

Books by Ronald McKie

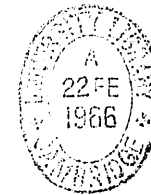
THIS WAS SINGAPORE
PROUD ECHO
THE HEROES
MALAYSIA IN FOCUS

Contributor to:
WITH THE AUSTRALIANS IN KOREA
AUSTRALIA AT ARMS

THE COMPANY OF ANIMALS

by

RONALD MCKIE



ANGUS AND ROBERTSON

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—a distinction which is the life ambition of all dedicated collectors—has a strange and complicated story behind it.

When Jim parachuted at night into northern Kedah during World War II with his Chinese Dragons he made himself a crude butterfly net—essential equipment at any time for him—from torn mosquito net and bamboo, and he caught butterflies even when he and his team were near-starving, sodden for weeks from monsoon rain, and always in danger of being found and killed by Japanese patrols. He began his habit then of putting his precious butterflies between paper—damp, stained pages torn from his operational diary—and keeping them in a rusty tin box.

Towards the end of the war a British officer, Major T. A. Wight, who was later killed by Communist terrorists in Johore, jumped into Kedah and made contact with Jim's secret forces. After the Japanese surrender, Wight, who was interested in butterflies, and who was to return to England before Jim, offered to take the tin box of specimens and to hand them over to the British Museum, even though most of the butterflies had become badly damaged as a result of the conditions under which Jim and his men had been living.

A. S. Corbet, then the butterfly authority at the British Museum, examined this small bedraggled war collection direct from the jungle and found one butterfly which had never been seen in Malaya before. It was dark brown with white spots on the hind wing and a double white border below the spots. He was able to recognize it even though the body had disintegrated from damp and only the wings were left. He later named it *Ethope diademoides hislopi*, and so Jim Hislop's name officially entered lepidoptery. But the wings of *hislopi* were so badly damaged that they were not worth keeping.

Not long before the Communist war began in Malaya in 1948 Jim made a special trip to Kedah to recover a Sten gun and ammunition which one of his Dragons had left behind at the end of the war, hidden in the buttress of a tree. Jim took a net with him of course, for the Sten played only a secondary part in this northern journey. He found the gun and clips, then went hunting for butterflies, and to his

astonishment he caught another *hislopi*. But he didn't keep it. He sent it to the British Museum, following his practice of giving the museum his rare specimens even if he has to go without them himself. He believes it is more important that they should be in a world-renowned collection, and available for all to see and study, than in his own.

It was nearly ten years before he found another *hislopi*, his own personal butterfly, to put in his own collection, and on that day he caught another extremely rare specimen. But that is part of the larger story of the rhinoceros.

In the fifteenth century a tribute paid by the Malacca Sultanate in Malaya to the Ming Emperors in Peking included "a girdle adorned with rhinoceros horn". But long before that, a thousand years at least, trade had gone on in the horn, hoofs, tongue, skin, sexual organs, urine, and blood of the rhinoceros from Malaya and other parts of South-east Asia.

The Chinese particularly, but the Malay peoples and others as well, used rhinoceros parts mixed with herbs to make medicines. But the horn was, and still is, prized as an effective aphrodisiac and as an antidote to poisons. Among the Chinese the demand for it was insatiable, and high prices were paid even centuries ago.

Rhinoceros horn is not horn but a form of matted fused hair. The chemist can find nothing in it to stimulate the sexual activity of a Pomeranian, but that doesn't influence Chinese, Malays, Thais, and many others who use it. They have faith, and faith defies pharmacology and logic.

Thirty years ago in Malaya the owner of even a small rhino horn could sell it for more than a hundred pounds, and even today in Malaya, where horn is almost in the antiques class, it is still possible to buy from Chinese a little horn—a few scrapes of powder which is drunk in water—for the price of a good suit. The sellers say it is rhino horn and the addicts believe them, though most, if not all, of the horn powder sold today is from water buffalo or deer.

Some years ago in Burma genuine rhino horn sold at up to 200 American dollars an inch, and one seven-inch horn

sold for 1600 dollars. Fresh rhino blood fetched thirty dollars a pound, dried blood a little less, bone three dollars a pound, and the skin six dollars a pound. Many years ago the blood alone was worth its weight in silver and even the dung and urine had high sales value.

Although rhinoceros had been hunted and killed since ancient times they were still plentiful in Malaya much less than a century ago. At that time there were so many of them and their undisturbed living areas were so large, that they had space and time in which to regenerate. But towards the end of the nineteenth century increasing populations and the demand for the opening-up of new country led to mass slaughter by the most ruthless and thoughtless of all animals—man—and by the early twentieth century the extinction of the rhino was already in sight. For all this the Chinese were largely responsible.

