

CHAPTER FIVE  
RHINOCEROSES

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**RHINOCEROSES** are bulky short-limbed animals having three toes to each foot and one, or two, horns in the middle line of the head. They belong to the same group as the horses, and the tapirs of South America.

**THE WHITE RHINOCEROS** (*Ceratotherium simus*). This, the largest of all land mammals next to the elephant, is now confined to two areas only of the whole African continent: the Zululand reserves, and a relatively small area to the west of the upper Nile. Fortunately timely protection has saved the species from complete extinction in South Africa, and its numbers are now increasing in the Hluhluwe and Umfolozi reserves of Zululand. The northern type, which differs slightly from the southern in minor characteristics sufficient to entitle it to be regarded as a sub-species, unfortunately migrates seasonally westwards from the Egyptian Sudan territory, wherein it is strictly protected, into French Congo, there to fall a prey to native hunters; its horn being, like that of the black rhinoceros, greatly sought after by traders for export to eastern Asia, where it commands a high price.

The white rhinoceros—only called white by courtesy—was at one time an inhabitant of the present Kruger Park; but it disappeared many years ago before the assaults of the native and half-caste Portuguese hunters from the east coast. In fact Mr. W. Sanderson of Logogote, who knew the low-veld intimately from 1871, told the writer that, even when he came, the animal was little more than a tradition, though the natives had a quite definite name for it. It certainly existed at one time all over the White River area, Pretorius Kop, and no doubt in the relatively open country of the Lambobo Flats. The late Mr. H. T. Glynn, son of perhaps the eldest of all the pioneers, says in his book *Game and Gold* that some remained near lower Sabi until the later 'seventies. It is possible, therefore, that the earliest white hunters and pioneers may have encountered it; but it certainly did not exist after the seventies of the last century. It is a grass eater, a huge, lethargic, and inoffensive animal, whose partiality for comparatively open country renders it an easy prey to its human enemies. The calf always walks in front of its mother, who guides it with her horns.

**THE BLACK RHINOCEROS** (*Diceros bicornis*). The black or pre-nasale-lipped rhinoceros, unlike its square-mouthed and so-called "white" cousin, is equally at home in dense bush and in open

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country, having in consequence enjoyed, before persecution came to it, a very wide range over the African continent.

In colour it is not noticeably darker than the other species; the height is much less—only about five feet at the shoulder; the skull is more abbreviated, and the horns, of which the anterior usually, though not always, exceeds 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 provided each 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 that there is but one species throughout Africa.

At the present day this animal is becoming very rare in South Africa. The number in the Zululand reserves is actually less than that of the "white" species. There is a decreasing number in Portuguese territory between the Maputa and Pongolo Rivers, and farther north, east of the Transvaal border, a few scattered individuals.

In 1923, I found fresh traces of a single black rhinoceros on the Bubube River in the Shingwedsi area; but the animal must have been a stray from, and have returned to, Portuguese country, as no further report has ever come to hand.

There have always been a few individuals located in the lower Sabi bush. In 1902, a single one used to drink at a pool near Gomondwane. A few years later, while in camp some miles down the Sabi River from the bridge, I saw, at daylight one morning, an old bull close at hand; and at intervals single and sometimes two animals together, have been seen by the staff. In 1936, Ranger Kirkman tracked and saw at close quarters an old female, some miles up the Matiwambo Spruit from the Sabi. Tracks of single cows with their calves are seen from time to time: but the beasts themselves are intensely secretive. In the lower Sabi area there lies a dense thorn bush about 100 square miles in extent, and to this the few rhinos which exist rigidly keep themselves, at any rate by day, no doubt moving about to feed and drink by night only. They keep well away from all roads and human dwellings, which, considering the temperament of the beast, is no doubt just as well. The particular types of acacia which they favour most, grow chiefly up the Matiwambo and Matimiri Spruits, and this area forms the head-

quarters of the few rhinos in the Kruger Park; but the bush is so dense and so thorny that one can hardly make a way without hacking a path, which naturally does not conduce to any quiet movement.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike its cousin, *Diceros bicornis* is essentially a browser, and the long prehensile upper-lip, almost a small trunk, is admirably designed for the work. Therefore, leaves, twigs, and small roots, form its food. The droppings, which are deposited in heaps, and afterwards kicked about by the hind legs, clearly indicate, by the broken sticks and crushed leaves which they contain, the nature of the animal's food. When disturbed, the black rhinoceros trots away with his head and tail both elevated: a female is followed by her calf, in contrast to 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 (*Buphaga*), 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 period of gestation is said to be often fourteen to fifteen months.

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 accruing accidents was, and is, ridiculously small. It 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, the writer has found that a gentle tapping on a tree or some other slight noise, insufficient to seriously startle the animal, has always sent it off at once. 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.

<sup>1</sup> Subsequent to 1940, no traces of the animals have been found, and I am inclined to think that the species must be written off as a Kruger National Park resident.