

# **The Hunting Instinct**

*Safari Chronicles on Hunting,  
Game Conservation, and Management  
in the Republic of South Africa  
and Namibia:  
1990-1998*

by

**Philip D. Rowter**



*Safari Press Inc.*

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# About The Author

I was born in the village of Studley, in Warwickshire, England, on 22 September 1947. The fact that this village is not too far from Stratford-on-Avon has had absolutely no bearing on my literary skills (or weaknesses), although I do happen to like Shakespeare very much! More contemporary writers such as Ruark, Hemingway, and Capstick have contributed to my taste for reading and writing about hunting. My grandfather (who, incidentally, was a poacher of rabbits and pheasants) is also responsible for what lies between these book covers. You see, like you, I can't change my genes, either.

The first thing in my life that I can remember is catching a pigeon with my bare hands; that's a feat of memory, since it happened some years ago. It was also a feat of hunting for a whippersnapper barely out of diapers. The bird, a variety called a tumbler, had been so busy picking up wheat from our loft and had got its head into the upturned bucket that it didn't see me creeping up behind it. Clutching the weakly fluttering bird tightly to my chest I ran to my grandfather to show him my prize. After being severely admonished (it just happened to be grandpappy's prize bird), he forced me, to my utter dismay, to release it. No matter, I had hunted successfully and from that day onward it was clear to me, if not my family, that I was a hunter and would remain so.

Time passed and despite annoying small details like school and education, I still remained true to my chosen profession. Life being what it is, however, you are born for the human race, and then you are consequently and brutally moulded into something for society, which means that you rarely can do what you really want to do. An apprenticeship as a metallurgist was entered into and, to the surprise of all, myself included, successfully completed. Immense pressure now came on me to abandon all and go to

university. Yielding to the promise of untold wealth after obtaining a higher degree, I went to Aston University, in Birmingham, England, and did my duty. Leaving a few years later, with my still hot-from-the-press Ph.D. certificate tightly tucked under my arm, I faced the reality of the job-finding jungle, so I promptly left England to Margaret Thatcher and went to make my fortune elsewhere.

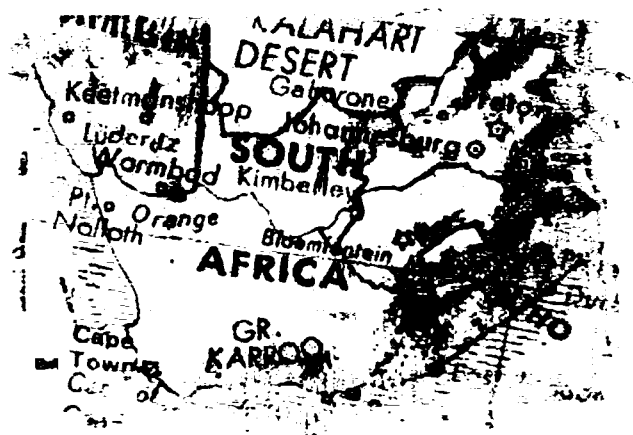
My travels took me to Switzerland, then Holland, and back again to the land of the Alps where I still live today. Somewhere along the way I'd also found a Dutch girl who could tolerate me, and I married her. No, it was *not* a shotgun marriage! I learnt the German language and took my hunter's examination for the Canton of Aargau, in northern Switzerland, and passed. I am currently the only Englishman to possess a valid Swiss hunting license.

A year later, much to the dismay of the French, and after having crucified their language, I successfully took the French state hunter's examination. I believe that I am the only Englishman to possess a valid French hunting license as well. Now, after having revenged the defeat of the English by the Normans at Hastings, in 1066, I relaxed my vendetta somewhat against the French as a nation and started hunting there, as well, since I was now armed with theoretical knowledge about the birds, bees, assorted mammals, rifles, bullets, ballistics, and woodcrafts.

