

If Hluhluwe and Imfolozi didn't exist, rhinos would likely now be extinct. By Dale Morris

# Black & white SURVIVAL

HERE'S NOTHING QUITE SO INSPIRING AS A RAMPAGING RHINO TO REMIND YOU THAT WE ARE DESCENDED FROM MONKEYS AND ARE STILL RATHER GOOD AT CLIMBING TREES. There I was, up amongst the flimsy boughs of a spindly acacia somewhere

in the middle of KwaZulu-Natal's Hluhluwe Imfolozi Park with not one, but four black rhinos rumbling by below.

Two other men, Roan Plotz, a conservation biologist affiliated with the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, and Bom Ndwandwe, a KZN wildlife ranger, were also up there.

"This is one of the reasons why the species can sometimes be difficult to study," said Roan as the aptly named 'crash' of rhinos vanished noisily off into the undergrowth. "They have a tendency to charge at the slightest whiff of a human."

In this case though, the animals hadn't got a whiff of us at all. We had been approaching from down wind and had been moving silently. Ndwandwe at the front with his gun (just in case), Plotz in the middle with his tracking antenna and myself at the rear with my note book and camera. The bush had been typically woody and by rights we should have been concealed from all but the keenest of eyes.

"Rhinos are as blind as bats," continued Plotz as we dropped from the tree and dusted ourselves down. "But ox peckers aren't and rhinos have learned to respond to their alarm calls."

It's a fascinating three-way beneficial relationship. The ox pecker is tolerated by the rhino and gets to feed on parasites. The rhino gets an early warning system. And the researcher gets an excellent incentive to stay fit. ▶

**SAFE HAVEN** The endangered black rhino has found a refuge in the Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park.





► Plotz and Ndwandwe, having spent many years creeping up on rhinos, were obviously unperturbed in the face of a charge, but I was not. A fact made evident by my shaking hands and wobbling knees.

“Don’t worry,” said Plotz in soothing tones. “Stay alert and as long as you can get yourself a few feet up off the ground you should be perfectly safe. It’s very rare a rhino will try to horn you out of a tree.”

Rare. But not unknown.

**Africa’s first wildlife park**

Quite a bit of research has been done on the relatively calmer white rhino since they are somewhat easier to find and observe. Black rhinos like to hang out in thicker bush and have a tendency to charge first and ask questions later. This has resulted in a shortage of masochistic academics willing to study the animal and a subsequent shortfall of knowledge.

However, Plotz and Ndwandwe don’t seem to mind their study animals trying to kill them. As a result they have carefully documented the activities, breeding successes, habitat preferences, home range sizes and general condition of 14 radio-tagged female black rhinos. It’s hoped their study will clarify whether the Hluhluwe rhino population is indeed in decline. If it’s true, it could be bad news for a species that only recently made a comeback from the brink of extinction.

It’s thought in prehistoric times there were over a million rhinoceroses on the continent. Relentless hunting and the demand for rhino horn for medicinal purposes and ceremonial dagger handles reduced black rhino numbers to fewer than 2300 by 1994. White rhinos were reduced to between 20 and 40 individuals. If it were not for the creation of Hluhluwe and Imfolozi game reserves in 1875, and the more recent Operation Rhino, rhinos would likely be extinct.

Hluhluwe and Imfolozi became the first formal wildlife reserves on the continent, established with the goal of saving black and white rhinos. Thanks to the protected population and well-managed game capture and relocation program, there are now upwards of 4000 black and 18000 white rhino dotted throughout the continent.

The road to the rhinos’ recovery has been rather bumpy, with perhaps the worst pothole being an outbreak of Nagana in the early 1920s. A disease carried by tsetse fly, it doesn’t pose a risk to wild animals but can be fatal to domestic livestock. So when neighbouring farmers started blaming cattle losses on the presence of nearby big game, the government of the day deproclaimed the park and turned it into a shooting gallery. Depending on which report you read, between 26000 and 100,000 animals were killed.

“By 1930 there were only 100 to 150 black rhino left in the park,” said David Cooper, Imfolozi’s game capture vet of more than 18 years. “In the rest of the country they were completely wiped out.”

Eventually, after 20 or so years of slaughter, it was decided Nagana could not be controlled by eradicating wildlife. That unpleasant but effective insecticide DDT was brought in to do the job.

“Black rhino probably clung on through that period by being elusive,” said Cooper. “Thankfully there were enough of them left to keep the species going.”

In the late 1940s the Natal Parks Board (now Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife) took over and began a programme to rectify the errors of the past. Anti-poaching units were trained and sent out on patrol, wilderness areas were set aside, the two parks were merged into one, locally extinct species were reintroduced and a strategic plan named Operation Rhino was hatched. ►



**SEARCH PARTY**  
Roan Plotz and Bom Ndwandwe head out to find rhino.



**BIG MOUTH** This white rhino can be distinguished from its black relatives by its square lip.



**TEAMWORK** Ndwandwe scans the horizon as Plotz wields the radio antenna.



**ON A GRAND SCALE** The Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park is home to members of the Big Five such as these buffalo.





