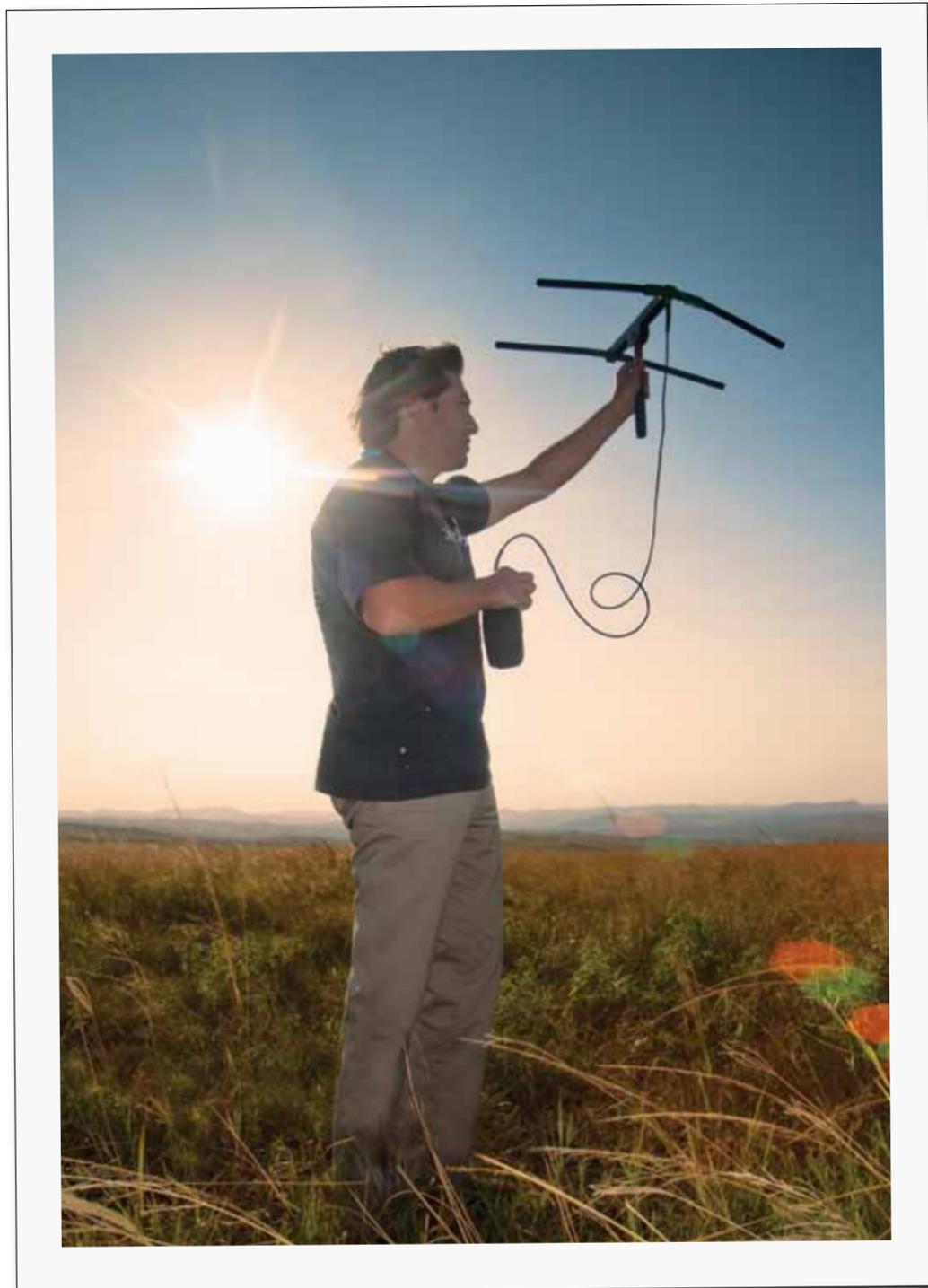


THE RHINO MAN

OF IMFOLOZI



KWAZULU-NATAL



Roan Plotz has dedicated his life to studying black rhino. DALE MORRIS stepped nervously into the wild with him



ROAN PLOTZ TWIDDLED WITH HIS telemetry receiver and adjusted the position of the antenna he was holding in his hand. I could hear the soft clicking of a signal emanating from his headphones, and as he moved the antenna round the sound became ever so slightly louder. Roan raised his eyebrows, sighed and removed the phones.

"I think she's over there," he told me, "but I'm not a hundred percent sure. The signal is weak. Still, let's go and take a closer look. If we're lucky she won't see us coming." He pointed to a grove of trees about a kilometre from where we were standing in a grassy area in the heart of KwaZulu-Natal's Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park.

"Keep your eyes peeled, Dale," he said as we walked off in single file. "We wouldn't want to surprise yet another rhino now, would we?"

The question was, of course, rhetorical . . .

I had been tracking black rhino with Roan and his field assistant, Bom Ndwandwe, for five straight days and during that time had been charged on numerous occasions. I had discovered that black rhino can travel at 56km/h, that their sense of smell is phenomenal, and

that they tend to charge at the faintest whiff of danger:

I had also discovered, through bitter experience, that black rhino consider scientific researchers and journalists potentially dangerous, and that it is nigh impossible to get a usable photograph of a rhino while running, climbing, hiding, panicking or pooping oneself.

"The ability to climb quickly is a prerequisite for anyone wanting to study black rhino," Roan had told me on one occasion when all three of us had been driven to the top of a spiky acacia. "But don't worry. Unlike elephants, rhino rarely try to extract you from a tree."

