

ANIMAL LIFE IN AFRICA

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RESERVES

BOOK II

THE VEGETARIANS



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CHAPTER III

RHINOCEROSSES

THE WHITE RHINOCEROS. The English name for this, the largest of all African land mammals after the elephant, is misleading, there being in colour very little difference between it and the more widely distributed black rhinoceros.

“ The head is very long and massive ; upper lip straight all round, with no trace of a proboscis ; nostrils are elongated slits parallel to the mouth ; ears longer and more pointed than in the other species, springing from a closed cylinder about three inches long ; tail as in the black variety, but only the last quarter provided with wiry bristles. The front horn is situate on the nasal bones, longer and more slender than in the other species, curved gently backwards, and the upper part of the front usually flattened by friction against the ground ; the rear horn is usually short, straight, conical and somewhat laterally flattened. Both horns vary a good deal in length and shape.” (Schlater.)

This splendid beast, which attains a height of over six feet six inches at the shoulder, was once extremely plentiful in many parts of South Africa, between the Orange River and the Zambezi ; but is now probably extinct south of the latter river, with the exception of some fifteen preserved in Zululand. Two of these were killed by natives in 1902, but, with this exception, they have been unmolested for a good many years. Until 1900 it was believed that the species did not exist north of the Zambezi, but in that year Major Gibbons, at the conclusion of his great march from the Barotse country, and while awaiting a steamer to take him down the Nile,

shot one in the Lado Enclave. It is now known that the species is probably quite as numerous in the Enclave, the north-eastern Congo, and the southern part of the Sudan west of the Nile, as it was in former days in any part of its South African range, and the fact of its presence being for so long unsuspected is the more remarkable, when it is remembered that such a keen zoologist as Sir Samuel Baker spent so long in this very region, and that Emin Pasha, also a zealous naturalist, albeit not a sportsman, was for years at Lado, Rejaf, and Wadelai, round all of which places the animals are very numerous. At a later period, when the tide of Mahdiism was ebbing from the Upper Nile, and European officers and travellers shot many rhinoceroses along its banks, no one seems to have noticed any difference between the ordinary black rhinoceros found on the east bank and the totally different animal across the river.

The Nile has evidently proved as impassable a barrier to the progress of the square-mouthed rhinoceros from remote times, as to that of his cousin the prehensile-* lipped animal, whose range extends all along the east bank. The nature of the country to east and west is alike in every way, but, though only a few hundred yards of water separate the two species, each seems exclusively confined to its own side.

Mr. Selous' minute account of the habits of the white rhinoceros in South Africa no doubt applies equally to those of his brother on the west bank of the Nile. He is a sluggish animal by nature, and betrays none of the irritability so characteristic of the black rhinoceros. He seldom charges, and his unsuspecting habits have been the cause of his falling a ready victim to the hunter, both European and native. He is prob-

* Adapted for grasping twigs, &c.

ably entirely a grass-eater, feeding in the late evening, through the night, and in the early morning. He moves steadily along at a slow walk all the time he is grazing, not remaining more or less in one place to do so, as is the habit of many animals. On the sun getting hot he lies down under some convenient tree or bush to sleep soundly through the warmer hours of the day; he is then very easy to approach. Sight and hearing both appear rather deficient, but scent is keen. When on the move the head is carried so low that the horn is almost parallel to the ground. The calf precedes instead of following the mother, and is guided by a gentle pressure of her horn.

White rhinoceroses are seldom found at any great distance from water. They are believed to be very numerous indeed to the west of the Nile, practically from Lake Albert to some distance north of Lado, and have not, so far as can be ascertained up to the present time, been reduced in numbers to any noticeable extent. This is due to the fact that the numerous hunters who recently were busy in their haunts pursued the elephant alone, a chase which precludes thought of all else. It is therefore to be hoped that when access to these remote regions becomes less difficult, Government will take effectual steps to guard these inoffensive and interesting creatures, in this their last known refuge, from the fate which has overtaken them in South Africa.

THE BLACK OR PREHENSILE-LIPPED RHINOCEROS. Unlike his so-called "white" cousin, the black rhinoceros has a range embracing nearly the whole of Africa, except where he has been exterminated through human agency. In colour he is not noticeably darker than the other species; the height is much less, only about five feet at the shoulder; the skull is shorter, and the horns, of which the front one usually, though not always, exceeds



RHINOCEROS

the other, are shorter and more massive. In all rhinoceroses these horns are a mass of closely and vertically-packed fibres growing from the skin, and with the slightly hollowed base resting upon a small prominence upon the bone of the skull, whence it can easily be detached ; the feet are each provided with three broad nail-like hoofs, so that the track is always an unmistakable one.

Formerly it was considered justifiable to split up the black rhinoceros into several species, according to the relative lengths of the two horns ; but it is now known that these variations are merely individual eccentricities, and there is but one species throughout Africa.

At the present day this animal is almost extinct in the Union of South Africa. A few still exist in the north-eastern Transvaal, in the dense bush which extends on both sides of the Portuguese border, between the Singwitsi River and the Limpopo, and also in the Sabi Bush, on the south bank of that river, where for many years one only was believed to exist, so closely had fear of man induced the animals to remain within the shelter of the thick wait-a-bit thorns. Actually there may be a dozen or more present in the two districts, which, so far as the British side is concerned, are within a Game Reserve ; but this small number holds out little hope of ultimate survival without the aid of fresh blood. The presence of a considerable number of rhinoceroses at no great distance in Portuguese territory, however, encourages the hope that recruiting may be possible, if indeed it has not already taken place. On the Maputa River between Bella Vista and the Pongola junction, the road passes through a large extent of very thick bush or forest, and here rhinos, which have been for a good many years strictly preserved by the Portuguese authorities, are pretty numerous, and are reported to inspire a good deal of terror in the natives

who travel by that route, though it is not added that any one has ever been actually attacked.

