

# Raising a baby rhino

by Daphne Sheldrick



The orphaned Stroppie with Punda, her stable mate.

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*The numbers of black rhino living in the wild in Kenya has dropped from 20,000 in 1970 to between 400 and 600 today. Based on her many years of experience, the author describes how it is possible to hand rear an orphaned or abandoned rhino from birth — a practice that could have an important role to play in Kenyan conservationists' struggle to save our rhino from extinction.*

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When my husband David and I left Tsavo East National Park, where he had been warden for 28 years, we came to Nairobi National Park where David was taking up an appointment with the new Planning Unit of the Wildlife Conservation and Management Department. I thought that this surely marked the closing chapter of my long and intimate involvement with wild orphans, particularly animals such as elephants, rhinos and buffaloes. With a heavy heart I bade farewell to my erstwhile animal family, all now well grown, well adapted and well able to lead a normal wild life without me. Now the bonds between them and me were purely emotional. They returned from time to time simply because they loved me, and once I was no longer there, I knew that they would be free of their human ties.

Nostalgically I looked back on my experiences with animals; to the successes and the failures, the heartaches, the challenges and the rewards. Over the years I had raised four rhinos, one from the day it was born, 22 buffaloes, a dozen or more elephants (but always only those who were over one year old), two zebras, most species of antelope, ostriches, mongooses, civets and others. I had learnt a lot from them and had been able to evolve suitable milk formulas for most species. Now I thought my work in this field had been completed.

Daphne Sheldrick

## ... baby rhino

Three months later, having just settled into our Nairobi National Park house, David died from a sudden heart attack. At that moment I felt that life for me had ended, and certainly my involvement with animals would be a thing of the past. Leading a life without him was a daunting prospect, but slowly I healed and got on with it, helped by the solace of Nature afforded me by being allowed to continue living in the Nairobi National Park. I tamed the wild animals that lived around my house and made them my friends, so that I could enjoy their company. They replaced my erstwhile orphan family, and gave me their trust and their love.

Raising baby rhinos, and indeed most wild animals, is easy when you know how, and not easy if you do not. Following the death of an orphaned rhino calf in the Nairobi Animal Orphanage it was suggested that any future orphaned rhinos should be under my personal supervision, and it was proposed that a small orphan complex be built near my house in the Nairobi National Park.

The first inmate was Sam, the baby rhino who was born to the famous Halima, one of two rhinos that survive near Governor's Camp in the Masai Mara National Reserve. Halima had had several previous calves, but all had been taken by lions. Not only is she a very docile cow, but the lions in that particular area consort in large prides, and no rhino can hope to protect her baby against a determined onslaught by a pride of killers.

Since the Mara rhinos are kept under protective surveillance, the fact that Sam was on the way was well known, and indeed his future was the subject of debate at several Rhino Steering Committee meetings. Finally it was decided that rather than remove him at birth he should be protected *in situ* by a team of rangers specially assigned for this task. For three weeks after his birth these rangers kept the lions at bay, but one dark night they attacked. The rangers and Halima managed to drive them off on this occasion, and Sam was saved.

However, it was only a matter of time before it happened again, so the Wildlife Department decided to move mother and baby to a safer location where they could be protected more easily. Halima was darted and drugged, Sam overpowered and captured in the process demonstrating amazing courage for one so small and fighting with all the fury for which his kind is known. The relocation was successful in that both mother and baby survived the ordeal, but unsuccessful in that Halima, being by nature a territorial animal, was bent on getting back home. She took to swimming the river to do exploratory sorties, leaving Sam, who refused to follow, behind. Being left alone he was of course very distressed, and very vocal, and hearing his wails, the lions swam across the river from the other side. Had it not been for the quick action of the Wildlife Department rangers camped close by, he would undoubtedly have been killed. Instead, the rangers were able to drive the lions off, and he was rescued in the nick of time, but in a critical condition with deep lion bites in his neck and back and scratches all over his body. He was then just six weeks old, and it was in that condition that he was brought to me on 6 October 1986. He needed a friend and constant companion to instil a feeling of security, so we acquired Boozie, a fat-tailed Dorper type sheep of local origin. Sam and Boozie are inseparable and even sleep together.