There are, or were, two species of rhinoceros which have lived in the jungles of Malaya for thousands of years. One, known as the Javan, has one horn on its snout. The other, a smaller animal, about ten feet long and about four feet six inches high with short sturdy legs, is the Sumatran, which has two horns, the rear horn smaller than the other and in some animals almost unnoticeable. The Malays call the small horn the "cooking pot lid".

Both were a grey-buff colour; that is, tail, legs and flanks were grey, and the underparts and lip were pinkish. The overall impression in the jungle was of a dirty grey, probably because of the animal's habit of wallowing in mud. A clean rhino has probably never been seen in the jungle. Both, too, had thick folds or tucks on the neck, behind the shoulder and just in front of the hindquarters. Though smaller than the massive African rhino, they resembled him even in expression.

Of the Javan rhino one must speak in the past tense, for the last of its kind in Malaya is supposed to have been shot in Perak by the American Arthur S. Vernay Expedition in 1937, though some people still believe that this specimen, now in the British Museum, is not a Javan but a Sumatran.

Since that year, at least, no trace has been found of Malaya's Javan rhino, and Jim, who has searched for him

often, is convinced nearly thirty years later that this animal is extinct in Malaya and probably extinct or near-extinct in South-east Asia except in Indonesia, where a few survive—perhaps fifty at most—in the Ujung-Kulon Nature Park, a small peninsula in western Java which juts into the southern end of the Sunda Strait between Java and Sumatra.

The Javan rhino in Malaya was vulnerable to man because he lived mostly in lowland swamp and may never have existed in such numbers as his cousin the Sumatran, which prefers inland river valleys, including hill country so steep and rough that it would almost stop an elephant. The Sumatran, since there is little point in referring again to the Javan, is a most timid animal which moves away from an area as soon as man intrudes. And since man intrudes almost everywhere today the rhinoceros has retreated more and more into the most inaccessible mountain country.

Although the rhinoceros lives entirely on grass and leaves, is not interested in man's crops, deliberately keeps away from humans and human habitation, and is harmless to man and to other animals unless attacked and wounded, he breeds slowly and, as well as having a horn of great commercial value, he has suburban instincts which expose him to man and make him comparatively simple to capture.

Badak is a creature of routine, not unlike the commuter who regularly catches the 8.25 a.m. to the city and returns home on the 5.17 p.m. He uses the same game trails and, as he likes to bathe in mud, he goes with dangerous regularity to his favourite wallow and lies up to his ears during the hot part of the day, making at times a curious humming sound of contentment.

He also has precise personal habits. Most animals drop their dung with geographic freedom. But Badak has a precious streak in his personality. He likes to put his dung in the same place day after day, and nearly always beside a tree, so that his heap soon becomes obvious to the most short-sighted hunter. He not only dungs in the same place but also, and with characteristic neatness, when he has finished, kicks grass or leaves back over the growing heap with his hind hoofs, just as a well-brought-up dog does.

As long as he lived among other animals, in a familiar

environment and protected by his hearing and smell and his great strength, tough hide and horns, Badak was reasonably safe and he prospered. But once man decided that he possessed something of commercial value and went after him in an organized way the rhino's formal suburban behaviour became lethal.

Rhino hunters seldom shot him, largely because he was difficult to stalk and get near, and because there was a much simpler way to kill him. The method most commonly used for centuries was to find his regular tracks—the tracks to his wallow or his midden—and to dig a deep pit on the game trail and cover it with bamboo, leaves, and jungle refuse. Unlike the elephant, who uses his brains and evades such obvious man-made traps, the rhinoceros is bedevilled by his dull routine and seems to lack the perception of so many other jungle animals. Generally he blundered along the track and fell into the pit, to supply a few more thousand frustrated Chinese with their favourite aphrodisiac.

The Chinese believe that when a rhinoceros gets angry "the blood rushes to the horns", and that it is the blood which contributes to their quality as a medicine and as a sexual stimulant. An old Chinese friend who told me this added with pride: "I have never taken rhino horn. I have never needed it. But don't underestimate Chinese medicine. For centuries we Chinese have treated wounds and sores with the oldest piece of bread or rice we could find—with green mould on it. Penicillin perhaps? Who knows? But it cured sores. For some things I go to a Western doctor. But for fevers I use one of the oldest Chinese remedies known. I eat snake gall because I know it will work."

Traces of the Sumatran rhinoceros were reported from the National Park, towards the Gunong Padang plateau, in 1940, but the Japanese conquest of Malaya, postwar chaos and recovery, and the start of the Communist civil war in 1948, prevented further investigation. So much time had passed that nobody knew whether the rhino still existed in Malaya and, if he did, where he lived. Many people believed that, like the Javan species, he was extinct.

