

WANKIE

The Story of a great Game Reserve

BY

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Illustrated by Penny Miller

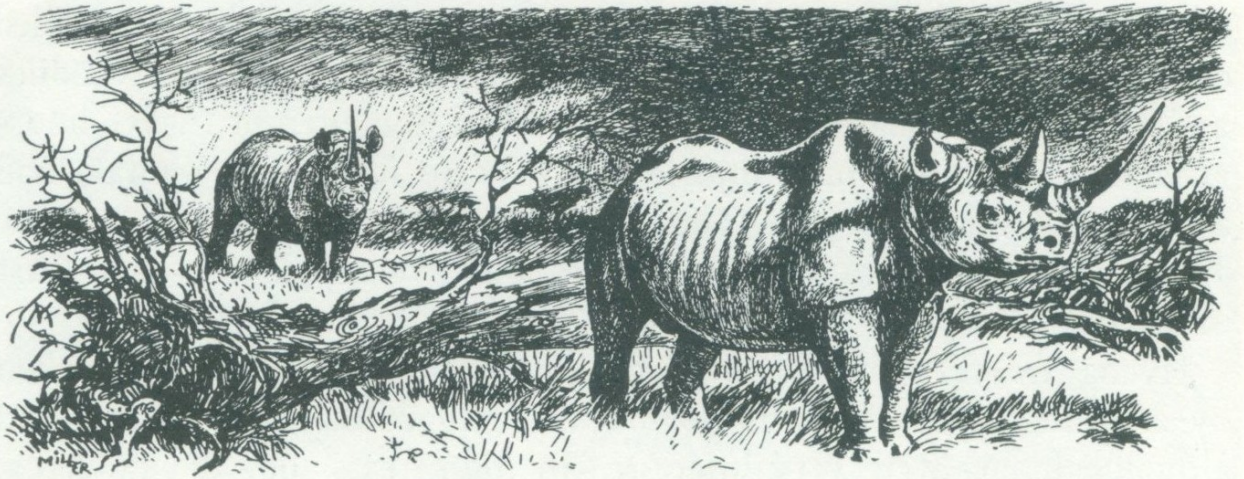


BOOKS OF AFRICA

1967



Ted Davison, of Wankie



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AT the inception of the reserve there were no rhino present in the area. However, there were a number, possibly five, on the Mabali river, a tributary of the Gwaai not far east of the railway. Reports indicated that black rhinoceroses had existed in the area now comprising the Wankie National Park up to about 1925, but there was no trace of any being alive when the reserve was declared. A farmer at *Sinamatela* ranch had a horn, found in 1926 just south of the ranch. Selous records rhino in fair numbers prior to 1896, while the late Mr Kelly Edwards saw one at Old Ngamo in 1912.

It was not until 1942 that the first signs of rhinoceroses were recorded, when two appeared on the Deka, thought to have come into the reserve from the west. These animals did not settle down but continued to wander from place to place, often two months or more elapsing without any spoor being recorded. They spent some time in the *Sinamatela* and *Deteema* areas and were also seen at *Shumba* and *Shapi* pans.

These rhino continued to roam in this fashion until 1946, when they wandered on to *Sunnyside* farm, a small-holding owned and run by a widow and her daughters, which jutted into the reserve near *Mukwa* siding. One of the daughters, a girl of about seventeen, out hunting for a buck for the labourers' meat, fired at what she thought was an eland but turned out to be a rhino. Unfortunately, she hit it in a vital spot and it died. The rifle she used was an old sporting .303 in such a worn state that it is amazing it could kill anything at all.

This was the bull of the pair wandering about the reserve. The other animal, a cow, remained about for a few months and was seen at Ngwashla – where it successfully drove six elephant bulls away from the drinking trough – and again at Nyamandhlovu where it was equally aggressive towards other game. My wife and I saw it at the pan one evening when it took over an hour to get a drink – so intent was it on investigating every other animal that came down, making short rushes at them, snorting wildly. The animals merely got out of its way and took little further notice.

The next morning Bruce Austin and I followed up the rhinoceros to have a better look at it. It had evidently hung about the pan for some hours and then wandered off along an elephant path. It kept to the path for about four miles, and then we suddenly came upon it asleep in the middle of the track, right out in the open, about ten o'clock in the morning. We all got safely into the branches of trees before waking it, but the rhino made no aggressive moves. It ran off snorting, after giving us just sufficient time to satisfy ourselves that it was a cow.

Soon after that, it disappeared from the Nyamandhlovu-Ngwashla area although spoor was reported at Ngamo, and later well down the Sihumi vlei near the junction with the Linkwasha. There was no trace of the animal after that for a couple of years, when a piece of rhinoceros hide was found in an old Bushman camp near the Nata river. Since then there has been no trace and we conclude that that was the end of our rhino.