The chronicles in this book are a record of some of my hunting experiences in South Africa and Namibia. They are not meant to be the usual sort of hunting, shooting, and fishing stories, but are an attempt to put hunting into another perspective. I hope that I have been successful; if so, you will also see why the hunting instinct endures.



## Chapter 5



### **Southern White Rhinoceros** (*Ceratotherium simum simum*)

There are five known species of rhino in the world today, namely the African (two species), Indian (about two thousand left), Sumatran (about four hundred left), and Javan (about fifty left). In Africa, the two species are the black and the white rhino. The quick to charge and cantankerous black rhino (about two thousand of which are left) is a browser, feeding off shoots and leaves (including semipoisonous ones), and has a prehensile lip. It is not sociable, except when breeding, when it also fights like hell. Despite the nuptial strife, they do get around to mating. The calf usually runs after the cow. The black rhino is threatened with extinction.

The less evilly disposed and slightly less likely to charge white rhino is much larger than the black. A bull may tip the scales at over three and a half tonnes and stand two metres at the shoulder. It will reach four metres in length; the front horn can exceed a metre. The second horn

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is usually smaller, but both horns can put a big hole in you. The white rhino is a grazer with a square mouth and adapted lip configuration. Ecologically, it opens up short grass grazing areas, helping animals that prefer short grass to crop. It is a social animal, and family groups are usual. The calf usually leads the cow. Its name has nothing to do with its colour. It got the name "white" from a South African Boer word, *wyt*, meaning *wide*, describing the mouth. Any rhino adopts the colour of the last mud wallow it was in. So much for the linguistic abilities of the English.

The white rhino has two subforms or species, the northern (thirty of which are left, and it is clearly threatened with extinction) and the southern. The southern white rhino is not currently endangered with extinction (about seven thousand are left, and its numbers are increasing), and limited trophy hunting is allowed. The considerable fees generated for this privilege are ploughed back into rhino management schemes. The southern white rhino's recovery from near extinction and its management to a viable species is a great tribute to the game management efforts of the South African government.

During the 1800s, considerable numbers of white rhino populated the southern tip of Africa. The opening up of the land marked the start of the slaughter campaign to rid the land of all large, dangerous game (rhino included) and to replace it with cattle. By the beginning of the 1900s only a handful of rhinos existed, in a tiny reserve called Umfolozi, in Natal Province. With great care, expense, and protection, the rhino started to make a recovery. Relocation was done when the habitat was secure, and slowly the numbers swelled. Breeding herds were established, and, at the end of 1990, some ninety years after the near-extinction, the population is viable. And that does not take into account breeding successes in other lands. Game hunting, under the strict control of government agencies, provides the much-needed financing for a continued success story. Only about one percent of the total white rhino population in



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South Africa is hunted for sport, but the revenue generated thereby guarantees the existence of the rest.

The main problem of the rhino family lies in the fact that they carry a liability on the end of their nose. Incidentally, the horn is not part of the skeleton; it is attached to the outside skin, somewhat like a wart. Rhino horn (both the black and white rhinos have two horns, one behind the other) has long been used in Far Eastern medicine. Although the actual therapeutic effects of the horn, which is made of keratin (a protein found in hoof and hair), may be minimal or dubious, the psychological effect is apparently great.

The other much-touted effect of rhino horn, namely as an aphrodisiac, is not proven scientifically. It is a biological fact that when mating, the rhino is capable of multiple copulations, but this has nothing to do with the horn on its nose. Rhinos that have been captured, dehorned, and then released by the authorities in antipoaching programs have not changed their mating habits. In addition, old rhinos might still have plenty of horn but will no longer breed. For me, at least, this indicates that there is no relationship between the presence or absence of a rhino's horn and the rhino's sexual behavior. I fail to see how consumers of rhino horn can relate their sex lives to that of rhinos, anyway.