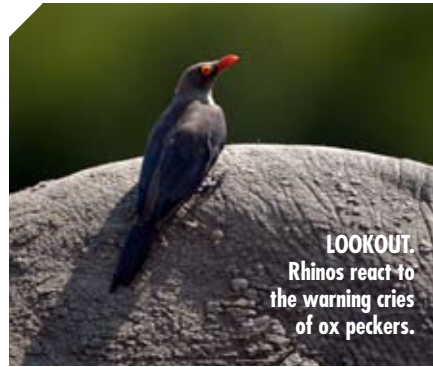
Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park boasts 400 different bird species and is one of the best places in Natal to see large raptors.

**BIRDER'S DELIGHT** This striking kingfisher is just one of many birds found in the park.



**COOL CROCS** Crocodiles are often seen from the picnic spot near the start of the Sontuli Loop.





► “The idea was to protect our rhinos from poaching, capture a percentage of the progeny and then send them out to other parks and reserves,” said Cooper. “No good having all your eggs in one basket.”

In the early 1960s when big game capture was a new concept, rangers would track down their quarry on horseback and attempt to fire a tranquilizer dart into it. Not only did this take both courage and great skill, it was also fraught with failure. The drugs of the day took anything from eight to 12 minutes to take effect and, in that time, a rhino could either vanish or attack.

“Since the ’90s though, we have used helicopters and ground teams both on foot and in vehicles,” said Cooper. “The drugs are far faster and more precise. Rarely does anything go wrong.”

Since its onset, Operation Rhino has seen the successful capture, transport and relocation of thousands of animals, but establishing a new population of black rhino is not easy. Cooper explained: “In the earlier years of the project we were exporting groups of three males and three females, but in reality this wasn’t so good. If something happens to just one of those animals it can really effect that population.”

You can’t simply top up the population with a new rhino or two. They would just kill each other.

“We now prefer to export much larger groups, looking at the bigger picture in terms of viable population recovery. Ten years ago we moved 28 black rhino to southeast Botswana all in one go and now they have over 70 there. We also lend rhinos free of charge to large game reserves with the necessary resources to protect and breed the animals.

“The World Wide Fund for Nature helps us with the translocation costs and the

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**DOWN BY THE RIVER** The Black Umfolozi River winds its way through the Imfolozi section.

Hluhluwe and Imfolozi became the first formal wildlife reserves on the continent, established with the goal of saving black and white rhinos.

**FIELDS OF GOLD** The landscape ranges from rolling savannah to scarp forest.



► new custodian gets to own 50 per cent of any baby rhinos born (currently worth half a million rand each). This really is a nice incentive for cooperation between private land owners to drop their fences, which in turn has a fantastic spill-over effect for all sorts of other animals such as wild dogs and elephants.”

Cooper smiled and there was a discernable glint in his eye. Obviously, this is a project that makes him, and no doubt every other rhino conservator in Africa, very, very proud.

#### A glitch in the rhino system?

Just about every black rhino on the planet can attribute both its genes and survival to the rhinos from Hluhluwe Imfolozi. If this population is now failing without clear answers as to why, it could possibly spell disaster for rhinos everywhere.

Ongoing data collected by anti-poaching teams as well as past observational studies indicate rhino home ranges within Hluhluwe have been increasing in size since the 60s and overall numbers of rhino have dropped.

“Too many rhinos on the land is not a good thing,” said Imfolozi’s conservation manager David Robertson. “They would need to range further to find sufficient browse and this in turn could depress their own breeding successes. Conflict between animals would also increase.”

Another worrying issue is the apparent lengthening of time between the birth of one calf and the next. Again this is something that could possibly be attributed to a lack of health within the entire population. However, few



**RISKY BUSINESS**  
Ndwandwe and Plotz  
scramble for safety.

**“As long as you can get yourself a few feet up off the ground you should be safe. It’s rare a rhino will try to horn you out of a tree.”**

majority in Kruger. Organised crime syndicates are using helicopters, modern tranquilisers, legal loopholes and (some suspect) inside knowledge to get at rhinos. All the conservation work done could still be undone.

Hluhluwe’s conservation manager Sihle Nxumala remains upbeat though: “To keep the dreams of those who started the difficult task of saving the rhino is not easy. To keep that good story alive is very demanding and it costs a lot of money. I still feel hopeful for the future so long as our government and the local communities support us. Who knows what comes tomorrow. Hopefully a safe future for the rhino.”

(if any) studies have been conducted on black rhinos in which a representative group of individual animals has been so precisely monitored as those being scrutinized by Plotz.