In 1961 displaced rhinoceroses from the newly formed Kariba lake became available. These were rhino which were trapped on recently formed islands which, in many cases, would be submerged when the dam filled to capacity. Most of these rhino were captured by darting them with an immobilising drug and transporting them to the mainland in an unconscious state, where they were given an antidote and released. We decided to try and re-establish black rhino at Wankie and, with this object in view, a crate was built at Kariba, big and strong enough to hold a fully-grown rhino when it recovered from the effects of the drug. The habitat, we knew, was suitable, as there had been – according to old records – black rhinoceroses in fair numbers in the early days.

Rupert Fothergill, his assistant, Tink Haslem, John Condy, a veteri-

ary surgeon, and myself found ourselves on a small island some fifty miles from the dam wall where a single rhino had been trapped by the rising waters of the lake. Rupert Fothergill was in charge of the catching. By the time I arrived he had cut a number of lanes through the thick bush which covered the island, in such a way that the island was divided up into ten or twelve blocks of about three acres each. By placing an observer in a high tree in each block it was possible to keep a check on where the rhino was. This was of great assistance in finding the animal when the darting was to take place and, more important, it enabled a watch to be kept on the rhino after the dart struck home and during the twenty minutes or so before the animal became unconscious. The weapon used to project the dart with the drug was a "Cap Chur" gun, a new tool somewhat like a child's popgun. The accuracy of this weapon left much to be desired, even at ranges of as little as twenty yards.

After two misses due to the dart falling short, the rhino became very worried and, instead of standing still, he kept running from one block of thick cover to another. Shouts of "It's here" went up from one observer after another, and the route taken by the animal could be traced round and round the island. The temperature in the meantime was about 100 degrees in the shade and the rhino began to perspire profusely, becoming very black. Eventually it went to bay, not far from the tree in which I was parked, and refused to move. Rupert stalked up very close behind it but, just as he was preparing to fire the dart, the animal turned round and faced him. He had to retreat and stalk up again from another direction. This time the dart went home but still the rhino did not vacate its stand. The drug did not take effect and after an hour another one was fired. It was found later that the needle of the first dart had gone right through the tail and the drug had been discharged harmlessly on to the skin between the legs.

Just after the second dart had been fired, I stood up on my perch to see better how things were going. The branch under me snapped without warning and I fell a couple of feet before the calf of my right leg became impaled on a jagged dry piece of wood, breaking my fall — which would otherwise have been about fifty feet. I was unable to dislodge my leg and called John Condry to come to my assistance. He had to climb down from his safe perch to reach my tree. He pulled my leg up some six or seven inches before the piece of wood which was

holding me like a meat hook came free. I was able to climb down and walk to the boat. John came with me and, after dressing the wound, he sewed it up with six stitches of fishing line.

When this was all over, the rhino was down and unconscious. It was dragged to the water's edge where it was loaded on to a raft and placed in the crate. When it was pulled away from the shore the raft with the crated rhino barely floated. Fortunately, there was little loss of blood from my torn leg and we decided to take the rhino to Kariba before I was taken to hospital.

We set sail from the island just about sunset, with the big raft in tow, but the whole contraption was so unsteady that it was in danger of capsizing each time the rhino shifted its weight. We had a small boat with about ten Africans ranged on either side to pull on ropes to keep the raft upright but, as our captive came out of the effects of the drug, he lunged about more and more until about eleven o'clock – when we had done about ten miles – it was decided to put the rhino ashore on the mainland. The first attempt proved to be another small island, not the mainland at all. Eventually, the animal was released and I was safely deposited in Kariba hospital, where the doctor, after examining my leg, decided that the veterinary treatment I had received was satisfactory and he did not undo the stitches. I spent a week in bed before going home.

This, our first attempt at rhino destined for Wankie, did not come off; but Rupert got a system going and eventually delivered nine animals safely to pens which had been built for them just below the Mandavu dam, where there was a nice stream of water running as seepage from the dam. After being kept in the pens for a fortnight or more the rhino were released to fend for themselves. One of the released rhino, a young bull, took up residence close to the dam and later, when a cow was released, they fought so desperately that they both died of their injuries.

The next rhino introduction was from the shores of the lake near the point where the Sengwa river now runs into the lake. Rupert Fothergill was again in charge and he successfully caught and moved to Wankie no less than forty adult rhino.

It was amazing how quickly these great big aggressive beasts became tame. Before they were released, after being in pens for only about three weeks, they would come up to the bars of the enclosures

and have their noses rubbed, behaving like great soft pets. This tameness was achieved by feeding them lucerne hay which, when they had learned to eat it, they loved, associating their human captors with this titbit. The danger was that they would become so attached to humans that they would lose all fear of people and become a source of danger to tourists. One of our rangers spent an uncomfortable night on the roof of his Land Rover, his African servants up trees, while a friendly rhino wandered about his camp turning over pots and pans and generally making itself at home.