Being mother to a wild animal is undoubtedly a most enlightening and rewarding experience, but it is not always as simple as it might appear. It is not just a question of finding the correct milk formula, shoving a bottle into the animal's mouth, slotting the animal into a human routine, and devoting to it only the time one can spare now and then. In order to be successful one must be a mother in more than just name. One must be wholly committed, understand certain truths about animals in general, and be totally sincere in one's love, for an animal can gauge such things with an uncanny accuracy. What one is prepared to put into the relationship will be the measure of what one will reap in return.

No matter what your experience, never

presume to know all the answers, because you never will. Humility is a valuable prerequisite for being a successful foster mother.

The first basic fact one must understand is that, like people, each animal is an individual in its own right, with its own unique temperament, and its own special idiosyncracies. Forget any worries about being labelled anthropomorphic. Such scientific dogmas are not only being proved outdated, but they shutter an ability to probe the mind of an animal. Anyone who subscribes to this philosophy will never be able to penetrate the barrier that isolates human from animal, for absent from their makeup will be some of the vital ingredients for opening the door to confidence, sympathy, compassion and an ability to project oneself beyond human ignorance and arrogance. This, I suppose, is what is meant by the term 'an empathy for animals'. An empathy for animals is a must.

One should understand that animals are 'different' from ourselves — not inferior. Therefore one should never gauge their intelligence by human standards. They are endowed with mysterious 'senses' that we have either lost, or never had. Whereas we communicate by the power of speech and the written word, animals communicate no less effectively by much more subtle means: by telepathy, by ritual, by scent, by body language and by instinct, that inborn 'memory' inherited over aeons of evolution that is the blueprint that dictates certain actions, survival tactics and aspects of social behaviour. So, it is necessary to understand that animals are not always masters of themselves; that instinct might intervene at any moment.

However, although raised by a human, it has been my experience that most wild animals know exactly what they are. They know what and what not to eat, what and what not to fear, where and where not to venture. But, instinct is something that needs honing by exposure to a wild situation, and it is vital to understand this simple truth when raising a wild animal. Don't mete out 'smother-love'. Don't shelter the animal too much. As it grows up, it *must* be allowed freedom and the space to venture into its own world in its own time; to be actually exposed to all that world harbours; to hear and understand the language of the birds; to explore the events of yesterday on the grasses and scent trails; to interpret the different messages borne on the wind; to learn who its enemies are.

Never assume that a wild animal belongs to you, or is a pet. Regard it as only being 'on loan' and be happy that you have been privileged to share its life until it responds to the call of the wild and takes its rightful place amongst the natural order. You must learn to say 'goodbye', and very often, if one can do this, a goodbye turns into an '*au revoir*'. The animal will remember you with affection, and return periodically to re-establish contact. Never confine a wild animal for selfish reasons. This is unforgivable, and if one cannot offer it some form of freedom and a near natural life, it is better not to raise it in the first place.

It is also important to know the social characteristics of your charge. Is it, for instance gregarious or one of Nature's loners? Does it seek seclusion and solitude when young, or is the constant companionship of others a 'basic

Roaming free: Sam and his constant companion Boozie with their attendant.



Debrah Sheelick



Daphne Sheldrick

*The Tsavo orphans at the waterhole, with Eleanor, their leader (right).*

need for its psychological well-being? An animal's psychological well-being is equally important as its physical, so one must try and simulate what it takes to give the baby a sense of security. If it lies out during infancy, for instance, provide the necessary cover to enable it to feel hidden. Understand animal codes of behaviour too: what are aggressive actions and what are subservient signals. Above all, know that *all* animals have very long and unforgiving memories. One must respect this, for an unkindness or cruelty will be remembered, and perhaps a grudge harboured until an opportunity presents itself to get even. Remember that animals have feelings and emotions, likes and dislikes. Like us, they sorrow and are happy, they have loved ones, and deep loyalties too.

Rhino babies are, strangely enough, one of the easiest and most uncomplicated of wild infants, and perhaps also one of the easiest to rear when one knows how. However, rhinos are delicate in many respects, and when subjected to any kind of trauma, tend to go down to pneumonia and the tick- and fly-borne diseases normally latent in their blood. Even a very young rhino will fight and charge its captors with all the aggression for which its species has been labelled, and if this happens, be warned that within about four days of capture, the baby will become very ill, even though it has settled down and tamed easily.

Therefore, upon capture, dose the animal immediately with one of the sulphur based drugs, and forestall babesia and trypanosomiasis with injectable Berenil. Guard against pneumonia by keeping the animal warm, if necessary by tying a small blanket around its body at night and during the cool morning and evening hours.