Rhinoceroses have been increasing of late years in Northern Zululand, thanks to protection. In Southern Rhodesia, where they were once so widely spread, they are now confined to a few districts; but a good many still exist in the Zambezi Company's Territories north of Beira. North and west of the Zambezi the species is sparingly distributed through parts of Northern Rhodesia, Nyasaland, Angola, and Moçambique. They become more numerous towards the north, and until quite lately were found in great numbers over most of British East Africa, wherever the country was high and dry. The fact of their favouring the open, treeless plains, and so catching the eye of the man with a gun on every occasion, soon, however, thinned their numbers, while their unpleasant habit, when alarmed, of dashing through caravans, to the great detriment of camp equipment, and terror of porters, led to their being considered a nuisance. The range of the species further extends to Somaliland, and the Southern Sudan, as far as the east bank of the White Nile, in the close vicinity of which, however, they are not met with in any great numbers.

Unlike the other species, the black rhinoceros is essentially a browser. Leaves, twigs, and small roots form his food. To the casual observer the fact that he favours so greatly the treeless plains of parts of East Africa might point to a diet of grass; but a closer examination of the ground reveals the presence of a small plant, which has in reality formed the attraction. When disturbed the black rhinoceros trots away with his head and tail both elevated; the calves follow their mothers instead of preceding them as in the other variety. The beast feeds during the night, and by day spends its time sleeping in

covert ; though in East Africa individuals are often seen standing out right in the open throughout the day. It is often accompanied by rhinoceros birds which give the alarm on the approach of enemies. Sight is poor, but hearing appears very fairly good, and the sense of scent is most acute.

The black rhinoceros has acquired a reputation for savage aggressiveness which the experience of the best-known hunters would by no means support. Considering the enormous numbers of rhinos which were killed in former days in South Africa, and the considerable quantity annually shot in East Africa and elsewhere at the present time, the number of accidents was, and is, ridiculously small. The rhino is a formidable-looking brute, and its appearance when bearing down to the accompaniment of snorts, reminiscent of a steam-engine, is not reassuring ; but it appears probable that many of these so-called charges of *unwounded* animals are merely efforts to escape from what they consider a tight place. If suddenly disturbed it is generally agreed that the rhino will often, by accident or design, come straight in the direction of the aggressor ; but if the latter gets quickly out of the way it will usually rush right on, obviously seeking only to escape. In occasional encounters with the animals within the Game Reserves, the writer has always found that a gentle tapping on a tree or some other slight noise, insufficient seriously to startle the animal, has always sent it off at once ; and the same experiment has had similar results on the occasions when these animals have been encountered in other parts of the continent. No doubt there are old, or ill-conditioned rhinos just as there are in the case of other species, but, taken on the whole, the general evidence points to the wild rushes, frequently so disastrous to transport of various kinds, being induced

more by sudden alarm, coupled with blindness and stupidity, than by natural ferocity.

Rather an amusing incident occurred recently to a sportsman in the Sudan, where one rhino only may be shot upon a licence. Having heard overnight that tracks had been seen not far from the station, he sallied forth at dawn and quickly found them. Before he had followed the spoor for long, a rhino jumped up from behind a bush close at hand, and he killed it with the first shot. As he fired, another, obviously a male, also got up near by, and after one glance round, made off as fast as possible, behaving, as the hunter remarked, "like a perfect gentleman." He had just time to confirm his fear that the animal he had shot was a female, when her calf, a beast about as big as a donkey, suddenly arrived on the scene, and at once taking in the situation, proceeded to scatter the party. The natives took to trees, while the sportsman, finding a convenient ant-heap, proceeded to perch himself on the top thereof, hoping that shouts and the hurling of stones and pieces of earth would serve to scare away the bereaved offspring.

Oblivious of such trifles, the little beast continued to run to and fro between its dead mother and the ant-heap, squealing furiously and continuously, making sufficiently clear its intentions towards the occupant of the latter. He indeed felt himself in rather a predicament; apart from his desire not to injure his small assailant, he had already shot the one animal allowed under his licence, and breach of regulations, however afterwards condoned, imply considerable trouble and official correspondence. At last the situation became an impossible one; the noonday sun was blazing down on the shadeless ant-heap, and the annoyance of the infant increased rather than diminished. So at last the sportsman decided to risk a

solid bullet from his small bore, and taking a steady aim at a fleshy but non-vital portion of the little beast's anatomy, he fired. For a time the noise redoubled, and at first it seemed that an ascent of the ant-heap was meditated; but eventually discretion overcame valour, and at the end of a really strenuous two hours the sportsman was able to descend and stretch his cramped limbs.

In the bush of the eastern Transvaal the old bones and skulls of rhinos are even now often seen, showing how very numerous this animal must once have been in the locality. On the Athi Plains of East Africa, where but a few years ago they existed in such numbers as to form a constant source of annoyance to travellers, they are now only occasionally encountered. Its size, stupidity and want of manners all render it certain that the black rhinoceros is soon fated to vanish entirely from all his more accessible haunts. Although its best friend could not defend its existence upon grounds of possible utility to man, the total disappearance of such a strange old-world type would be none the less regrettable, and care should be taken that all declared game sanctuaries contain sufficient specimens to permit of the due preservation of the species.

CHAPTER IV

ZEBRAS

THERE are at the present day three distinct species of zebras inhabiting the continent of Africa: Grevy's, the True or Mountain, and Burchell's, the last comprising a number of sub-species. All zebras are strictly sociable animals, fond of open plains, hills, or lightly forested country, and are essentially grass feeders. Like the