
MADE TO



MEASURE



SYMBIOSE

SURROUNDED BY UNCERTAINTY AND RUMOUR, THE WESTERN BLACK RHINO HAS EVADED ALL RECENT ATTEMPTS TO DISCOVER WHETHER IT STILL EXISTS IN ITS LIMITED RANGE IN NORTHERN CAMEROON. ESTIMATES VARIED FROM FIVE SURVIVORS TO 31. JEAN-FRANÇOIS LAGROT AND HIS WIFE ISABELLE SET OUT TO SOLVE ONE MYSTERY, AND UNEXPECTEDLY FOUND THEMSELVES EMBROILED IN ANOTHER. ▶

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEAN-FRANÇOIS LAGROT



JEAN BRUNEL

A western black rhino photographed in 1977 in the Boubandjida National Park, on Cameroon's border with Chad. Poaching has led to the extinction of the species.

AFRICA'S RHINO WARS have been waged for over a century and in that time have seen both victory and defeat. White rhinos were saved in South Africa at the beginning of the 20th century, and black ones in the Zambezi Valley and on East Africa's plains in the 1980s. Rhino populations are gradually recovering – enough for the IUCN's African Rhino Specialist Group, when it met in Swaziland in July 2006, to view the current status of four of the six subspecies as encouraging.

But in the heart of Africa, guerilla warfare against rhinos is ongoing. The last of the northern white rhinos *Ceratotherium simum cottoni*, in Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), are facing the weapons of Sudanese rebels as well as local poachers and, according to the latest survey, are down to four survivors. Here, the African Parks foundation has entered the fray and will invest heavily to try to save this rhino from extinction.

Another subspecies has been even less fortunate; indications are that the last population of western black rhino *Diceros bicornis longipes* has gone extinct within the past few years. We can't state categorically that it has been wiped from the earth, but between February and June 2006 we patrolled the whole of its known distribution range in Cameroon's Northern Province and found no reliable evidence to show that it survives in even the remotest corner.

Unexpectedly, our research took the shape of a criminal investigation: the western black rhino was the victim in our mystery, and the clues we followed were spoor in the extensive tract of bush that lies between Garoua in the north and Ngaoundéré in the south. Then there were the bad guys, who weren't really so bad, but it took us four long months to unmask them. This is our cautionary tale.

HIDE AND SEEK

The western black rhino was one of four black rhino subspecies in Africa and, according to the only recent analysis we know about, was genetically different from the other three. This analysis confirmed that the difference was likely to have been a consequence of geographical isolation, and indicated that there had been a high level of inbreeding in what was most probably a small population. For two decades the rhino's situation has been dire. In Cameroon during that time, its numbers dropped from more than 100 to less than 30; in the 1980s it disappeared from the Central African Republic (CAR) at unbelievable speed (the 500-strong population in 1980 had been poached in less than five years); and the demise of Chad's last 25 rhinos in about 1990 went almost unnoticed.

This wasn't even the first time that the western black rhino faced extinction. Massacres between 1925 and 1932 had taken their toll, resulting in a ban on hunting imposed by the French Colonial Administration in the 1930s. (One French hunter, a certain Theodore Lefevre, claimed he shot 400 rhinos before the ban came into effect.) Thanks to the protection measures, and despite heavy poaching during World War II, the population grew. But then, around the turn of the 21st century, fears for its survival began to surface again.

When we started making enquiries about *D. b. longipes*, its file had already been on the desk of the IUCN French Committee for a couple of years. An expert survey had concluded that only five rhinos could be confirmed in northern Cameroon and this pessimistic report, coupled with limited funds, had led WWF to withdraw from any plans to save the last few individuals.

But the rhinos did have a champion. Paul Bour, a Frenchman resident in Cameroon and in charge of logistics



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for a hunting camp within the western black rhino's range, has had a passion for the animals since 2002. It had been six years since the last rhino was seen, a female which was darted. Paul, however, spends all year in the bush and was convinced that there were more survivors than the five officially recognised. According to the report he delivered to the IUCN French Committee in August 2004, 31 individuals, including six calves, still survived in Cameroon's Northern Province. Persuaded that urgent action was needed, the Committee first had to raise funds. One way to attract sponsors would be to get images of the remaining rhinos. With these photographs, a campaign could be launched that would collect sufficient funds for a long-term conservation programme. And that's where we came in.

