

NATURE AND SPORT
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CHAPTER XIII

THE WHITE RHINOCEROS

Mr. Coryndon's two specimens—Rarity of this species—Discovered by Burchell—Restricted habitat—Former abundance—Easily shot—Recent re-discovery of white rhinoceroses in Zululand—Six shot in 1894—Description and habits of the animal—Immense bulk—Oswell's adventure—Curious trait of mother with young—Feeding habits—Plentiful in Oswell's time—Six shot within a quarter of a mile—Too numerous to be pleasant—Feathered allies—Excellent sentinels—Rhinoceros' appetite—The last of the race.

THE arrival early in 1894 of Mr. R. T. Coryndon from Matabeleland had considerable interest for naturalists. That gentleman brought with him the entire skins and skeletons of two species of the great white rhinoceros, a species now in the last throes of extinction. How rare the white rhinoceros has become may be gauged from the fact that for years Mr. Selous—that most enthusiastic hunter-naturalist—has been endeavouring to procure a specimen for the Natural History Museum, without success. No white rhinoceros has ever been shown alive in Europe, although its black congener is pretty well

known; and hitherto the species had been represented only by a few of the immensely long fore-horns and one complete head. There is another complete head in the Cape Town Museum—the head of the last ever shot by Mr. Selous. No better instance of the alarming rate at which the great fauna of the world are being exterminated can be furnished than the case of the white rhinoceros. Like many other South African animals, this rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros simus*, first discovered by Dr. Burchell in 1812) had a singularly restricted habitat. Its modern range has invariably been between the Orange River and the Zambesi, and it has never been found north of the latter river. There can be little doubt, I think, that, prior to the beginning of this century, this enormous terrestrial mammal—the greatest of known creatures after the elephant—wandered upon the great grassy plains of Bushmanland (a continuation of the Kalahari Desert), just south of the Orange River. Native tradition has it so. And Mr., afterwards Sir John, Barrow, a very competent observer and painstaking naturalist, who explored the Cape in 1797, expressly mentions at p. 395 of his excellent *Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa* that this animal was “not uncommon on the skirts of the Colony behind the Hantam Mountains, and seems to be a variety only of the African two-horned rhinoceros.” The district men-

tioned by Barrow is some way south of the Orange River. But at all events later Europeans have never encountered this rhinoceros south of the Orange. Burchell and other travellers found the great beast roaming the plains of Bechuanaland and the adjacent countries in vast numbers. Dr. Andrew Smith, during the scientific expedition sent out by the British Government in 1835, saw immense numbers of rhinoceroses, black and white. Cornwallis Harris and other African travellers had similar experiences of the abundance of both species. But rhinoceroses are, as a rule, pretty easily slain. They are sluggish, and possess poor eyesight, and trust for their protection mainly to their sense of smell. Often they were shot dead while fast asleep in their mid-day siesta. Gordon Cumming, Andersson, and scores of other hunters of the middle of this century used to shoot them in large numbers as they came to drink by night at desert pools and fountains. During the dry season there were collected at these scant watering-places all sorts of animals from an immense area of country, and night shooters made proportionately big bags. Oswell and Vardon killed in one season eighty-nine black and white rhinoceroses: Andersson some sixty in a similar period. This sort of thing, which was eagerly carried on by all hunters, European, Boer, and native, whenever opportunity occurred, could not last for ever; and, thanks to the

wanton and wasteful slaughter of those days, there are now to be found very few black rhinoceroses south of the Zambesi; while the white rhinoceros is, if not already quite extinct, just on the point of extinction. It has been well known to South African hunters for the last few years that probably the last representatives of this great mammal would be found, if anywhere, in some remote and difficult country in a corner of North-east Mashonaland. Here Mr. Coryndon procured his specimens. The skins and skeletons were preserved with infinite trouble, and now—thanks to Mr. Coryndon's energy and care—decorate the collections of the Natural History Museum and of the Rothschild Museum at Tring. Thus—with an example forwarded by Mr. Varndell—have the only three complete specimens of this interesting mammal been rescued for future generations. Mr. Selous and most other South African hunters supposed with some confidence that this portion of Mashonaland would prove to be absolutely the last home of the white rhinoceros. At the end of 1894, however, there came tidings that some few of these immense creatures still existed in the low, inaccessible, tsetse-fly-haunted country between the lower courses of the Black and White Umvolosi rivers, Zululand. Here are dense reed-beds and much jungle and cover, to which, evidently, the last remnant of the white rhinoceros

of this region have betaken themselves. It is to be feared they cannot long survive, even in that unhealthy, fever-stricken bit of country, dangerous though it is to the white hunter. From a letter to the *Field* in November 1894, written by Mr. C. L. Leatham of Zululand, it seems that during that year more than six specimens of *Rhinoceros simus* were shot between these rivers, two of them falling to the rifles of a well-known hunter, Mr. C. R. Varndell. Of these two, one, an excellent specimen, carrying a three-foot fore-horn, has been preserved. South Africa has been so ransacked by big game hunters, that it is now hardly likely that any fresh discoveries of these gigantic mammals will again be made. Nor is it probable that the few specimens (if any) still remaining in life will enjoy any prolonged immunity.