The southern white rhino is a Big Five animal. Rhinos have an immensely tough, thick skin and heavy bone structure. This requires a calibre of at least .375 H&H Magnum (legal minimum), a full-metal-jacket or solid bullet of suitable construction, and a well-placed shot. A softnose bullet will mushroom on the iron-hard, callused skin and cause a stinging but superficial wound. Believe me, rhinos don't like that at all. Given that they have been clocked at over fifty kilometres per hour over a short distance, no one can outrun a rhino. The size of the animal leads one to think it is slow and cumbersome. Wrong. It is quick and as agile as a flea, and it can stop

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dead and run off at another angle in a short distance and in even less time.

The best bullet placement is the side brain shot at close quarters. An imaginary line, drawn from the eye level to the lower ear, crossing another imaginary line drawn vertically from the ear, and a bit forward and up, is a good spot. The brain shot from the front is made when the rhino charges, but this requires fast, precision shooting to avoid bullet deflection by the horn, or, worse still, hunter deflection by the horn. Not recommended in either case. Another shot placement, low on or just behind the shoulder region, demands deep penetration of the bullet through bone. Although heart-shot, the rhino may run off before dying. The hearing and sense of smell of rhinos are excellent. This seems to compensate, in part, for their notorious shortsightedness. They can see only up to about twenty metres but can register movement well.

### **Hunting the Southern White Rhino: A Close Shave or Two**

It was in April and the start of winter in an area near Hoedspruit in South Africa. The property that we were hunting on had a good number of rhino. The old bull rhino that we were seeking had been established on the property many years ago. It had bred successfully but had now become solitary. The decision was made to hunt it and to use the trophy fee to buy a couple of young female rhinos for further breeding and freshening up the bloodstock.

We stood looking at the pile, or midden, of freshly steaming dung. The bull rhino is territorial, and this is its way of marking territory. Middens serve both as optical and olfactory signs. The rhino defecates and urinates and then scuffs the dung around with its feet and horn to enhance the wall of smell. Judging by the size of this one, it had been used for years. Other rhinos had added to the latrine, no doubt, which was now crawling with dung beetles.

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Swarms of flies also droned and buzzed slowly above the midden as if drugged by the thick, scent-laden air. Nearby there was a broken tree stump, polished to a high shine by rhinos rubbing up against it. Rhinos have a heavy load of ectoparasites such as ticks and lice. They can remove some of these by wallowing in mud and then letting the mud dry, thus entombing the pests. A rub on a tree stump will usually dislodge them, whilst giving a glossy finish to the stump. Also, the mud cools the rhino and protects its skin from the sun and further pest infestations.

Leading off the midden was the characteristic three-toed spoor of the bull. It was easy to see in the fine sand. It had become a familiar sight to us as we had tracked it over the passage of several days. The summer had been good, and the abundant rain had made the bushveld a green curtain behind which everything could hide, including three tonnes, and more, of rhino. The wind had turned into a capricious whore. She flirted with us, gently kissing the back of our necks, then blowing false promises into either ear, before breathing in our faces. This was not conducive to tracking an animal possessing an excellent sense of smell, and we had been cuckolded enough earlier. The rhino had picked up our scent and, although we hadn't seen it, we had heard it crash through the bushes. The spoor had led us to the midden. After excreting an immense pile of sloppy green dung, the rhino had left. We took up the spoor again.

The rhino was in no hurry and had stopped to crop the grass. Our black tracker, Thomas, was certain that we were no more than half an hour behind the quarry. The bushes crowded in on us from all sides. We started to move in on the rhino.

The rhino now stood dozing about fifty metres before us. The wind was good for the moment, but the rhino was not standing broadside. The cover here was now sparser, but, as rhinos can't see well, we dared to move in. The sound of a twig breaking underfoot reached it, and it turned to peer myopically in our direction. It sniffed but could

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not detect any taint of our scent. The big trumpet ears flicked erratically. The rhino snorted and swung around and turned to face us full on. It knew that we were there. I knew then that the rhino would charge. Would this be the place where something would die? The front brain shot was the only chance from this angle. I raised my rifle and put off the safety and brought the cross hairs of the scope to where they should be. The electric tension was discharged as the rhino uttered a short snuffling grunt, turned again, and pounded away into the bush. The rush of adrenaline made us light headed as we unwound from the close shave.