One of these "introduced" rhino has calved and now, after a lapse of several years, Wankie again supports a population of black rhino. Forty-nine were released and while some of them have wandered out of the park (two, in fact, being reported to have reached the Nata river) the majority have remained near Sinamatela.

There is ample proof that white or square-lipped rhino existed in this country until after the turn of the century. Selous recorded them on the Dett vlei just before the rinderpest of 1896, and there is little doubt that they were present at one time in what is now the Wankie National Park. There were reports of the existence of white rhino in the Chizarira hills in the Sebungwe district. Very few people had visited this area; in fact, there had been no official reports on the locality since Messrs Jack and Henkel visited it in 1912. I was particularly interested in visiting the hills to see if I could find any trace of rhino other than the black variety. With this object in mind, Bruce Austen and I went there in August 1956. As a preliminary, we flew over the area in a Dakota because we anticipated difficulty in finding guides. All we learned from the flight was that once up on the plateau, the country was uninhabited, but very well watered. We saw little game beyond a few sable, tsessebe and impala. Game tracks, such as there were, did not seem very marked.

We began our walk from a drift on the Lubu river and by nightfall were at a kraal near the foot of the escarpment. We had seen this kraal from the aircraft. Here we were fortunate enough to find a Batonka who was willing to act as guide. With him we set off next morning, much easier in our minds about finding a way up the escarpment. For about ten miles we followed a dry watercourse. By midday we were hemmed in by high hills but we had made no ascent. Our guide assured us there was water ahead so we pushed on, and about 2 p.m. he

stopped and, pointing to a damp patch of sand covered with brightly coloured butterflies, said: "That is the last water; beyond this the country is black and I do not know it."

We soon had a hole scooped in the damp sand, into which some water percolated, sufficient for our needs. We had not brought many containers as we were confident of finding water. By the time we were ready to leave, a swarm of birds (waxbills) was drinking from the pool we had made, and we interpreted this as an indication that our guide was right and that there was no water farther on.

We moved on, still hemmed in by steep cliffs on each side, even higher than before. Only one hundred yards or so from the river bed, but ahead of us, we could see big green trees which indicated water. Sure enough, we came upon a stream of clear water which developed in the river bed and increased until, in a few hundred yards, there was a strong flow. There was little sign of game, merely a game track, but it was not much used and we were doubtful if it would lead us out on to the plateau. The cliffs closed in even more until we found ourselves marching in a narrow defile among big trees, being forced to cross and re-cross the stream many times and climb up small waterfalls. After some time the ravine on either side began to recede and the ground opened out. What was more encouraging, the game track seemed to be more used, chiefly by rhino; but all the dung was from black rhino, being browse and not grass – as would have been the case if there had been white rhino about.

The spruit divided here and we took the one to the left as the game tracks on this seemed more hopeful and it was going in the direction we wanted to go. Gradually we got higher and higher, with no very formidable climbs, until eventually the stream failed and we topped a rise from which we could see we were crossing a watershed with the streams on the other side running north and not west as was the case of the one we had followed.

That night we camped in a very pleasant spot in a grove of big musasa trees (*Brachystegia speciformis*) which seldom occur in the Zambezi valley, these being the first we had seen. We were now at an altitude of about four thousand feet, or some two thousand feet above our starting point. Our guide, who was still with us, maintained that he had never been on the plateau nor had any other member of his village. He said no one ever went there because it was too dangerous. We indi-

cated the beautiful water and asked why his people did not live there. His reply was that it was too cold.

We spent several pleasant days wandering about the plateau, coming on some lovely places with abundant water. One of these spots was a large pool covered with huge water lilies. It was almost big enough to be called a lake. It is called *Mansituba* (white water). We examined hundreds of deposits of rhino dung, some in big middens, but we found no trace of white rhino, although black rhino were present in large numbers.

For two nights we camped on a stream which plunged over the northern edge of the escarpment on its way to the Zambezi. We fished in the big clear pools and had some wonderful catches of silver fish, a type of barbus, which our carriers were only too pleased to eat. We spent that day exploring the gorge of this stream with its thickly-wooded hillsides and big clear pools, full of fish. As we got lower down, the wooded hillsides gave way to steep precipices, several hundred feet high, with only a narrow ravine at the bottom. Like the one we had recently ascended, game only frequented the upper reaches of the gorge and seemed to be restricted by the numerous waterfalls.

At the end of our trip we had seen nothing which would suggest the presence of white rhino, but there were some big black rhino in parties of five and six, spending their rest periods out in the open grassland, a characteristic of white rhinoceroses.

