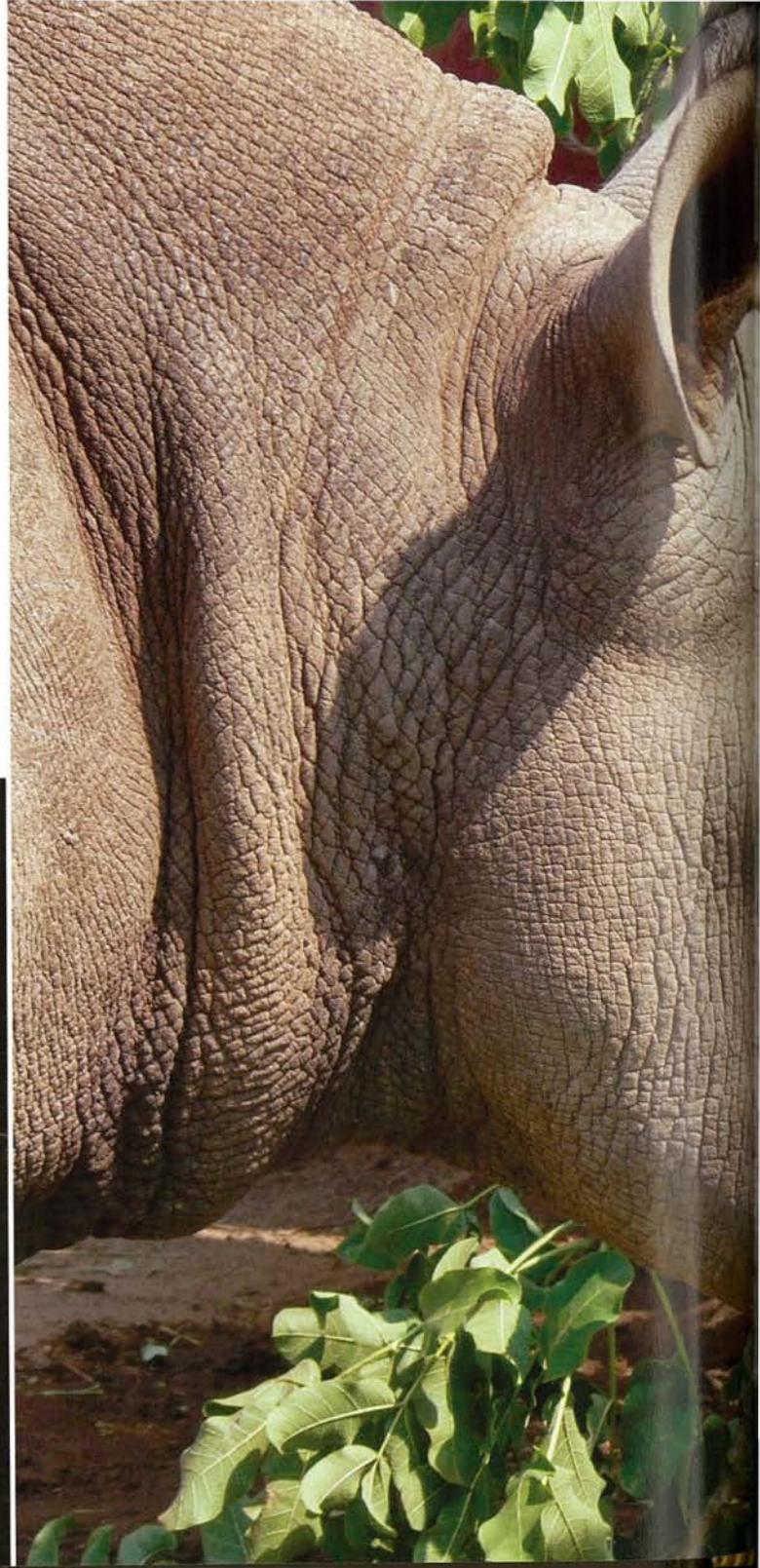


Photo Dr. Anthony Hall-Martin

Plans are in place to reintroduce large predators into Majete. The project aims to have leopard in Majete by the time this book is published and lions by 2012 or 2013. As far as possible the animals will be sourced from threatened populations elsewhere in Malawi. If all goes well, more black rhino are scheduled for introduction to Majete in 2014.

African Parks are funding and managing these animal translocations within the terms of their agreement for the management of Majete Wildlife Reserve. Through dedicated funding, hard work and professional management, African Parks has created in Majete a premier park for Malawi in a very short time. A critical element in the process, however, has been contributions of animals from the Liwonde Sanctuary, thus once again justifying its creation all those years ago.

