

# Tanzania:

## Rhino rewards in the

For 14 months I have been searching: not for the elusive Selous rhinos, but for big, strategically positioned trees. These I would use as nocturnal observation posts for watching and photographing rhinos undetected. Conventional rhino-monitoring techniques (photographs) is not easy here in the Selous Game Reserve, because of the dense vegetation. I therefore had to try innovative techniques – hence the search for suitable trees.



I was frustrated because in fact we had no positive identification photographs of a rhino in the Selous. Good photo ID is essential if we are to be able to estimate total rhino numbers and therefore implement realistic rhino management strategies for the Selous.

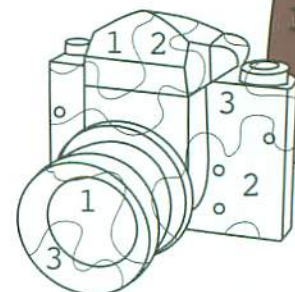
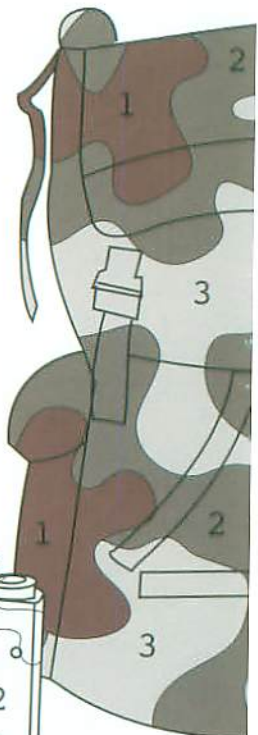
I had one specific big tamarind tree in mind, near a waterhole where I knew some rhinos frequently came to drink at night. So, now that I'd found an observation site, the real challenge of undetected nocturnal observation could begin. Constructing a suitable living area was achieved by fixing old fishing nets from Dar Es Salaam between two poles to make a hammock; my home for the next seven days.

The first step was to blend into the immediate surroundings of foliage and branches. That was tested to perfection later that afternoon when the local troop of baboons (later to become my allies in leopard detection) came to visit and drink at the water hole without noticing me. Wow, what a privilege! I was witnessing events as an undetected spectator. Animal behaviour was unstaged and relaxed; I felt part of the system. That feeling was short-lived as one of the sentry male baboons detected me. He soon realised that I, in my "immobile home," had very limited capacity to do them harm and so they continued to go about their normal business.

As rhinos have weak eyesight, having my cover blown was not a concern, but I knew the real challenge would be to bypass their acute olfactory sense. I knew I had

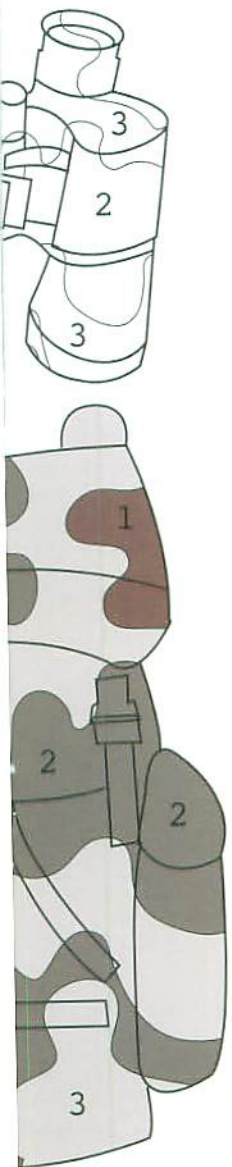
to adopt extreme measures to cover my unmistakable human scent. What better way to solve this problem than to paste some fresh elephant dung on me and daily refresh my new fragrance? I vigorously rubbed the digested plant matter into my skin. The first night came and passed, the moon was three nights before full, some lions in the distance and the normal nocturnal activities, but no rhino. Very confident of my cover, my new environment and new fragrance I was, however, rewarded with very close encounters with zebra, hyaena, buffalo and elephant. The highlight was four male eland bulls slowly and cautiously making their way to the water, right underneath me (three metres away) without detecting me.

The stage was set and now the waiting game started. I was fixed up in this tree and witness to all the amazing events around me. The second night as a shadow intrigued me. What was that shape? A lone buffalo bull? A big eland? Too tall, maybe the hippo I heard earlier? No, the head is higher. Clouds over the moon. The posture, the distinct movement of the head and the rest of the body, could it be a rhino? But more darkness, clouds covering the moon. It was distant, slowly making its way to the water, but taking a different route, away from my tree, without my confirming its identity. Was it a rhino? Frustration.



# Selous

Save the Rhino has just awarded US \$15,000 towards the cost of purchasing a second-hand Cessna 172, which will be used for aerial surveys, routine monitoring (particularly during the wet season when the roads become impassable) and anti-poaching forays. Maintaining a highly-visible profile in and around known poaching areas acts as an excellent deterrent.



The fourth day came and went as I became more and more part of the resident herds, flocks, troops, packs of whatever lived around me. I had an early dinner at about 4.00pm, as I wanted to be fed, comfortable and prepared for the night as soon as the animals became active. Dinner tonight was very good, as I had saved some special treats from the previous day: hazel nuts (shared with the neighbouring family of side-striped squirrels), three carrots (five days old, but very tasty), and dried peas for starters; main course was biltong (dried meat); and, for dessert, dried prunes. By 4.20pm the kitchen was cleared, dishes packed away and I was ready for the night-time entertainment, whatever it had lined up for me.

After months of studying rhino movements (from their footprints) in this area, I anticipated and hoped that the rhinos would approach the waterhole from a certain direction. As the late afternoon wildlife routine followed its daily sequence, my eyes scanned the by-now-familiar surroundings. A not-so-familiar creature appeared on stage. Blink, blink it is 7.03pm and the light is fading, but still good enough for me to recognise the distinct movement of the creature. My hands, sweating, shaking; heart pumping fast and loud; lungs hardly inflating (afraid it might hear me). Did I press the record button? Is the video recorder working? How much time does the tape have left? Is the battery full? I need proof, or no




one will ever believe me! Look again. Yes, it is the one I was searching for so long, now it is slowly making its way straight towards me.

This is a real Selous rhino! He is a beautiful mature 25-year-old male, slowly, ever so cautiously, approaching my tree, while I am recording all the time, not missing a single step. He is the dominant male of this area, scent-marking his route, sniffing-sniffing, ears like radar dishes panning the environment to detect the slightest sound. The nostrils flare wider open every time he breathes, trying to probe the air for any danger. He is right underneath me. A few minutes of sniffing before the final approach to the water. There he stands, while I cling to my tree in disbelief. He is so alert, but not showing the slightest indication of being aware of my disguised presence. Then he goes to satiate his thirst, before disappearing into the night.

Triumphant, I replay my video footage, which we can use to identify him in the future. Best of all, he never detected me. I am excited about the next dry season. I'll be in another tree, de-scented, waiting, documenting, building on our data to fill an empty frame of unknown rhino numbers in the Selous with reliable rhino identification data.

Friedrich Alpers

Project Scientific Co-ordinator, The Selous Rhino Trust

-  1 - Tanzanian Soil Brown
-  2 - Desert Shrub
-  3 - Selous Grey