In a country where Communist ambush was likely at any place and any time, searching for doubtfully existent

rhino was not a healthy occupation. But not long after Jim had become Game Warden for Perak in 1949 he heard reports that a Tamil hunter had seen a small rhino. He traced the man to upper Perak. The man confirmed the report and showed him tracks in rough hill country along the Kedah border. The prints were those of a young rhino. Later, while on an elephant hunt in the swamps of Ulu Bernam, on the Perak-Selangor border, Jim found the prints of an adult rhino and took plaster casts. A small game reserve was later created here to preserve at least two Sumatran rhinoceros which were known to live in the swamps.

Jim's were the first records of any rhino in Perak since the Vernay Expedition twelve years before, and the first confirmation that the Sumatran species still existed in Malaya. From that time he undertook an almost personal crusade to save this rarest of Malayan animals. As he moved about the country he looked for their traces and encouraged his rangers and local Malays in widely scattered areas to watch and report.

A rhino was seen by members of a mountain climbing party in the Larut district of Perak, although Jim, who was one of this party, missed the sighting. But he was able to confirm during his expedition to Gunong Padang that rhino still lived in the eastern end of the National Park.

In 1957 the Air Force decided to establish a bomb range in Upper Perak. Jim protested and pleaded. He told the authorities that bombing would not only destroy wildlife, including rhino and elephant, but also that it would destroy the salt-licks on which many animals depended for their existence.

He sent a patrol of game rangers into the area to make a quick report. They found rhino prints around the three endangered salt-licks. Jim went in to double check the report—and to spend the most eventful day of his life, not as a rhino protector, but as a butterfly collector.

He was walking along a game trail, armed only with his net, when he noticed a print and went down on hands and knees to examine it. The three-toed hoof print had been made by a rare Sumatran rhinoceros, and in his excitement at the discovery he at first did not notice something else. Only when he began to measure the print did he see a

small butterfly, sitting with folded wings, on its edge. He was able to catch it between finger and thumb. That newly hatched, faultless, glossy blue butterfly was *Arhopala varro selama* (Selama district was where he caught it). It was so rare that it is now in the British Museum, and Jim is still waiting to catch another for his own collection. Rare rhino print and rare butterfly together—this was one of those jungle combinations that defy explanation.

After he had put the beautiful blue between paper and laid the paper carefully in his tin carrying-box, Jim followed the rhinoceros print, which was fresh, and found even clearer prints as the trail sloped to softer ground. They were so fresh that he moved with great caution and, he thought, without sound. He followed the tracks until they left the trail, and in a dozen steps was beside a wallow. The surface of the mud was placid, but mud still dripped from the undergrowth in a tunnel along which the rhino had only just departed. He had missed that rhino by perhaps twenty seconds.

As he returned along the track from the wallow, cursing his bad luck, a brown spotted butterfly flickered ahead of him. He swiped, not even expecting to catch it, and there in his green net was *Ethope diademoides hislopi*, his own personal butterfly.

That was a memorable day for Jim. He caught one of the country's rarest butterflies, he added the first *hislopi* to his own collection, he again confirmed the presence of rhino and missed seeing Malaya's rarest animal only by seconds, and he saved many wild animals and at least three salt-licks from destruction—for the Air Force, after his protests and his reports, cancelled its plans for a bomb range.

Something went wrong with the balanced pattern of jungle life when the tapir was invented. This weird animal, one of the world's oldest, has been described as "looking a little like Granny's nightmares"; it seems to have no purpose except to illustrate the disruptive principle of camouflage and to make the tracking of the rare rhinoceros as confusing as possible. Even its names—it has several—suggest that the Malays were not sure what it was. In many areas of

Malaya the tapir is called Badak Murai, which means a black-and-white rhinoceros.

When Jim was rediscovering the rhino in Malaya and proving that, although near extinction, it had not yet died out, he had to be careful when tracking that he was not wasting his time following a tapir. The rhino has three-toed front hooves. The tapir has four-toed front hooves, but the inside toe on each foot is smaller than the others and slightly higher, and the print of this toe may not show, except in soft ground, and can easily be missed. The prints of a big tapir and a small rhino on reasonably firm ground are so much alike that even an experienced tracker like Jim can't tell the difference. The only test is to follow the prints to soft ground—and this is not always possible—and then look for the print of the fourth toe. If it shows, the animal is a tapir. If only three toe prints show, the animal is a rhinoceros. Another test is that if the diameter of the print is more than eight inches the animal is most likely a rhino.

