



Left: Obongi, while young, with Roger Wheeler, Warden of Murchison Falls N.P.

Obongi's first contacts with man were stormy, her hitherto young and peaceful life being destroyed by a succession of nerve-shattering events. One minute she was resting in the shade of a thorn bush, the next she was being chased by the catching team in battered, stripped down, and incredibly noisy vehicles. She was lassoed (a technique preferred at the time to the still not completely researched immobilising drugs); hauled aboard a follow-up truck; deposited in a log stockade along with half-a-dozen equally bewildered white rhinos; then, when the first shocks had worn off, loaded up again, this time from an earth ramp; driven and bounced over 150 miles; ferried across the Nile; and ultimately, after a short period in another stockade, released into the Murchison, Uganda's first national park.

This experiment was absolutely vital for the survival of the white rhino, and was carried out as humanely and with as much sympathy as possible. But it killed Obongi's mother, leaving Obongi wandering alone in the bush. So for the second time in three weeks, the 6-month-old calf found herself being pursued and captured — left on her own, even had she been able to fend herself, predators would quickly have had her.

So that is how Obongi (her name comes from the area in the West Nile where she was first captured) came into the care of the park staff in general, and of park warden Roger Wheeler in particular. Wheeler, now the Director of Uganda's national parks, is a man with a deep understanding and knowledge of animals. In a unique and little publicised relationship, neither fleeting, one-sided, nor over-sentimentalised, he kept the closest eye on Obongi's well-being.

If taken early enough, the young of wild animals quickly (at least for the period of adolescence) become tame and friendly, even such traditionally hostile creatures as the leopard. Obongi, though, had known some 6 months of freedom, and it was reasonable to expect at least an initial display of resentment and suspicion. Yet she settled almost immediately and became heartwarmingly friendly and trusting, characteristics that she retained right up to — and after — the time of her release.

The only thing that stopped Obongi from being just another refugee and orphan was her size. As the staff at the park quickly found out, it is one thing to feed and play with a young antelope or cat, but quite another to be nuzzled and leant on by what speedily became a

OBONGI

the white rhino who fell in love with mankind

By David Henderson

ton or so of tremendously powerful, if gentle, white rhino.

It was Obongi's tremendous friendliness that presented such a problem when the time came to release her. The task was not to teach her to fend for herself (as with animals such as Elsa the lioness), but to persuade her that her own kind were far more rewarding and desirable companions than even the best intentioned humans. Basically she needed a fresh start, sufficiently far off to preclude any long-distance hike back to the park lodge, but near an understanding and well briefed, though isolated, human community. Which, in effect, meant near a ranger post.

Several attempts were made simply to persuade Obongi to go a few miles into the bush. But on each occasion she came trotting promptly back. During Roger Wheeler's absence on home leave, a more ambitious plan to take her well away from the main park complex got her as far as the principal airstrip, and here she decided to stay. Apart from providing a somewhat novel flying hazard, she complicated matters further by attaching herself with the utmost devotion and determination to one of the airstrip's porters, Jakobo Owiny.

This middle-aged porter from the district's Acholi (one-time warrior tribe) did not seem disconcerted in the slightest — at least, not after the initial shock. He quickly realised that, among other things, his new 'duties' had the advantage of shielding him from the more arduous labours of airfield maintenance for which he was paid.

Although Obongi's move was a clear step in the right direction the fact remained that, while she had been weaned from park headquarters, she was now presenting a real hazard to its considerable and growing light aircraft traffic. Goats and other animals could be driven off the runway, and kept away while aircraft landed. But the rhino tended to go at her own pace, as and when she wanted, and tended to return before the extremely disconcerted pilots had landed. Also, of course, the real crux of the matter was that she was most unlikely to find herself a mate and breed as long as she stayed at the airstrip — and this was the primary object of the original transfer operation to the park.

Where to move her, and how, were the problems that Roger Wheeler faced on his return from leave. A white rhino could scarcely be driven, not even Obongi. Nor could she be persuaded like more normal-sized beasts on to the back of a Land-Rover, to be driven painlessly

off to fresh pastures. There was also something increasingly touching about this huge and gentle creature, with her unshakeable faith in man, and nobody was more aware of this than Wheeler. It was clear that whatever the solution to the problem, it would have to preclude anything unkind or hasty.

In the event Wheeler's plan was a masterly one. He called up Obongi's adopted porter, and told him to summon his charge and to start walking with her to a chosen ranger post.

And so the Murchison provided the strange, indeed touching, sight of a grown man leading a white rhino through the bush. The enormous Obongi added piquancy to the scene by her unmistakable efforts to convince the watching world (in effect only the other beasts and birds of the park) that it was really a case of herself exercising the porter ... A moment's quiet grazing here, a snatched morsel there; a scratch and a rub against a likely tree or anthill; periods of rest, of more sustained grazing, of uninhibited curiosity as hitherto unseen wonders appeared — Obongi indulged in all these, and yet took the greatest care not to get left behind.

Man and rhino walked from dawn until evening, reaching the vicinity of the chosen ranger post around nightfall. As darkness came, Jakobo Owiny followed his final instruction. He slipped away into the shadows without so much as a farewell pat, to leave the unfortunate Obongi to a solitary night in the bush. She must be the first, and almost certainly the last, white rhinoceros to be jilted by man.

Not that she had been completely cut off. The next day, clearly hurt and puzzled, Obongi attached herself somewhat aloofly to the ranger post. For many months she showed a marked reluctance to turn her back on her

human friends. For a long time, too, she ignored the attentions of a large and persistent bull. This beast the rangers described, with the wit of African story tellers, as showing all the symptoms of frustration and spurned love, his moods of temper alternating with acute depression.

One day Obongi disappeared from the immediate vicinity of the post, and it soon became clear that her dependence on man had at last been overcome. Roger Wheeler still continued to drive out deep into the park to find her; he still talked to her, and got out of the Land-Rover to scratch her ears. But Wheeler apart, and friendly as she remained, she no longer sought out human company.

Significantly, it was Wheeler who first realised that Obongi was pregnant, keeping the news from all but a handful of his closest friends to save the rhino from being constantly disturbed. It was Wheeler, too, who first found her calf, a thoroughly perky and curious youngster whose birth brought a warm glow both to Wheeler and to wildlife circles throughout and beyond East Africa.

Motherhood did not allow Obongi's affection for the man who had brought her up to disappear. Once the baby was a week or so old, Wheeler, wise enough not to risk upsetting her by approaching on foot, called the massive Obongi from his Land-Rover. In almost less time than it takes to tell, several tons of white rhino were rubbing against the side of the vehicle — the driving side.

This was the turning point of Obongi's wildlife rehabilitation. Wheeler was never to be forgotten, never to be ignored. But others were ignored — game guards, tourists, wildlife experts who had known her well — not rudely; not aggressively; just, at long last, through the eyes of a true animal of the wilds. ●



Obongi, now adult, with her calf