

## 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 submachineguns. 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 hap 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

# s Diary

leaving her at all. I fear for her very much, but will not let her die.

#### 11 March

Her first tooth is nearly through. I put a rug on her, tied around the waist like a horse blanket. Thus warmed, she was installed in the dining room for the night. She made the most spectacular mess and scraped it all over the carpet and up the walls and rubbed her nose in it. By the time I had got her clean, the dog had rolled in the mess. By 6.30am I had cleaned one rhino, one dog, the carpet, the walls - and was in tears. A bad day.

#### 14 March

She is a little better. We walked to the drift and she played with grass and a leaf, gave two bucks and fell flat on her precious nose. When I sat down she came behind me and put both her front feet up on my shoulders.

#### 12 April

She seems well and happy. Last night she spent her first night in the stable. I can now recognise six distinct noises. 'Eeeak' means 'where are you?' Another sort of 'eeeak' when waiting for her bottle means 'please hurry'. A loud 'eeeak' means 'I'm lost'. 'Huff-huff' means 'I'm coming'. A snort means 'what's that?' and the funny little noise she always makes when I put her rug on means 'you're troubling me'.

#### 18 May

She put her nose in water for the first time, looked really surprised and rolled her eyes like mad.

#### 5 June

I had to go to Nairobi for the day and on my return she greeted me with great affection, but sniffed me all over and seemed none too pleased with the strange smell of traffic and exhaust fumes. When I sat down she scrambled up on my lap, stuck her nose in my ear and told me a long and complicated story which I did not really follow.

#### 28 October

I am now walking Samia between two and three hours a day. She had her first encounter with giraffe today. They were overwhelmed with curiosity at this odd combination of black dog, small rhino and me. They

suddenly came within range of Samia's shortsighted eyes, and with a shattering snort of alarm she sought refuge between my legs and swept me clean off my feet. Then, as she could not get under me, she sat on top of me huffing and puffing her consternation.

#### 25 November

Samia really loves the horse nuts and has developed a new very deep grunting noise which seems to mean 'nuts, please'. She is one of the very few young animals I have ever had who never pushes or demands food roughly.

#### 18 December

I still do not know how I differentiate between Samia's alarm snort and an ordinary sneeze, but I do and so do the dogs. Sambo in particular responds at once to her alarm signal, barking and looking and smelling all around.

#### 28 January 1986

As Samia gets bigger and her balance improves, she seems to be getting more gentle. I am much less bruised than I used to be. She is particularly careful with Sambo - she seems to realise that he is getting old and frail.

#### 15 February

Samia is one year old today. She now has over 12 variations on the 'eeak' theme, but the meaning of many of these defeat me. When she finds a good smell and rushes between it and me breathing in a very distinct fashion, what is she trying to tell me?

#### 1 April 1987

She broke the barricade again this evening, just by leaning on it. Later she looked highly offended when, after a mud roll, I refused to let her sit on my lap.

#### 6 May

While walking up the hill to the Top Plain I decided to stop and push my shoulder bag containing notebook, camera and so on under a bush and retrieve it on the way back. Samia was following me but turned back, went to the bush and re-emerged with the strap in her mouth and, to my amazement, brought the bag to me. What will my little rhino teach me next?

In the early days (below), Samia rarely left Anna Merz's side. Here, she's three months old.

More than two
years later
(bottom), she was
still being bottle
fed, though her
diet was
supplemented with
lucerne, grass and
cut browse. As in
the wild, she was
weaned at three,
and is now
completely
independent.

