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NAMIBIA WILDLIFE TRUST, Newsletter

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Death of a rhino

by Blythe Loutit

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The morning sun spilling over the pink granite plains of the Doros had me totally enraptured as I tuned the radio for the morning call-up.... I just missed Rudi calling my number and by the time I'd set the time correctly he'd signed off. I then heard June Owen-Smith calling for me. I answered and she told me the news that another rhino cow had been shot leaving a small calf orphaned which was now in her care at Wêreldsend. She suggested that I come over as soon as possible so I completed my programme of plant collecting and set off for Wêreldsend later that afternoon.

It was a long and tedious drive from Doros to Wêreldsend travelling at a maximum speed of 20 km an hour because of the rough terrain. I finally arrived some time late that night and just fell asleep in the landrover. The picture of the little calf lost and bewildered standing at the bloodied panga-slashed head of her dead parent snorting and charging at the advancing hyenas and jackals until hunger finally turned it away disturbed my sleep so I finally got up and walked down to the camp.

Dawn was just breaking when I found June giving the calf the early morning feed. The wounds that the jackals had inflicted had been fairly bad but June had done a marvellous job of cleaning up the worst of it. She told me the full story and that Rudi, Garth, Peter and John Paterson were in pursuit of the poachers. Rudi was later joined by Alisdair McDonald from Nature Conservation in Windhoek while Garth returned to attend to urgent matters connected with the case.

After working round the clock for four days Rudi and Alisdair were able to make the arrests. It is not often that an operation of this sort is successfully completed in such a short time.

The Department of Nature Conservation had issued a permit for the orphan to stay at Wêreldsend until alternative arrangements could be made so I took care of the baby. She was a delightful ward. I took her walking mornings and evenings - an experience which could well be described as "An Educational Rhino Trail" - I learnt as much if not more in those few days than in the nine months of intensive observations on rhino feeding. I also learned that little rhinos need plenty of communicative touching and affection. Probably due to poor eyesight she relied upon a continual vocal communication uttering a sort of 'huff-puff' or plaintive 'meow' which had to be answered. If I walked too fast she'd break into a very agile trot with tail up and almost bowl me over if I didn't hop out of the way in time.

On the sixth day the Department of Nature Conservation removed her to Etosha. It was sad to have to part from the little animal but reassuring to know that she would be in the care of a veterinary officer. We hope that she shall return to her home in Damaraland or the Skeleton Coast Park when she is over any unforeseen problems which may arise from her traumatic experience.



The young rhino takes a sniff at a Welwitschia plant.