RETURN OF THE BLACK RHINO

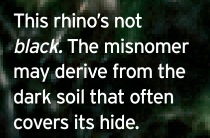
WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM SOME FRIENDS, A RARE AND MAGNIFICENT BEAST MAKES A COMEBACK

IT IS THE OLDEST DESERT IN THE WORLD, a garden of burned and blackened-red basalt that spilled out of the earth 130 million years ago in southwest Africa, hardening to form the arid landscape of Namibia, the driest country south of the Sahara.

Black rhinos blossomed from African ground some four million years ago. Maybe this difference—the 126-million-year wait between the two events—is how long it takes to construct from dust and wind and a dab of rain, and from that other, last thing, *spirit*, a rhino. There is no other flowering of which I am aware, no iris nor orchid, as convoluted and specific and fantastically beautiful as the rhino, no pollinating moth whose desire is as elegantly fitted to its flower as the black rhino is to the landscape of northwest Namibia, known as the Kunene region.

There are few places that get less rain. An inch a year might be expected; two inches would be considered a wet year. The sun beats down on the black and red stone, baking out any vestige of moisture, so that the landscape disintegrates grudgingly, millimeter by millimeter, across the centuries. The desert floor is a fabric of fist-size cobbles rounded not by antediluvian floodwaters but by the uncoiling release of

BY RICK BASS ✧ PHOTOGRAPHS BY ED KASHI



This rhino's not *black.* The misnomer may derive from the dark soil that often covers its hide.

time and by the wind burnishing the stubborn basalt.

It's curious that the land would give rise to such a huge, capable, and utterly improbable rhino, rather than having life in such an austere environment hedge its bets and spread that same biomass across a far greater number of less dramatic organisms, life forms that would require far less maintenance. Why call in nearly all of one's cards, so to speak, and place all of one's chips on the table in the form of these super-survivors, muscle-clad giants with feet the diameter of wash baskets, squinty-eyed almost to the point of blindness?

As recently as 1960, approximately 100,000 black rhinos roamed the continent of Africa. By the mid-1990s, their numbers had dwindled to around 2,500. Even by the 1980s, fewer than 40 remained in the Kunene region. (The black rhino, *Diceros bicornis bicornis,* is not black at all—there are several theories about the origin of this misnomer—but as ghostly pale as the more common white rhino of South Africa.) Poachers, serving demand for the dead, dry skin of rhino horns—used for ornamental and ceremonial dagger handles in Yemen, and ground to powder for a traditional Chinese medicine to treat colds—have been for a long time a limiting pressure on black rhino populations. But the rhinos' lonely position in the crossfire between Communist Angola and the U.S.-backed South African Defense Force during the late 1970s and early 1980s worsened matters; both sides were accused of poaching rhinos and elephants to help fund the war. A drought during the war years accelerated the rhinos' free fall, until a group of conservationists began publicizing the threat and working to bring the black rhino back from the edge of extinction in Namibia.

A SMALL BAND OF US is hunkered low. All day, our keen-eyed trackers—Joseph, Leslye, Himba—have been following the fresh prints of a mother rhino and her calf across the red desert, our bodies moving through the heat with liquid, mindless resignation. The only way to endure the heat is to become the heat. At first, the mother rhino's passage seems to me all but undetectable, save for the occasional chunks of dung we encounter, logs the size of pieces of firewood, with the gnawed-up, frazzled ends of the highly toxic euphorbia bush forming the fabric of the leavings. Eventually, I can sometimes see, in places where the rhinos have shoved a cobble aside, the fresh, round pie-plate of a hoof in the dust, with each of the three toes visible—but then nothing, only more basalt.

We follow the trackers as they follow the tracks. To the horizon, in any direction, we can see nothing but stone. We pass a sparkling spring, one of only about a hundred known and mapped watering holes in Damaraland, a region comprising approximately half of the 9,653-square-mile Kunene, and spy the fresh, soft track of a lion, the paw wider than my outstretched hand. Emerald saw grass surrounds the marshy spring—it would be very easy for the lion to remain there, hidden, lying in wait—and we give it a wide berth.

Between the occasional hills are rubble piles of volcanic necks, shafts from which the basalt flowed vertically into the world, towers that only now are beginning to sag and crumble—acquiescing, finally, to the inevitable disintegration of all physical things.