Pregnancy rates are being recorded through chemical analysis, births documented, accurate home ranges mapped through radio tracking and individual animals outside of his study group are now easy to identify due to an ongoing ear notch system. No-one knows what Plotz will find when he analyses the data, but everyone who cares about the future of the black rhino is hoping science will provide answers.

Regardless of whether the rhinos are doing well or badly due to the effects they are having on the land, there can be no debate the species is still very much in peril. A resurgence in rhino poaching has seen more than 100 killed in South Africa alone, the

Many people believe ground-up rhino horn will cure all sorts of ailments, even though it’s made from the same material as hair and nails. Incredibly, it can fetch up to US\$3 000 a kilo on the black market. You’re better off eating half a kilo of toenail clippings.



**RUN, RHINO, RUN** They may look cumbersome, but rhinos can reach speeds of 56 km/h.



## TRIP PLANNER

**GETTING THERE** Imfolozi and Hluhluwe are about 280 km north of Durban. Most people head into the park through Mambeni Gate on the R618. Alternatively, access is through the eNqolotho Gate (30 km from Ulundi) or at the Memorial Gate (not far from the town of Hluhluwe).

### ACTIVITIES

- The Sontuli loop in Imfolozi, which follows the Black Umfolozi River, is our top tip for game viewing. It's an easy drive that can be completed in a few hours and has plenty of beautiful pull-off spots where you can get out of the car. Elephant and crocodile are quite often seen at the picnic stop a few kilometres from the start.
- Three-hour night and day drives in an open safari vehicle leave from both camps and cost R200 an adult and R100 a child.
- Thrilling two-hour guided morning and day hikes into Big Five territory cost R180 a person (under-13s are not allowed). Book with reception the day before.

There are also a number of self-guided hiking trails, where big five animals can be encountered (obviously, disclaimers must be signed).

### WEATHER

The hottest and wettest time of the year is mid-summer (November to January) when the temperatures and humidity can be unpleasant. However, most animals are in their best condition at that time of year and there will be far fewer tourists. Often you will have the rhinos all to yourself. From May through to September black rhinos are seldom seen, but there are always plenty of white rhinos to be seen hanging out at the side of the road. It's well worth visiting twice in order to experience the contrasts between the dry and wet seasons.

**PRIVATE LODGE** At Gqoyeni you enjoy the services of your own cook and ranger.



**HILLTOP** The red adobe thatched chalets are plush and spacious.

### WILDERNESS WALKS

The Wilderness Trails are the only way to experience the 33 000 hectares of Imfolozi designated a wilderness area. Catered trails sleeping in tented camps cost R2750 a person (three nights) or R1 870 (two nights). Basic trails where you carry your own food and equipment, spending three nights sleeping under the stars cost R1 900 a person. Trails leave on set dates and must be booked well in advance. 033-845-1000 or trails@kznwildlife.com.



**MUNTULU MAGIC** The lounge at Muntulu overlooks the palm-lined Hluhluwe River.

### PICK YOUR PLACE IN THE PARK

All reservations should be made through KZN Wildlife booking office on 035-304-4934.

#### Families – Mpila Camp chalets

Imfolozi's main accommodation hub sits atop an unfenced hill where wildlife roams freely between the chalets. These range in size and can sleep from four to seven people (R310 to R346 a person a night). The majority of units are self-catering and fully equipped; bring all your own food and braai wood. Power is by generator only, which operates from 06h00 to 22h00. After that it's candlelight.



**SAFARI CHIC** The tents at Mpila bring you close to the bush.

#### Bush lovers – safari tents at Mpila

En-suite two- or four-bed tents with kitchenette cost R310 a person and have a lovely safari feel to them. Each unit is tucked away in the bush and nearly all have views over the Imfolozi's rolling hills.

#### Birders – Hilltop camp

Hluhluwe's main camp is nestled in an evergreen patch of scarp forest and therefore is a great place for birding (especially during the early morning). Choose from two- and four-bed chalets or rondavels which sleep two. Rates are R276 an adult a night for the rondavel, R550 for chalets. Hilltop Camp has facilities for people with disabilities, as well as a restaurant, shop for basic provisions and a pool.

#### Luxurious – bush lodges

Exclusive eight-bed private bush lodges are ideal for small groups who want to experience something special. For the price of R595 a person a night (minimum R3 570) you get the camp all to yourself, plus a personal guide for bush walks and a chef to cook your meals (you must supply the food). Choose from Gqoyenei and Hlatikhulu at Imfolozi or Muntulu, Munyawaneni and Mthwazi at Hluhluwe. Masinda lodge in Imfolozi, which sleeps six, can be rented for R550 a person a night (minimum charge R2 200). 🐾

PICTURES: EZEMVELO KZN WILDLIFE

