



# MEET THE EYES AND EARS OF LEWA



© JOHNNIE CROSS

John here captured during a rhino ransolcation.

**J**ohn Pameri Tajeuma is a Maasai. He grew up among wild animals. He was brought up among people who see them as threats, trophies or meat. But John's outlook has changed utterly. He is the Wildlife and Security Manager of the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy. His job is to make sure Lewa's animals stay alive. It's a job, he says, he would not swap "in a million years."

He is married and has 3 boys, aged 4, 6 and 8 years. John describes his children with love and pride. He describes how his youngest son will not watch anything on TV that is not wildlife-related. He is teaching them to love the animals that he works relentlessly to protect.

He started working on Lewa in 1992, as a ranger responsible for patrolling rhinos. With commitment and motivation, John slowly moved up the ladder. When the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy was born, in 1995, and when the Craig's family commitment to rhino conservation became obvious, training was provided. He was sent to South Africa for a ranger course in 1996. He was also trained in the use of firearms. John is one of the KPR (Kenya Police Reserve) stationed at Lewa. He was also sent to Meru National Park for about a month, to learn from KWS. John knows

**John hopes that in 10 years, Kenya will have thousands of rhinos roaming freely.**

the importance of wildlife, and how endangered some animals are. He believes that it is our responsibility to protect these animals and thinks he has a different perspective from most local people, who see wildlife as a nuisance.

His week is mostly spent in the field. As a manager, he does have to spend a bit of time in the office, doing what managers do. He is responsible for about 150 security staff on the ground. They answer to him and they rely on him. He writes security reports by compiling the information that is given to him by his staff. These reports are used to inform the right people and to carefully monitor all activities (human and wildlife) in and around the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy.

But John tries to spend as little time in the office as possible. His work is on the ground. He is the eyes and ears of Lewa. He will do fence checks, team checks, wildlife checks. Each rhino on Lewa is identified daily: if one rhino is not found after 3 days, Lewa goes looking for it. There are 107 rhinos on Lewa (62 black rhinos and 45 white rhinos), and it holds 10 % of the black rhino population in Kenya. John's most important job is to watch after them.

John spends a lot of time in the community. He speaks to people,

visits them. He answers questions. The most frequent thing that John has to do is intervene in times of human-wildlife conflict incidents. He tries to educate them. He tells them everything that Lewa does and tries to show them what the positive effect of having wildlife around is. Every time there is an incident, such as poaching or crime, John or one of his assistants goes to see where Lewa can help. He probably goes out about three times a week. He helps Lewa help community problems.

**H**is family is in Timau. His wife, Agnes, works for Lewa House, one of the lodges on Lewa. John is a real conservation character – one of those people that sit quietly behind the scenes but make conservation happen.

Best moment on the job: John says he has many that remind him how lucky he is. John comes from a poor background and to him wildlife has brought opportunities. Rhinos are what make John proud. John hopes that in 10 years, Kenya will have thousands of rhinos roaming freely.

Mawingo, the blind rhino on Lewa, gave John his favorite moment. She had lost her calf. She was running up and down, in lots of distress, looking for her baby. The whole team was looking for the rhino, with Mawingo in the middle. They found the rhino, and returned it to Mawingo.

His saddest moment was when Samia, a black rhino on Lewa, died with her calf. Samia was mating and was being chased by a big male. She went over a cliff with her calf. Everyone loved Samia because she was tame, and people got very attached to her. When she died, everyone on Lewa was very distressed. Samia was part of the family.

A scary moment: One time he and his team slept under a tree and woke up to the sound of branches coming down. Above him was an elephant trunk, feeding on the tree. John thought he was going to die. He couldn't reach for his gun to scare the animal away. After a few minutes, the elephant clearly smelled John and started probing around with his trunk. Then the elephant abruptly turned around and walked away.

Maybe it knew it had inadvertently awoken a friend. >

– Elodie Sampere