

## COVER

Rufous morph: the Sokoke scops owl eluded scientific notice until 1965. Its nest is continuing to prove elusive, however. The latest search is described on pp. 30-35.

Photo: Munir Virani

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The Sokoke scops owl eluded scientific notice until 1965. Its nest, though, has continued to elude discovery. *Alison Cameron* takes up the search in Kenya's Arabuko-Sokoke Forest.





## A rhino's lonely lot

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**Paul Kirui** reveals the amazing antics of the female Mara rhino that befriended, first a buffalo bull and then a bull eland, before becoming unattached once more.

I read with interest the short article by Iris Hunt in your last issue (SWARA 25:1) on the female black rhino in the Mara Triangle that teamed up with a bull eland. I have been observing this particular rhino for more than four years while based at Kichwa Tembo Camp. So I thought SWARA readers might like to know a little more about this animal.

This rhino first crossed over into the Triangle area from the eastern part of the Maasai Mara National Reserve in September 1997. For some time, she could usually be found around the Enkoikwaatet Salt Lick, near the Mara Serena Lodge. We started seeing her there on our regular game drives in October 1997, although at first – like other Mara rhinos – she would shy away from our vehicles.

She then gradually extended her range northward to the area around Kichwa Tembo. She still made regular trips back to the salt lick, however. These trips would last four, sometimes five days. Her movements were so predictable (see map) that we could nearly always find her. No wonder rhinos are so vulnerable as poaching targets, I remember thinking at the time.

She came to settle more permanently around Kichwa

Tembo when she discovered another salt lick nearby. From this salt lick, she could be seen emerging in the early mornings almost every day. She even established a hideout in a bush near the Oloololo gate that the driver-guides now call *Nyumba ya Faru* because she can always be found there when in the area.

She was very aggressive at first, running away from – or charging – tourist vehicles. She was also quite aggressive towards other animals. We attributed this behaviour to her loneliness. A male rhino moved into the area, but he did not stay long. The terrain within the Mara Triangle seemed rather too open for his liking, offering little by way of browse, or bushy cover in which to lie up.

Then, on 16 October 1998, there was an extraordinary turn of events. The female rhino charged, and fatally wounded, a lion that had been courting a lioness near the Kichwa Tembo airstrip. It was two days before the gored lion, lying helpless in the grass, finally died from its injuries. Had the long absence of rhinos from the neighbourhood somehow contributed to this lion's apparent disregard for how dangerous a rhino can be?

Early in 1999, we witnessed another drama involving this

rhino. Out on an early morning game drive, we spotted five lions that were hunting some zebras. So we stopped to observe. When the lions had chased and caught a sub-adult zebra near a large clump of bush, we drove up to get a closer view.

But then, just as the lions were about to strangle their prey, the rhino – which had been hiding in that bush (unknown to us) – came charging out at high speed. She made a bee-line for the centre of the action, at which point the lions abandoned their zebra and moved off.

The wounded zebra struggled back on to its feet. The rhino, though, continued its charge, burying its horn into the side of the zebra's belly with such force that the horn went clean through

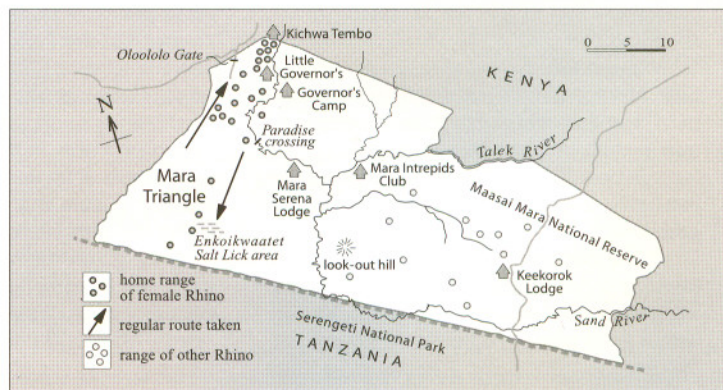
and out the other side. Taking a few steps back, she did this again, as if to make sure the zebra was dead. Then she went after the lions, which beat a hasty retreat. So she returned to the dead zebra and – astonishingly – lay down in the grass beside it. The lions kept trying to inch their way back. But, whenever they were getting close, the rhino would get up and see them off.

I cannot say for how long this went on, as we had to go back to camp for breakfast. But, when I returned that afternoon, I found the lions feeding on the zebra carcass. The site, located between the Mara Serena and Oloololo Gate, has come to be known – among the driver-guides of Kichwa Tembo, the Mpata Club, Little Governors and the Mara Serena – as *Uwanja wa Mchezo wa Faru* (Rhino's Playground).

Later in 1999, during the wildebeest migration and not far from the Rhino's Playground, a wildebeest herd was streaming down to the Mara River. The rhino was resting up in the shade of a nearby tree. She appeared to get agitated, at the grunting sounds of all those wildebeest passing by. For she stood up suddenly and charged into the herd, gouging one wildebeest repeatedly with her horn.

Then, when all the other wildebeest had dispersed, she again went back and lay down beside the dead animal, only this time she rested her head on the carcass as if it were a pillow! (A friend took a photo of this, but – alas – it came out poorly.)