We pass over into a small, gentle valley in which the desert swells again to the horizon, the trackers veering left and right, following the script of the rhinos' mysterious passage. Seen from above, our movements might resemble the curious dance of bumblebees or some other heat-drunk insect. We pick our way through the loose scree, watching the ground before us. Beyond the Edenic yet potentially dangerous spring, the only signs of life besides our wandering selves are the euphorbia bushes, nearly spherical clumps of dusky green. In some ways the euphorbia seems nearly as miraculous as the rhinos, able to withstand the horrific hardpan heat in the long days of high summer, with temperatures down in the rocks reaching well in excess of 130 degrees. The plant resembles a green

The euphorbia bush is extremely toxic to humans but offers a source of nutrition to black rhinos, which distribute its seeds through their spoor.

Medusa, with thousands of cylindrical tubes of flesh radiating upward, creating as much surface area (and dead-air space between) as the fins, or baffling, on a radiator: a valuable adaptation, because the increased surface area helps the plant disperse heat it would otherwise retain.

Mike Hearn, our host, is at age 32 the director of research for the Namibia-based Save the Rhino Trust. Besides being physically charismatic—he is tall and broad-shouldered, a former rugby player, with a deep tan and wild-flowing, sun-streaked brown-blond hair—Mike radiates a kindness and gentle humility that have served him well in the community-outreach aspects of his job: visiting with and listening to the scattered human communities at the edge of rhino country, devising economic development models that rely on protecting rhinos rather than killing them, building an economic framework wherein a living rhino is far more valuable than a dead one. Working with the Namibian government and local communities, Save the Rhino Trust, founded in 1984, recruited guards, sometimes the very same people who had been poaching the rhinos, to protect them. Possessing tracking skills and intimate knowledge of the landscape and the rhinos' movements, the workforce was already emplaced. Like a shadow, each guard followed the rhinos—and other endangered large mammals—at a distance, a guardian angel armed and loaded. It took only a few shoot-outs for everyone to understand that the rules had changed, had turned suddenly upside-down. In 20 years the rhino population in the Kunene doubled. The trust's scientific research—including an ongoing census of the remaining rhinos—and its outreach to local communities have helped establish a modest rhino-based tourism and conservation industry in the region.

When Mike came to Save the Rhino, in the early 1990s, he possessed the two qualities that the organization most needed to advance its programs: affability and compassion. The fact that he was movie-star handsome seemed to authenticate his presence all the more: *He didn't have to be here.* He could have been off making films in Hollywood or raising funds in London.

AS MY TRAVELING companion, Dennis Sizemore, an American conservationist, and I follow Mike, Himba, Joseph, and Leslye, the heat is such that it seems we are swimming or floating through it rather than walking. Though we sometimes stumble and clatter, we are slowly growing accustomed to the challenge of picking our way across roly-poly old basalt cobbles scattered across an almost perfectly planar surface. Exploded, jagged quartz crystals glitter brilliantly on the reddened landscape, sometimes snow-white and other times translucent, as if great bags of diamonds have been rent open and the contents strewn about.

The trackers themselves have scattered now, and whether they

This Herero woman works at the Palmwag Rhino Camp.

THE KEY: DEVISING AN ECONOMIC MODEL FOR PROTECTING RHINOS RATHER THAN KILLING THEM, ONE IN WHICH A LIVING RHINO IS FAR MORE VALUABLE THAN A DEAD ONE

have lost the tracks or instead feel that they are so close to the rhinos there is no more need to look down at their feet—that we need only to lift our eyes to behold them—I cannot tell. And yet there are no rhinos, only heat and stone and sky.

The light begins to soften with the approach of late afternoon. One by one we sit down on various stones and rest, staring out at the seemingly infinite beauty. To the north—to the curve of the broad red valley—is a line of distant trees, the signature of a ghost-river that, Mike tells us, is pretty much the edge of Damaraland. It's a dry river of heated sand even in this, the wet season. Namibia's one inch of rain fell about 10 days earlier, cracking open, briefly, the red shell of earth into a quick unfurling of utterly illogical, almost unseemly, extravagance—the elegant white blossoms of *Catophractes alexandri,* or trumpet thorn bush, showing themselves as brilliant as those of dogwood, and the dusky euphorbia, too, seemed a tad greener.