This toe or print confusion doesn't exist between other animals. But the tapir isn't like any other animal. He looks like the result of a union between an elephant and a pig. He is only four feet high, slightly higher at the rump than at the shoulder, weighs about a quarter of a ton, and can travel on his short thick legs with the speed of a horse. His massive neck is like an all-in wrestler's, his head seems to have been stretched, and he has an elongated muzzle ending in a short trunk that droops over his mouth. His ears are thick and almost cowlike, and his tail is little more than a stump. Badak Murai is not handsome.

But it is his colouring and markings that are his most unusual characteristics—and perhaps his greatest assets. His head, neck, shoulders, front legs, hind legs, and backside to just above his tail are brownish-black. The rest of his body—belly, back, and rump—is a clear grey-white. His ears also have grey-white tips. He is so fragmented by his two-toned colouring that he looks as if a house painter had started to paint him but had abandoned the job. When the tapir moves, one almost expects his rear section to stay behind.

Badak Murai is a living example of camouflage at its best. Of all animals in Malaya his camouflage is probably the finest. In the light and shade of the jungle, the half-light of the deep jungle, his bold patterns effectively break up his outline and conceal him. This disruptive pattern—it has been used a lot on ships, planes and buildings in war—makes him impossible to see only a few yards away. He is almost impossible to see at any time because of his camouflage, his hearing, his sense of smell and his speed. As a result he is one of the least studied of all wild things in Malaya.

The tapir is an enigma. He is defenceless, yet he has survived in numbers with remarkable ease. Perhaps the explanation is that he has nothing that man wants: neither horn nor tusk nor skin. It was once believed that he was the one animal in the jungle without natural enemies—a difficult claim to support for a defenceless yet perfectly camouflaged animal. Jim doesn't believe in this inviolability. He has records of tapirs being attacked and badly injured by tigers, though no records of actual kills. What is most likely is that the tapir, because of his in-built protection and his weight and speed, is hard for even a tiger to find and kill, though it would seem that his young would be vulnerable to the big cats. The young, born after nine months—the same gestation period as for rhinoceros—and only one at a time, look almost exactly like piglets. They are dark brown with yellow stripes and spots. Only in their piggish appearance do they resemble their mother.

Another myth about tapirs is that they are mute, but Jim has often heard them calling, though only at night. The animal makes a high squeal and varies the call from a few short squeals to a series that may last for minutes.

Badak Murai lives on leaves, shoots and fruit. He is found all over Malaya, from deep riverine jungle to mountains up to 4000 feet, and he seems to prefer game trails along high ridges when travelling from one area to another.

The best place to find him, or at least his tracks, is along rivers. Unlike the rhinoceros, which loves mud, the tapir prefers clean water. He is, for his bulk, a fine swimmer and diver, and at night plays in deep river pools for hours, snorting and occasionally squealing.

The rhinoceros, when he adds to his midden, kicks dirt and leaves over the dung. The tapir carefully scrapes backwards with his hind feet *before* he drops his dung, which is just like horse dung. The tapir also does not make a midden in a favoured spot. He dungs casually, but never forgets to scrape first.

Badak Murai looks clownish and cloddish, but he is so alert and so cunning that no member of the Game Department has ever been able to shoot one as a specimen. Jim has heard tapir and has tracked them, with all the skill of a jungle master, only to hear their crash of escape. Some Malays did catch one in a wire trap. They sold it, illegally and at great profit, to a circus. News of this quickly reached the Game Department and Jim confiscated the tapir. Percy was full grown and, within an hour of being put behind wire at Jim's home at Batu Gajah, was docile and even friendly. Later he would trot towards Jim when he entered the yard. The tapir wore an expression of moronic happiness when his belly was tickled; apart from this the friendship did not develop. Unless Jim tickled his belly Percy remained a piebald stranger.

Most of the big animals—elephant and seladang, rhinoceros and tapir—avoid one another. "Thou shalt not meet" seems to be one of the jungle commandments. If meetings take place on game trails or at drinking places the animals act like strangers at a funeral or depart. Most of them, even birds and butterflies, do have a common meeting ground—the salt-licks—yet some of them seem to come to the licks almost by appointment and to obey the commandment. Seladang leave immediately if elephants appear. Deer are cautious if pigs arrive. Tapirs won't go near a lick unless it is free of other animals and only at night. This discrimination is almost human and racial in its implications—which is strange, for the impulse that sends animals, birds and insects to the salt-licks is the impulse to survive.

Salt-licks are dotted about the Malayan jungle like flag-points on an army map. There are many in some areas, few in others. Some licks may be close together. Others may be a hundred miles apart. They are not, as the general term