Both veterinarians, we have been photographing and filming rare and threatened species for about 10 years. In our capacity as vets, we were also assigned to assess the work done by Paul and his association, Symbiose, to help him improve his methods and to check the footprints he had recorded that suggested a larger rhino population than was previously thought. Questions had, in fact, been raised about the shape of those prints: they differ from black rhino prints in southern Africa. Is the atypical shape a characteristic of *longipes* (*longipes* means 'long foot')? Is the print really so different after all? Southern African experts believe not, insisting that a black rhino is a black rhino and any differences between subspecies are more subtle. And there was another question: why did Paul never find dung? ▶

ABOVE According to the guides, this skull is the remains of a western black rhino that was killed in the 1980s at Hossere Makat, a mountainous area that was once the stronghold of the species.

OPENING PAGE A rhino footprint photographed in Cameroon in 2004. It differed from footprints of other black rhinos in East and southern Africa, leading researchers to wonder if it belonged to a separate subspecies.





Our first mission with Paul in March and April 2005 was a failure. Although we found fresh rhino spoor in five different locations, our attempts to photograph an animal were always thwarted. It became a game of hide and seek – we put a camera trap at a salt

lick and the rhino that had made the prints there promptly disappeared. We removed the camera and it returned. Were we just having bad luck, or was this a particularly elusive animal?

THE BEST-LAID PLANS

We decided to go to South Africa and Zimbabwe for training in tracking and to get technical assistance from world-renowned experts there. In KwaZulu-Natal we visited Craig Reid at Hluhluwe Imfolozi Park and sought advice at Tembe Elephant Park and Ithala Game Reserve. In Zimbabwe, we drove straight to the Save Valley Conservancy, a protected area that holds more than 150 rhinos, black and white – the highest number in one place in Africa.

There we met Jackson Kamwi, a tracker who lives with rhinos every day. It was he who found the last rhino in Rwanda, and he has been on rhino-tracking missions in Ethiopia and Tanzania. This experience, combined with his ability to speak English, made him just the person to help us solve the mystery of the animal-less rhino tracks. Jackson's employer agreed to let him come to Cameroon during the rainy

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season in Zimbabwe, and a date was set for February 2006.

In the meantime, we returned to France to look for partners to fund a new five-month rhino survey in Cameroon with Paul Bour. We met with success and within a few months convinced the Nature et Découvertes chain-store foundation, Merial Veterinary Laboratory, the Doue la Fontaine Zoo, IUCN French Committee, SECAS working with Vincennes Zoo, and FFEM (French Fund for World Environment) to support our project.

The project was to be divided into three stages, centred on Jackson's visit to Cameroon. With Paul, we would first locate the areas where fresh spoor were regularly seen and select a number of them for the Zimbabwean tracker's attention. Then, during the following month, we would cover the rhino's territory with Jackson to confirm

that the prints were those of a rhino and, with his help, we would follow them and try to observe as many of the animals as possible. Finally, with the experience we would have gained while working with Jackson, we would spend the remaining months of our field mission locating and identifying all the western black rhinos that still survived in northern Cameroon. We would also collect dung samples for DNA analysis, as it is important to establish clearly the genetic relationship between the western black rhino and the other three subspecies, as well as the degree of inbreeding within the *longipes* subspecies.

ON A MISSION

On 25 January 2006, we landed at Garoua, the capital of Cameroon's Northern Province, ready to begin our exploration of the rhino's range, ►

ABOVE Jackson Kamwi, a senior tracker at Save Valley Conservancy in Zimbabwe, who led several expeditions in Africa to locate close-to-extinct rhino populations.

OPPOSITE, TOP The northern section of Boubandjida National Park was once home to a large population of western black rhinos.

OPPOSITE Paul Bour used camera traps for several months to try to capture the last western black rhino on film.



ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT The author (wearing a T-shirt) introduces Jackson Kamwi (back to camera, right) to the rest of the rhino-tracking team; found south of Garoua, these rhino nails belonged to the last western black rhino, thought to have been poached between 2001 and 2004; Jackson examines a gun made locally by poachers; this western black rhino mother and her calf were photographed in the Central African Republic in 1974 – just 10 years later, rhino had disappeared from that country.

which begins 80 kilometres south of the city and forms a rectangle some 200 kilometres from east to west, between the borders of Nigeria and Chad, and 100 kilometres from north to south. Paul had hired new staff and the team now numbered nine, including five trackers, with the three of us as leaders.