Scheduled new arrivals to Majete and ones to be very cautious of, especially after dark





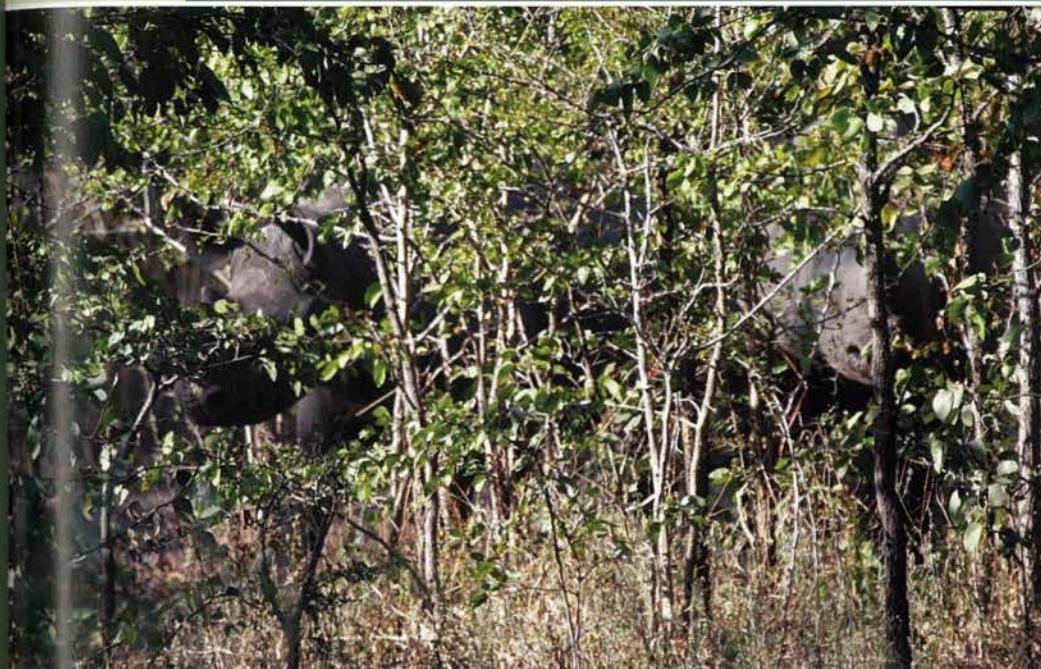
This is 'Rydon', the second rhino born in the Liwonde Sanctuary to 'Justerini' and 'Brooks'. He is pictured here in the Majete rhino *bomas* waiting to leave for South Africa as part of the inter-park exchange programme

Photo Lynn Smithyman



'Lundu', the Majete male rhino, proving these animals really do rely on hearing and scent. Despite my beach-wear camouflage, he has not seen me

Tracking Rhinos



'Jabesi' and her one year old calf *'Ntangai'* face-to-face with myself and Leefa Chitanda



Barney O'Hara & his helicopter, for me the best in the business

I truly believe that to successfully achieve our goals for these parks it was crucial for myself, and others like me, to live, work with and almost "breathe" rhino on a daily basis. The deep understanding this taught us, and the passion it inspired, was very important. Many of the lessons we learnt, the skills we developed, could not have been achieved otherwise. Good trackers for example are not trained, they evolve by working on the ground.

Establishing the sex of black rhino by tracking on foot can prove difficult. Liwonde black rhino are active at night and tend to sleep in riverine thickets during the day, making detection very difficult. When you do find them it is usually at close range in dense vegetation and the rhinos' first defence is to turn and face you straight on, and if need be, charge, as seen below!





Two problems arise here; first you may have to take evasive action from the charging rhino, which obviously makes sexing the animal impossible, or, if the rhino stands its ground, the relevant organs are facing the wrong way. This prevents you from seeing if the rhino is male or female!

Therefore the most practical way to sex rhinos is from the air by helicopter, as photographed here by Dr Anthony Hall-Martin with 'Justerini' and 'Leonard', seen left.

Black rhino have a gestation period of 15 months. The calf stays with the mother until another calf is born, at which time the mother chases the older one away. If the calf is male it must now fend for itself, if female, it may be allowed back in a month or two. A black rhino calf weighs 40 kilograms at birth.



A Boehm's bee-eater resting before catching his next meal

Rhino monitoring; what to look for

A black rhino stands 1.7 metres high at the shoulder, weighs over 1000 kilograms, is a browser, and is smaller but much more aggressive than its white rhino relative who weighs in excess of 2000 kilograms.

Black and white rhinos, while related, are very different in their habits and lifestyle. A white rhino, or wide-lipped rhino, is a grazer and is normally sighted in open grassland. If she has a calf with her she will run away with the calf in front of her, similar to an urban mother pushing a pram. In contrast a black rhino, or hook-lipped rhino, is a browser and is most likely to be sighted in a thicket with her calf behind her, like a rural mother with her child resting on her back. The white rhino can defend her calf better in the open with the calf in front and the black does the same in the thick bush with her calf behind her!

A rhino has three toes and when tracking, the direction of movement can be established by the spoor pattern. Trackers must move cautiously, bearing in mind that a rhino will often hear and smell you before you see it.

The black rhino is extremely agile and can reach speeds of 40 kilometres per hour - and then turn on its body length if need be! Tree-climbing is a skill one needs to acquire before tracking black rhino.



If you encounter bushpig in a rhino habitat, there may well be rhinos close by, as they are often seen in each other's company, 'Jabesi' and 'Ntangai' with two bushpigs, proving the theory of co-existence!