"That was as near as *damn it* is to swearing," I said, putting on the safety again and turning to my friends.

They both grinned, trying unsuccessfully to cover their fear.

"I thought that you would have to shoot. The old boy seemed to toss a mental coin, and it must have come up heads, meaning that he chose to tail it," replied my PH, putting his rifle into a safe condition in one easy action.

"I'll drink to that," I said, wiping the sweat off my brow.

We unwound, drank hot water out of the bottles, and set off again. The paths were covered with rhino spoor, and it was difficult to sort out the spurious tracks. We pressed onward. An hour later we had closed to the last thirty metres. We could make out the head of the rhino as it stood under a tree. The bush throbbled with the sound of insects. We closed in. Sweat stung my eyes as if chili extract were being poured over them. The strident chirping of the insects augmented the roar of blood in my ears as I raised the rifle to shoot. The rhino was standing broadside, and I placed the cross hairs on the place. Hey! Wait a minute. This was not the same rhino. I looked at the tracker near me. He shrugged his shoulders and signaled to me not to shoot. I didn't.

My blood was pumping around so fast that I feared the rhino would hear the swish of it surging around inside me. We had picked up the spoor of another bull. It was

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not so big in the horn department as the one we wanted. It was also younger and therefore definitely off the wanted list. We retraced our footsteps, carefully avoiding the treacherous wait-a-bit thorns while trying to keep our eyes on the rhino. The rhino swung around to face us. It snorted. Oh, oh, this was going to be it. I saw it all in my mind's eye, trying to explain to the landowner how we had ended up with the wrong rhino. The rhino stood peering around, radar-dish ears flicking this way and that, trying to detect sound. It took a half pace forward, appeared to make a decision, blew air through its nostrils, and turned and stormed off, crashing through bushes it mowed down before it. Another close shave.

Rifles were uncocked and nerves unwound. Rhino hunting is not good for your nervous system, and adrenaline depletion can be a real problem. Those who have seen rhino in the zoo, walled off by a substantial barrier, have no idea how big they look when they are right up in front of you, with no protection between you and oblivion. We called it a day, having had enough fun and games with rhinos for the time being.

That night, after a meal of grilled impala liver and kidneys and after a corresponding nightcap of several stiff tots of something tawny brown that burned like fire as it descended, I fell into bed and then into a weird tumbling condition, in that order.

"Come on; get up! We've got a rhino to hunt!"

The voice of my PII penetrated the Scottish mists of sleep, and I started to grunt and mumble the speech of the hung over and rudely awakened. Whisky poisoning, again. I dragged myself out of my bed and noticed that it had the appearance of a load of blankets spewed from a washing machine gone berserk. I made a dull mental note never, in the future, to chase down wine with anything other than wine.

In case you are wondering, no, we didn't get around to taking that rhino. We tracked and walked and talked and cursed and were bitten by flies, bugs, and ticks (but not

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snakes). We were scratched to bits by wait-a-bit thorns (but not cats), and the blisters on our feet burned in our boots as if we had pulled on socks made of glowing coals. We did everything. It wasn't enough. We did that extra bit. Still no luck. Maybe one day I'll go back and go through the whole process again. Close shaves, you see, can be addictive.





*Lioness in the mopane bushes. This one snarled at us but didn't attack. The trouble with lions is that they are unpredictable. Always exercise caution. RSA.*



*They're normally not dangerous, but when you are twenty metres away armed with only a camera, white rhino do not look that docile. RSA. (Safari Press photo library)*



*After the shot, we went out to see if the hippo was lying in shallow water. It wasn't. The murky depths would yield up the hippo only some hours afterward when the fermenting stomach contents had produced sufficient gas. RSA.*



*Left to right: Helper, yours truly, and Chief Benjamin of Tonga Block B. Don't let this serene moment fool you; a serious crowd-control problem developed when the hippo meat hit the riverbank. RSA.*