Rhino babies are very endearing. They quickly lose the head-heavy infant look and, but for a blunt nose and soft smooth skin, become perfect miniatures of an adult, sturdy and rounded. At birth a rhino only stands between 18 and 25 inches at the shoulder, and weighs between 60 and 90 pounds. Rhinos

tame more quickly and easily than any other animal. Even an adult can be tamed within only a few days. They slot into a routine with philosophical ease, being very much creatures of habit. They love a comfortable rut, and are content with less than most other orphans: their food on time; a dry warm stable at night; a mudwallow and sandpit at their disposal; a patch of bush in which to hide; and a 'friend'. Never do they shove or jostle for the bottle, as does a buffalo, but ask with a plaintive *mew*, and gently take whatever is offered. They need a companion close by at all times, to replace the mother that would have been a part of their early life. And they thrive best wandering free with a human attendant and an animal companion, romping and playing, investigating the scents and sounds of the bush. All this avoids the danger of boredom; another important aspect in the raising of young animals.

As I write Sam is ten months old and already I find that I have learnt a lot more about rhinos. Being a mother to a wild animal opens the door to a special and intimate understanding of animals, one that is totally fascinating and rewarding.

Daphne Sheldrick was born and educated in Kenya and for well over 20 years lived in Tsavo East National Park where her husband David was the warden. During her years in Tsavo she successfully reared and rehabilitated numerous wild animals.

Daphne has written four popular books about her experiences in Tsavo, many educational articles on wildlife, including several for *Svara*, and a piece on elephants for *Colliers Encyclopaedia*. She now immerses herself in the work of the David Sheldrick Wildlife Appeal, which was set up in memory of her husband. In recognition of her work she has been made an honorary warden, an honorary life member of the Game Rangers' Association, a patron of Zoo Check and the Rhino Rescue Appeal, an executive committee member of the Wildlife Clubs of Kenya and a member of the Wildlife Conservation and Management Department's steering committee for the Kenya government's rhino projects.

## How to feed a baby rhino

A 'humanised' brand of baby milk with a full cream base is the key to raising a rhino. I have always used Lactogen, and on the following formula have raised four baby rhinos without any difficulty whatsoever, one from the day it was born (still in the foetal sac).

Feed four hourly during the day at 6 am, 10 am, 2 pm, and 6 pm, and, until the calf is a month old, once at night at 10 pm.

The initial ratio should be 8 scoops Lactogen to 24 fl oz water. Gauge amounts according to demand. All baby animals know what they want and when they have had enough. After a few days, increase the ratio to 10 scoops Lactogen to 24 fl oz water, and aim for 1 scoop per 2 fl oz. This is the full strength ratio, and the milk base will be mixed according to this for the entire time the calf is on milk, which is usually about 18 months.

Having achieved the full strength ratio for the milk, one then introduces the cereal. Start by adding 1 tablespoon of Nestum baby cereal and 1 tablespoon Energex wheat germ two times a day, then three times a day, and finally to all feeds.

At about four months each feed will be:

- 4½ pints warm water
- 7 oz Lactogen powder (7 oz = 45 scoops)
- 5 tablespoons Nestum cereal
- 2 tablespoons Energex
- 1 tablespoon glucose
- Pinch of salt.

At five months each feed will be:

- 5½ pints water
- 9 oz Lactogen
- 9 tablespoons Nestum cereal
- 1 tablespoon glucose
- Pinch of salt.

The calf will very soon begin to browse a little, and at this time it can go on to milk feeds per day. The cereal can also be changed to uncooked oatmeal, and the calf will now have:

- 6 pints water
- 10½ oz Lactogen
- 11 oz oatmeal (15 tablespoons)
- 4 tablespoons Energex
- Salt.

This is the maximum milk feed. As the calf browses more, it will be noticed that its appetite for milk declines, and its lunch-time feed can be dropped.

The calf will probably go off its food whilst teething. Don't be hasty to give drugs. Mix milk according to demand. Always allow some ticks, but not too many. It is important that the calf acquires an immunity to tick-borne diseases, and the way to do this is to allow it to have some ticks on it.

Feeding, and the quantities to give, is really a matter of common sense. A lot of cereal and a lot of Vitamin B is essential to the good health of a rhino calf. On the above formula, the calf will gain about 1 kilo per day.