Our very first field trips yielded fresh spoor and, encouraged, we divided the area around the tracks into three-kilometre by three-kilometre squares and searched each one for further evidence of the rhinos' presence. But all the tracks vanished after 10, 50 or 100 metres. It was very hot, between 40 and 50 degrees Celsius, and still we walked very long distances each day. There was no time to waste; Jackson would be arriving soon.

By the time he flew in from Harare, we had prepared a lot of work for him. There were a dozen sites to examine, some with very fresh tracks. We were convinced that within a few days we would be following Jackson along a rhino track and seeing the animal ahead of us ... and a second one, maybe a third.

From the very first field trip into the historical range of western black rhino, close to Hossere Makat, a mountain with many rivers flowing down its slopes, Jackson was attentive. Tracks showed that a rhino had recently walked by the river, but the surroundings – open savanna with few trees for browsing – were not typical of its preferred habitat. The Zimbabwean was puzzled. There were more tracks next to a muddy waterhole, but they were too light for an animal that weighs more than a ton. And there were none

to show that the rhino had ever left. Our trackers insisted that a rhino had been there, and even pointed out some scattered dung. But Jackson wasn't convinced.

It was the same story during the following days and weeks. We patrolled a large area but found nothing that persuaded our skilled tracker that rhinos really existed there. Where the habitat was favourable, with tree species that they were known to browse in Zimbabwe, we saw no signs of foraging. But there were signs of poaching – snares, carcasses, bleached bones, the debris of camps – and the density was so high it would have been a miracle if any rhinos had survived.

One evening, while the trackers slept, Jackson voiced his misgivings. The spoor he had seen that day showed that the rhino's foot was hitting the ground in a puzzling way, not pushing the dust backwards as it should. Nearby he had even noticed suspicious human footprints that someone had tried to erase. He was convinced: someone was planting fake rhino spoor. What's more, during the last training session he had carefully pointed out the difference between the prints made by fore- and hind feet. Until then, the prints we had seen showed no difference; now suddenly they did.

We too had been puzzled during the past few weeks, but even so, it was difficult to accept Jackson's suspicions. If anything, they made the mystery even stranger. Who had been faking the tracks? And are all the tracks that Paul had recorded over the past four years also fake? And, most importantly, were there any surviving rhinos at all?

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A few days later, an opportunity arose to challenge the culprits. We divided the trackers into two teams and one led us to a salt lick where we found perfect spoor, exactly like those we had seen in South Africa. Someone had been paying close attention at Jackson's last training session. We told the trackers that earlier in the day the other team had confessed that it had been faking rhino spoor for a long time. Had they been faking too? At first the trackers denied it but, faced with our determination, Oussoumanou eventually broke down. 'Yes, we started making fake tracks two or three years ago. I only saw real tracks twice, but then none of us found tracks any more, so we decided to make them up.'

Paul was aghast. He had put so much energy into the project and it was all wasted. 'We didn't want you to be discouraged, Mr Paul,' explained Mamoudou, 'and we were afraid of losing our jobs.' We learned that all the trackers knew of the deceit, although not all were actively taking part in it. The shock was overwhelming.

Jackson left a few days later, his mission accomplished but the project in ruins. We were grateful for the tact he had shown in uncovering the plot.

FINALE

The big question still remained: were there any western black rhinos left? We could not allow our disappointment

to deter us from our main objective and, after giving our predicament some thought, we decided to keep silent. In the two months remaining we would patrol the whole of the rhino's historical range as thoroughly as the budget would allow, and only then would we release any findings.

The first thing to do was dismiss most of the team members. Then we would start searching again, basing our work on three information sources: historical data showing the traditional areas that hosted *longipes*; professional hunting guides whose concessions covered most of the areas; and a network of informers in all the villages. Isabelle embarked on making enquiries among the hunting guides while Paul and I began patrolling again with a new team.

By early June, when the first rains had already transformed the landscape and turned the dried yellow savanna into a vast green golf course, we had covered some 2 500 kilometres. Since 1 February we had completed 48 field trips and had found not a single reliable sign that western black rhinos still inhabit northern Cameroon. *Diceros bicornis longipes* had, in all probability, disappeared in the past couple of years. And, sadly, those who had tried to keep its presence alive remained unaware of the impact of their misguided efforts. ■