Leslye, who has been squatting on his heels, rises and points. We see then what has been out there all along, a giant rhino, glinting almost white as the sun reflects off her broad armor. She is about a mile and a half away, but even at that distance looks improbably huge—a living dinosaur, appearing not so much tank-like, as I have read in some descriptions, as like an immense limousine. She is moving across the desert from right to left in a kind of toy-like glide, reminding me of a tractor-trailer seen on an interstate from a very long way off. Behind her is the tiniest fluff of white, like a speck of cotton: her calf. As great as it was to follow their live trail, the joy of seeing the rhinos themselves is about a thousand times better. Mike is smiling, transfixed; we all are.

Mike shares his super-binoculars with us. We can see the puffs of red dust raised by the rhinos' footsteps, even the glint of sunlight in their eyes. We sit there in utter contentment and watch as they gradually quarter, like boats out on a vast sea, and begin to travel in our direction as if being drawn toward us, summoned by our desire and our curiosity. If the rhinos proceed in the direction they have now chosen, they will eventually be within range for some of our telephoto lenses. And because the heated afternoon wind is strong in our faces, we feel safe, as our scent won't get carried in their direction. We sit sprawled among the rocks and watch them and murmur quietly. The watering hole is a quarter mile off to our right, and Mike thinks the rhinos might be heading back toward it after bypassing it earlier in the day. Even in this heat, a rhino can go three days without watering, and under ideal conditions quite a bit longer. Perhaps the mother smelled the lion and decided to make one big loop around the spring, sniffing for the scent of every altered molecule in her desert, before circling back. Perhaps her baby got thirsty.

Time melts. We watch as the mother and calf continue to drift

Not far from where they first evolved four million years ago, Namibia's black rhinos are now fighting for their survival.

our way. And after a little while, something happens—some ice-sliver of impossibility dissolves, for it finally occurs to us that she is not just traveling approximately in our direction but has chosen a tangent that leads more or less right to us. We sit up a little straighter, not quite sure what is at work here, but knowing there is something dangerous and wonderful going on. We keep expecting her to veer—to tack toward the watering hole—but instead she just keeps coming. At a hundred yards out, my stomach drops a bit, grumbles, and the hair on my back prickles. She is terrifying—and so *beautiful*: almost milky white, and with such fluid, enormous muscles. If we are going to stand up and slink away, now is the time to do it, before we enter into her sphere of sightedness. And yet we are mesmerized by her approach and cannot seem to pull away. While she is out on this late-afternoon saunter, believing the desert to be all hers, I cannot imagine that she could possibly be pleased, particularly with her newborn in tow, to discover that she has stepped unwittingly into a nest of humans out in the middle of nowhere. She is 75 yards away, then 50. We can see every articulation of muscle now, the ribs lifting with each breath, the nostrils widening. Her feet are immense, her ankles as solid as anything on this earth, her legs bowed, canted, and angled powerfully at the knees.

The baby, almost buff-white, continues to trail her. He's too cute, like something you'd bring home from the pet store. The mother's horns appear now to tower like skyscrapers, and as she turns her anvil of a head in our direction to stare at us intently, fiercely, we can hear the scretch of each pebble beneath those great feet, can smell the dust raised from each tentative yet angry step. The calf, more hesitant, is farther behind her, mewing like a kitten, distressed, which cannot be helping the mother's mood.

The six of us are frozen in a clump. No camera-clicking now. We are on an incline, elevated so that, even crouching, we are looking down slightly at her. She is giving her most malevolent stare—2,000 pounds of fury, now less than 30 yards away, with not a tree in sight—but she is staring at a point just off my right shoulder, as if her eyes haven't quite focused on us. She keeps coming, her calf keeps crying and fretting, and the heated wind keeps scouring us all, masking us somewhat, though at this near distance, little sliding back-eddies of scent surely must be filtering downslope; surely those huge nostrils are reading something.