'Justerini', our original rhino cow, is now 22 years old and in her prime. She will live to 40 - 45 years





Vegetation damaged by black rhino browsing on the move, as seen above.
Underneath, 'Justerini's' urine marking the ground shortly after she gave birth to 'Leonard', named after Leonard Sefu, near the Nyafulu hills

Radio transmission tracking

With the arrival of 'Ollehile' or 'Chimpanje' as he was also known, and 'Chimwemwe' in 2000 we introduced telemetric radio tracking devices. A hand-held receiver picked up radio waves that were transmitted from a chip in the rhino's horn.

This simplified the monitoring of these two rhinos and we decided to do the same with 'Bentley', the dominant male in the sanctuary, and 'Julia'. This improved and eased our monitoring overall. On a positive note we achieved much improved results, however the batteries in the transmitters in the horns only lasted about a year, making this a very expensive operation.

Inserting the chips is stressful for the animals which have to be tracked and darted by helicopter. The cost is also extremely high as the procedure is done with the assistance of vets, helicopters and expensive drugs. We decided to abandon this technique and rather spend more time on the ground with the scouts and rhinos. Obviously there are occasions where this technique is applied for the benefit of the rhinos.



Checking a fresh midden, or dung heap, which had just been laid on Chipembere road. Rhino scout Ian Kambala, is checking the temperature of this female rhino dung with his finger, and Patrick Ndalaewesi is making notes of her browse composition. A male rhino will find this midden and spread the dung aggressively with his front feet and then most likely mark his territory before following the cow



Photo Janet Porter



'Julia' feeding her young calf, 'Namatunu'

‘Julia’ receiving her tracking transmitter. Her eyes and ears are covered while she’s anaesthetised to prevent damage and stress. Also, her body is soaked with water to keep her cool





The Black Rhino Sanctuary

The Liwonde Rhino Sanctuary is approximately 4000 hectares or 40 square kilometres in area. It was originally chosen as an ideal black rhino habitat by a specialist Kruger National Park Research Officer, Danie Pienaar and has since met every expectation. It is shaped to allow for an elephant migration corridors outside of both the eastern and western boundaries





The Black Rhinos of Majete

On a hot August night in 2010 six black rhino put on the 'Oscars' of all rhino shows for us at the Msepete waterhole



'Lundu' watches 'Cassia' arrive at the waterhole

Rhino behaviour, especially black rhino behaviour, is very unpredictable. I have adopted the policy with my rhino friends of hunkering down at a known meeting place and letting them come to me

This way I meet them on their terms and generally in a relaxed and amicable mood! An accidental meeting in this terrain and thick bush with a black rhino in a bad mood could easily have fatal consequences. In an attempt to control these interactions as much as possible, I tend to monitor the Majete rhino after dark at their chosen waterholes.

This picture sequence was captured over 90 minutes of sheer magic with an eight second shutter speed exposure, using only the light of the full moon. The pictures clearly tell the story, even though the rhinos' movement during the exposures has blurred some of them.



'Lundu' courting 'Cassia', who has her calf in tow



'Lundu' mating with 'Cassia', with a rhino audience



'Lundu' and 'Cassia' face each other, while the calf takes a drink-break



'Lundu' appears to thank 'Shamwari' for her baby-sitting stint



Ten minutes later 'Lundu' mates with 'Kumi'



'Shamwari' leaves and five more rhino gather



Author's Note

Rhino knowledge can be gained in many ways, from books, documentaries, the internet, conservation workshops, wildlife chats and conferences to name but a few.

Whilst all of these are very valuable sources, I am of the honest opinion that there is no better means of gaining this all important rhino knowledge than by walking, talking, sleeping, eating and sharing stories around the campfire, on patrol or on all-night vigils in an observation hide with the men on the ground - the all important rhino scouts.

Black rhinos come in all different shapes and sizes and all are blessed with distinct characters. The two scouts, Jabesi 'Baba' Dzimba and Tizola Moyo, are able to identify their rhinos by these characteristics. This makes them both a unique and a very valuable source of rhino information.

They are also very important players in the future of Malawi's Black Rhino Project and I would like to thank them and their teams for the knowledge I have gained through my association with them, their parks, and most of all, from their beloved black rhino, 'Chipembere'.



Jabesi 'Baba' Dzimba

Jabesi 'Baba' Dzimba is Liwonde's longest serving rhino scout. He retired from active rhino work after a helicopter accident and being tossed aside by an irate 'Nangondo' in a rare moment of rhino madness.

'Baba's' passion and love for his rhinos, as well as the people he worked with, are unequalled by anyone I know. Like myself he is getting a bit too long in the tooth to continue on active rhino duty, so he has now been given a more sedentary posting within the Department of National Parks and Wildlife. I learnt a great deal from him and enjoyed the times we spent together in Liwonde, monitoring and caring for his rhinos. 'Ntangai's' mother was named 'Jabesi', in honour of this wonderful man's service and contribution to the black rhino project.



'Ntangai', as a two-year-old, emerging from a thicket. His mother, 'Jabesi', not in the picture, is on red alert and watching my every move