Another area from which we frequently get reports of the presence of white rhino is the Chewore, an area in the Zambezi valley, east of the river of that name. A game ranger from the Game Department, "Lofty" Middleton Stokes, collected a specimen of dung from that area and sent it to me. It is the nearest approach to white rhino droppings I have seen, but it was not from this animal. It contained about 75 per cent grass and the rest twigs and leaves – which is definitely a black rhino sign.

The Africans of the Zambezi valley distinguish two types of rhino. The *Fura Uswa* (grass eater) and the *Eja Mtowha* (eats Mtowha) or *Diplorhynchus condylocarpon*. This is more than likely left over from the days when the white rhino did occur in the valley. Now the name is applied to any bigger-than-usual black rhino which spends its time in the open country. I was told of the presence of a *Fura Uswa* near a village in the Doma area. So confident was my informant that it was not

the common black rhino that I cycled twenty miles to try and find it. This animal actually was easy enough to find. All the villagers seemed to know from day to day where it could be found and had no difficulty in approaching it, but what they showed me was a big black rhino bull. I thought at one time that the black rhinoceroses never ate grass, but this one did to some extent and I am now sure that many of them do. The bigger and older black rhinoceroses seem to have a tendency to spend less time in the thickets than their younger progeny and seem less aggressive, so there is small wonder that the Africans have different names for the two types.

One rhinoceros I saw in the Chizarira, a young bull, was wandering along a small dry watercourse in a most purposeful manner, as if looking for its companions. At intervals he would stop, turn his hind quarters towards a small bush or patch of grass and emit a blast of urine spray in a backwards direction. It would move on for a hundred yards or so and repeat the process. It was evidently laying a scent trail by which it hoped its companions would be able to find it.

The black rhino is well known for its habit of scattering its dung. The Africans have a story that long ago a rhino became involved in a fight and got its skin so badly torn that it had to have it sewn up. In the process the needle slipped inside and was lost. Now the rhinos of today are still looking for the needle. This story is based on the assumption that rhinoceroses scatter their droppings with their noses and horns, when in fact they do not; they do it with their hind feet, much the same as a dog scratching. Even baby rhinos do this.

Just why rhinoceroses use middens is not clear. These middens (some of them contain large quantities of droppings) are not used by one rhino only, but by any passing rhino. Middens may be a form of territory demarcation.

The Africans have a story to the effect that long ago the elephant and the rhinoceros had a competition to see who deposited the greatest pile of dung. The rhinos got together and hit on the idea that if they all deposited their droppings in one place they could beat the elephants, which they did. The elephants later heard of this trick and became very angry and beat up every rhinoceros they met. The rhinos, thoroughly beaten, decided to hide their droppings from then on, so that the elephant would not be reminded of the deceitful trick; and that is why today rhino scatter their droppings.

When it was decided to re-introduce the white rhino into Rhodesia in 1962, the preference was for young three-quarter grown animals and, as these would stand little chance against the lion population in the Wankie National Park, it was decided not to release them there. I was in charge of a party sent to Natal to bring up eight white rhino captured in the Umfolozi Game Reserve. We had no part in the capture but did witness one animal being caught by means of an immobilising drug. This was the same as that used by Rupert Fothergill at Kariba. It all seemed so simple, as the rangers at Umfolozi had got the technique taped to a fine art. To capture a rhino was to them just a morning's outing. I had seen white rhino before, having visited the Natal game reserves several times, but never in the herds such as are found at Umfolozi. I was struck by the hippo-like characteristics they displayed. They lived in small troops like the hippopotami, up to about twelve head, and when feeding behaved just like hippo. When resting, they often stand in a bunch with all their rear ends together, with their heads facing outwards from the circle that they form. I have often seen hippo asleep on the sand adopt just the same position. White rhino droppings, too, are much more like that of a hippo than that of their cousin, the black rhino.

Of the eight white rhino introduced, four were taken to Kyle Dam Game Reserve near Fort Victoria, and four to the Matopos National Park near Bulawayo. After being unloaded from their trucks, they were kept in pens for three weeks to accustom them to their new surroundings and adapt themselves to the new types of grass they would have to eat before they were completely weaned from the lucerne and teff grass "hay diet" on which we had been feeding them. During this time they were treated for worms and some of the stomach parasites they passed were truly amazing things, nearly four inches long and half an inch thick.

Two black rhino were also placed in the Matopos Park. One was a young cow called Sal who was originally sent to Wankie from Kariba. As she was much too young to defend herself against lions, she was sent to Matopos, by which time she had become very tame. Here she was joined by Rupert, a bull who was captured as a very young baby at Kariba and hand-reared by John Condy in Salisbury until he was about two years old. Unfortunately, Rupert died about a year after his introduction to Matopos.



Ted Davison and some of his merry men
 Staff 1961
 Tony Boyce, Chris Brits, Bruce Austin, Harry Cantle
 Tim Braybrooke, the author, Jordie Jordaan, Fred Starkey, Ron Thompson



Giraffe catching in Wankie