She is magnificent, and she is about to kill us. Mike whispers that we may have to stand up—slowly, all at once—but we should not run. I hear him as if in a dream, understanding that he is operating in a world in which action has consequence. But I feel as though I am sunk down deeper in time, and I can only continue to stare at the rhino's tremendously muscular body—slabs and plates not of armor, as in the cartoons, but of dense and utter muscle. I notice a few faint guard hairs along her back illuminated by the lowering sun behind her. I think the only thing that has saved us thus far is the incredible improbability of the encounter: Even now, in these last few yards, she might still be thinking, *No, it can't be...*

MAP BY BLUEMARBLE MAPS

She stops and pivots slightly, squaring up to us now like God's linebacker—preparing to charge; any fool can see it—then lifts her tail and, as if squeezing a trigger, voids two blasts of golden urine high into the air, aiming them somehow almost straight up, like geysers. We watch as the sunlit spray vaporizes in the winds aloft and is carried our way. In an instant we can scent it, even taste it on our palates—slimed!—and I know without having ever heard of such a thing that this is the final step preparatory to her charge; as with a bird voiding involuntarily just before it leaps into flight, she is ready now, committed.

"All right," Mike whispers. I tear my eyes away and glance at him without moving my head, and see that he is rising slowly, his own hair burnished filamentous by the westering sun. "Stand up slowly, *quickly,* now." He summons us from our buried dreams like a conductor. This is the only card we have to play: presenting ourselves to her in order to ask for, and receive, her mercy. We rise almost in unison, with only the slightest dysynchrony of aging knees unfolding. To the mother rhino's dim sight, perhaps it appears that the strange human-scented boulder, the slag-rubble she's been approaching, has come to life, suddenly expanding and populating the space before her.

She pauses.

"Don't run," Mike whispers. We are slightly spread out now and are frozen again. Mike, the tallest, is in the middle, and we form a sort of cross. She is so close now that as she exhales, her ribs heaving, her breath is swept straight to us, and we in turn inhale it, our own hearts thumping wildly. The mother snorts, paws the stony ground; more sunlit plumes of gravel smoke rise and drift across us like magic dust. Behind her the calf makes some tiny movement of either fear or impatience. With breathtaking speed and force, the mother whirls, charges back to him, and stands by his side.

Then, with military precision, the pair rotate clockwise in an odd dance, flank to flank at an exact 90-degree angle. Now they're facing away, heads and horns tilted up in the attack, or perhaps the defensive, position—tiptoeing, pivoting, in a ballerina-like circle, pausing for a full minute with each 90-degree rotation. With their revolution completed, the mother whirls again and breaks into a gallop, running away from us with the calf right on her heels, the two thundering across the desert with twin red wakes of dust pluming behind them, heading for a line of trees three miles distant, which they cannot see but which, in that wind, they must be able to smell exquisitely. They gallop across the red desert as fast as any horse. It is disorienting to watch so large a creature running at so fast and unbroken a pace, accelerating all the way, the calf receiving no slack, working hard to stay up with the mother—life lesson number one, perhaps. In only a few minutes they are gone, white specks disappearing into that far brush, the sun almost setting now.

Still jittery-legged, we sit down and watch the darkening desert, the space where they had just been. "That was good," says Mike, a veteran of at least a thousand sightings. "That was very good."

AS IMPROBABLE AS it seems, Mike is from Kent, England; more improbably, he grew up with rhinos there. A short way down the street from Mike's house, a man named John Aspinall opened a suburban zoo—the Port Lympne Wild Animal Park, replete with rhinos, chimpanzees, and the largest herd of elephants in the United Kingdom. Aspinall was famous for flying native fruits and grasses straight in from Africa for his animals. As a young boy Mike hung out there at almost every opportunity; eventually, drawn to the rhinos, he got a job there.

Mike studied conservation biology at the University of Kent, then came straightaway to the source of rhinos, Namibia, where he got a job in 1993 as an intern with Save the Rhino Trust. For a solid year he worked in the office in Windhoek, in south-central Namibia, doing little more than filing papers, until finally someone saw that he was not just an adventurer but a committed scientist. At the end of that year, he was awarded a job at the field station in Palmwag, in Damaraland.