The white rhinoceros differed mainly from its black cousin (*Rhinoceros bicornis*), the common African rhinoceros, in its much greater size and bulk, its enormously long fore-horn, immense and disproportionate head, and square blunt upper-lip. The black rhinoceros, which feeds upon bushes and shrubs, has a pendent or prehensile upper-lip. The white rhinoceros, which fed always upon grasses, and therefore needed no prehensile lip, can be at once and easily distinguished by this striking difference in the upper-lip. The length of the fore-horn, in the case of the white rhinoceros, was sometimes

enormous—there are instances in which the measurement of 4 ft. 6 in. has been recorded; sometimes the horn projected almost laterally from the snout, in true unicorn fashion. The bulk of this mighty beast was immense. A mature specimen stood 6 ft. 6 in. in height, and measured 14 ft. to 15 ft. in length, and weighed, probably, some four tons or more. Even the African elephant, from the comparative shortness of its body, although standing much taller, bulked scarcely larger than the white rhinoceros. Although usually harmless and inoffensive, this rhinoceros was, when roused or wounded, a dangerous foe. Mr. Oswell, the friend and companion of Livingstone, had an extraordinary escape from the charge of one of these monsters, which attacked his horse, drove its horn clean through the animal's body, and tossed horse and rider over its head. The horse, of course, was killed; Mr. Oswell himself escaped with a wound and a terrible shaking. Although called white, this rhinoceros varied little in colour from its black relative. In both the colour is a dirty brown; the white rhinoceros being, perhaps, a trifle paler. This great square-mouthed rhinoceros always carried its huge, disproportionate head very low—so low, indeed, that in numerous instances the fore-horn touched the earth, and its under surface became worn away and flattened. Gordon Cumming seems to have been

the first to mention a curious trait exhibited by this rhinoceros—a trait noticed also by Selous in his first book, *A Hunter's Wanderings in Africa*. When hunters are at hand and danger threatens the mother and young calf of this species, the calf runs just in front of the mother's snout, and is guided in its course by the long fore-horn, which is pressed against its sides as it runs. This very singular and interesting demonstration of motherly affection is very well shown in an illustration towards the end of Gordon Cumming's book, *The Lion Hunter in South Africa*.

The "Wit Rhinoster," as the Boers called it, fed always upon grass, and was to be found therefore usually upon grassy plains, or, as in so much of the Bechuana country, in open forest where grass was plentiful. The broad square muzzle of this animal was manifestly adapted specially for this sort of food. The black rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros bicornis*), on the other hand, feeds invariably upon bush and shrubs, for the seizing of which its prehensile upper-lip is exactly designed.

For untold ages of the past these mighty mammals must have grazed peacefully and contentedly in their South African habitat. The spears and bows and arrows of the native were weapons not greatly to be feared, for the rhinoceros has a tough hide an inch and a half in thickness, and in consequence

was little harassed by the black man. It feared neither the lion nor any other of the carnivora, except in its youngest state of caldrom, and even then it had always a sufficiently formidable mother to protect it.

The numbers of these great creatures to be found in South Africa even fifty years ago must have been very great. Cornwallis Harris speaks of them in 1837 as "very common in the interior." Oswell, who hunted from 1844 to 1851, speaks of seeing them in herds of six and eight, and of once, when in need of meat for natives, having slain six within a quarter of a mile with single balls. Oswell was a man of scrupulous integrity and honour, and his testimony, like Selous', is absolutely to be relied upon. Often he and his party had to drive the great beasts from their vicinity, before outspanning for the night. The animals appeared to mistake the wagons for living creatures, and were most troublesome in their attentions. Gordon Cumming mentions having seen as many as twelve feeding together in a patch of young grass. As a general rule, however, the white rhinoceros may be said to have wandered singly or in pairs. The whole country, in the time of Harris, Oswell, and Gordon Cumming, held so many of the kind, that they were to be seen in the numbers I have mentioned.

Stupid, sleepy, short-sighted, and easily approached

as were these rhinoceroses in the golden days of South African sport, they yet had in addition to their own keen powers of scent a very constant ally and friend—a friend found, too, almost always in attendance upon the black rhinoceros. This was the well-known rhinoceros-bird (*Buphaga erythroryncha*), that starling which, as I have mentioned, frequently accompanies the rhinoceros, as well as buffalo and domestic cattle, in small flocks, for the sake of the ticks and other parasites that infest them. These rhinoceros-birds are of a brownish-black colour, with red bills; they undoubtedly warn the rhinoceros when danger approaches by alighting on his head or back, striking him with their bills, and uttering sharp cries—warnings which are never neglected. Many a dull beast has been saved in this way by the timely admonition of these feathered friends.

The white rhinoceros seems to have put on much more flesh than his cousin *bicornis*, who never seems to attain any great degree of fatness. Selous states that in the autumn and winter months of Africa (March till August) the square-mouthed rhinoceros was usually very fat, and that its meat, especially the hump, was then most excellent. The appetite of a wild rhinoceros must, like that of an elephant, be a pretty capacious one. In captivity the daily food allowance of one of these creatures seems to be, roughly, “one truss of straw, three-quarters of a

truss of clover, one quart of rice, half a bushel of beans, and twenty to twenty-four gallons of water." Assisted by the free range and wholesome exercise of the desert, a wild rhinoceros could no doubt put away much more even than this ample allowance. The white rhinoceros, by the way, like its black congener, always drank at night, usually between the hours of nine and twelve.

There can, I fear, be little doubt that this rare and interesting quadruped will within the next two or three years have become quite exterminated—a creature of the past. Naturalists have to thank the Hon. Walter Rothschild, who commissioned Mr. Coryndon, for his enterprise and generosity; as well as that hunter himself and Mr. Varndell for their skill and success in procuring the first—and probably the last—complete specimens of this mammal, before its final extinction.