By the end of 1999, this same rhino had calmed down quite noticeably. She appeared relaxed






and would tolerate even close approaches by tourist vehicles. It was in 2000 that we first saw her 'grazing' in the company of other species, usually buffaloes. For a time, she latched on to a whole herd of buffaloes, before peeling away with just one lonely old bull for company.

Early in 2001 the old bull disappeared. He was quite a familiar sight and, since none of us has seen him again since, we assume that he must have been killed by lions. For some time afterwards, the female rhino reverted to living as before, mingling with other animals – including elands – but spending most of her days alone. Then, towards the end of 2001, she befriended the eland bull in the 'strange alliance' that Iris Hunt describes in SWARA.

The rhino, though, has since left this eland. First, she hooked up again with some buffaloes, but now – as of mid-July 2002 – she is all on her own. We are keeping an eye on her and shall go on monitoring her habits.

What may pass for strange behaviour on her part is most likely just the result of there being no other members of her own species in the area. It is now almost five years since she first entered the Mara Triangle, and in all this time no other rhino has joined her (at least, not in any lasting sense). It may be an idea, then, for the authorities to introduce a male rhino to the area as a prospective mate for her.

The habitat in this female's home range may present a few problems, however. For, with the exception of the Mara River banks and some croton thickets around the Enkoikwatet Salt Lick, much of the terrain is open grassland – not ideal for rhinos. It may also take a newcomer some time to adjust to such a new environment. After all, it took this female almost three years to settle down, from a state of restless aggression to a more accommodating state. 

Paul Kirui is a guide for the Intrepids safari company.

## Colobus twins



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**A**s keen supporters of efforts to preserve the Angolan black-and-white colobus population on Kenya's south coast, we have – from our home at Kijiji Cottages on Diani Beach – always kept a close eye on our resident troop.

Until recently, this troop consisted of one adult male, two adult females and two juveniles. Both juveniles have the same mother, and we had been wondering, come April, why this adult female had not given birth this year, as she is wont to do each January.

I first spotted the twins on 28 May. The family was in a tree outside our kitchen. I could see that the female was holding a baby. I was surprised, then excited, to see two little white tails dangling down. It was difficult to get a good look at the newborns, as they were both on her chest, presumably feeding.

I telephoned the Colobus Trust to relay the good news. Four of its staff immediately came over to witness and record the scene. Together, we determined that the twins were probably no more than two days old. Both umbilical cords were still visible.

The troop usually spends its mornings in the trees near the house. So we got many chances to observe the new additions. By the end of the first week in June, both twins seemed to be thriving. The other family members chipped in, looking after one or other twin for short periods. To our surprise, one of the juveniles did most of the helping out, and not the other adult female.

At first, whenever one of the twins was taken from the mother, it would squeal continually until the mother reclaimed it. Little by little, however, both twins became less anxious at being parted from their mother. She seemed to be coping well, feeding the twins either simultaneously or one by one. With plenty of vegetation about for her to eat, she did not have to move around much.

It was impressive, when she did move, to see her pick her way through the upper branches with both babies clinging precariously to her chest. We were left wondering, though, how well she would cope later on, when the babies were bigger.

Alas, this was not to be. For, on 17 June, one of the twins died. Over the last few days of its life, this twin had suddenly become much skinnier and weaker than the other one. As often happens in such situations, we suspected that it had not been getting its share of milk. A post mortem, done the following day, confirmed starvation to have been the cause of death.

Of course, this was all very sad. But we quite accept that, in the end, there is nothing any of us could, or should, have done. Nature will always run its course. We just feel deeply privileged to have gained the trust, over the years, of these magnificent creatures. And we look forward now to being able to go on observing 'our' resident troop for many more years to come.

The accompanying photograph of the mother with both twins was taken on 31 May.

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## From the other bank

**I**t was indeed an amazing sight. I am referring to the incident described and photographed in SWARA's last issue (Vol 25:1) by Zohar Navon in the article, *Out of his depth?*, wherein a lion ventures out among the crocodiles of the Mara River to feed on a hippo carcass.

At the time, my wife Edna and I were looking on from the opposite bank of the river; from the lion's side, that is. There were actually two lions. We were almost directly above the one in the water, and have some wonderful film footage of the whole episode.

There is one quite scary moment, when a very large crocodile sidles up to the carcass, right next to where the lion is trying to feed. The lion is not impressed and lashes out at the crocodile. This does not seem like a very wise move, considering that the lion is clearly out of his element down there in the water. The huge crocodile does eventually back off, however.

On revisiting the scene the next morning, we found that the carcass had been stripped almost

bare during the night. Pieces of it lay washed ashore a little way down-river. One large chunk, we noticed, had been dragged a short way from the river by the lions. We found one of them still feeding on it. The other lion was lying, bloated after his feed, under a nearby bush.

There had evidently been much excitement during the night. And one of the two lions was carrying what looked like quite a serious injury. He had a gash in his rear left thigh, with fresh wounds (toothmarks?) lower down on this same leg. Oh, to have been present overnight! What explosive goings-on there must have been!

It was great to see the original incident described in SWARA, and to get the view from across the river from where we were filming. All in all, the last few issues of SWARA have, in our view, been of a very high standard.

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