Mike's office is a thatched-roof, open-air, two-story hut—a tree house, really—overlooking Namibia's red hills and arroyos of dazzling heat. Shaded, and occasionally catching the faint stirrings of a breeze, it reminds me of Tarzan's tree fort, except for the bank of solar-powered computers and the file cabinets and the library of dense technical information, the data plots and biological treatises, overflowing the shelves.

STILL JITTERY-LEGGED, WE SIT DOWN AND WATCH THE DARKENING DESERT WHERE THE RHINOS HAD JUST BEEN. "THAT WAS GOOD," SAYS MIKE HEARN. "THAT WAS VERY GOOD."

Downstairs in the ramada-like plaza, with its cool concrete floor and its day-long shade, are some breathtaking photographs Mike took of charging rhinos. When I ask about them, he shrugs and says he was always able to keep a boulder between himself and the rhino—a mortal game of tag or keep-away—and that after a while the rhino would get tired and go away. The photos convey the incredible athleticism of the animal, all but airborne as it races through a boulder field, the ultimate broken-field runner, leading the charge with those twin sabers. And Mike, no less a force, evading the rhino like a bullfighter—and having the gall, even in his retreat, to snap away.

I was invited to Namibia by Dennis Sizemore, an old friend who is now executive director of the nonprofit Round River Conservation Studies (on whose board I sit as a volunteer), based in Utah. Round River students are working with Save the Rhino to help refine the protocols for rhino-viewing. This involves unique challenges—and opportunities—here in the see-for-a-million-miles desert. The students, under Mike's (and others') guidance, are combining vegetative-plot analyses and population studies with measurements and observations that detail the various responses caused by humans' presence. How close can a person get to a rhino under various conditions of wind, temperature, light, and so on, without the rhino's knowing the person is there? They are measuring, too, human satisfaction based on proximity to the rhino.

DENNIS SIZEMORE

It turns out that distance doesn't matter. In this landscape, tourists are just as thrilled to see a rhino at 300 yards as at 30. Some, of course, might savor the adrenaline rush of a 30-yard encounter, but most seem to prefer beauty, not danger. For such travelers it's enough to see a rhino even at a secret distance—to marvel, and perhaps to be assured that it simply still exists, and to see it fitted to scale against the vast landscape that birthed it.

That's good news for the rhinos, because to have them bolting all over the desert, constantly on the run—as they were during the war in Angola—would not be beneficial to their population. The researchers have found that, once frightened, a male rhino will gallop for at least half a mile before slowing; a female, two miles or farther. That's a long way for a 2,000-pound animal to sprint in 130-degree heat.

In this regard, our encounter in the desert was a failure. The goal is to see the rhino without its ever seeing you; to save it without its even knowing it was saved.

WE SPEND A FEW more days traveling with Mike. The rainy season has just passed, the desert is in full bloom, and Mike stops often to inhale deeply the scent of all the different flowers. It's the only time of year he is treated to such a luxury.

After our stay in Damaraland, Dennis and I finally say our farewells to Mike. We travel on to Etosha National Park in north-central Namibia, and then home to the United States, which is in the full frenzy of Christmas. I try to hold fiercely to Namibia—the sound of doves cooing at first light each morning, the laughter of hyenas at night, the otherworldly heat.

Yet as is always the case, these memories of the senses, held tight and scored deep, begin to soften ever so slightly. Not vanishing but reassembling, as if placed within some deeper, though somewhat less sensate, vault. Some vault not-the-present; some vault called the past.

And then, a couple of weeks later, we receive word that Mike Hearn has died off the coast of Namibia in a surfing accident. He was an epileptic and had been taking medicine, but evidently had a seizure while out in the waves, and a life was lost, along with a thousand grand dreams.

Others will pick up his vision and begin reweaving, or attempting to reweave, the pieces. For as long as there are rhinos—at least a little while longer—there will be those who are drawn to them, as if summoned. But there is no denying that what has been lost was immense, heartrending, as delicate as it was rugged, and irreplaceable. Something that had been millions, even billions of years in the making—Mike Hearn—was here for 32 years, and then gone.

The rhinos, and the basalt, remain.

Contributing editor Rick Bass is a board member of the Yaak Valley Forest Council (www.yaakvalley.org) *and author of 21 books, including the forthcoming story collection,* The Lives of Rocks *(Houghton Mifflin).*