Rarely?

Of course, if this story was ever to make it into the pages of this magazine I would have to a) survive in order to write it and b) get at least one passable photo of a rhino. However, things had not been going all that smoothly. We were down to my last day in the park and all I had to show for my efforts was a pile of abstract photos showing large grey smudges and out-of-focus branches.

I had seen rhinos hurtling across the landscape towards the horizon and I had seen rhinos >>

□ **A black rhino lurking with intent. You have a better chance of seeing a wild rhino in Hluhluwe-Imfolozi than almost anywhere else on the planet.**

Opposite:
□ **Roan Plotz at work in his 'office,' searching for black rhino with his radio telemetry equipment.**



□ Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park is a mosaic of grasslands and forested hills.

□ A game capture team working on an anaesthetised and blindfolded black rhino.

>> hurtling towards us. I had seen rhinos hidden in grass and hidden behind bushes. I had even seen a few of them at night. What I hadn't seen, though, was a rhino willing to stand still in a photogenic manner for more than a millisecond.

Thankfully, Roan had been markedly more successful as far as his personal mission was concerned. When I met up with him he was in fact just finishing off three years of field observations of 14 radio-tagged Imfolozi black rhino

"Few people study black rhino intimately," Roan told me. "Probably because it's not easy to approach and watch them undetected." (This was something I'd discovered for myself on numerous occasions in the preceding days.) "White rhino are far less skittish or aggressive, so you find more research papers on them. However, there are many gaps in our knowledge of black rhino and this really has to change."

Rhino (both black and white) are a prime target species for poachers because of the value of their horn, which is used in traditional Asian medicine

for conditions ranging from headaches to the Little Willie syndrome, and in Yemen for making ceremonial dagger handles. So any information from research projects such as Roan's could be invaluable to organisations striving to protect the creatures from extinction.

"What I'm doing," said Roan, "is looking closely at their pregnancy rates, infant survival rates, territorial behaviour, habitat requirements and interaction with other species. It's basically to do with how many rhinos should be kept in a fenced reserve, and I very much hope my data will be useful to those who make decisions regarding their conservation, not just here in Imfolozi but wherever black rhino are managed."

Those who stand to benefit most would include national parks and reserves, captive breeding institutions, conservation organisations, field researchers and, of course, the black rhino themselves.

In order to track and observe black rhino in the wild, Roan had to enlist the help of Imfolozi's legendary game capture unit, a dedicated team of rugged gentlemen who regularly tackle rhino in the name of conservation. I was fortunate to be in the park during a black rhino darting operation, and even more fortunate that they let me tag along.

I sat waiting with the ground crew on the back of a 4x4 vehicle, watching a nearby lion nibbling on a porcupine, while up above the team's vet surveyed the park from a helicopter, dart gun at the ready. Less than 15 minutes later we received a call saying a black rhino had been darted and we sped off into the bush to intercept the creature. The lion barely looked up from its feast while I clung on for dear life to the vehicle's roll bars.

When we arrived at the downed rhino the vet was already checking its vital signs, the helicopter's rotor blades still slowing to a standstill. A drill was produced, a hole was made in the animal's horn, a radio transmitter was inserted and the hole was sealed with dental acrylic paste. Finally the antidote



was administered so the rhino could recover. That was our signal to leave . . . quickly.

"I found my first game capture very exciting," Roan admitted, "and I still find them exciting."

I could easily understand why. Zipping around the bush in specially designed 4x4 vehicles, grappling with huge beasts and flying in helicopters is thrilling indeed. But the excitement doesn't end when the game capture crew depart. In fact, as far as Roan is concerned, that's when the fun really begins.

Every day Roan and Bom find their way on foot through herds of buffalo and other potentially dangerous creatures (such as lions, hyenas, leopards and tourists) to keep track of and collect data from their study animals. It's a risky undertaking, but after a while, or so Roan told me, you begin to know intuitively when things are getting risky. >>

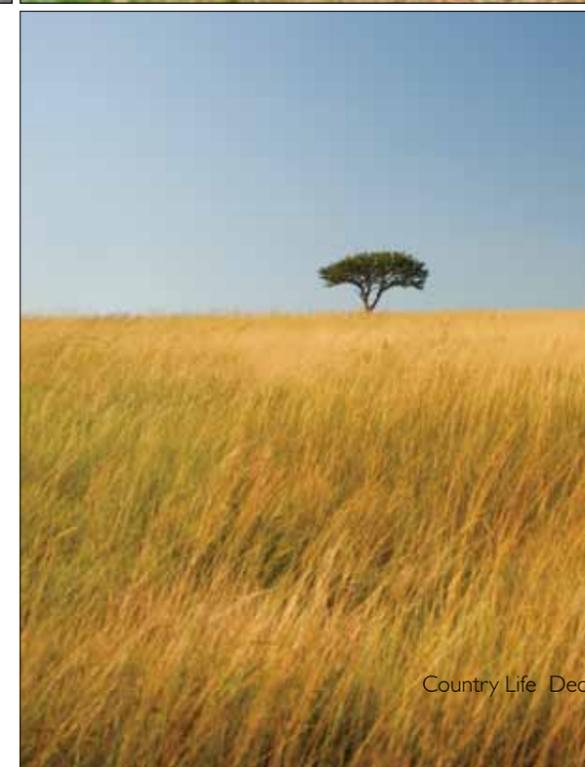


□ Rhinos are short sighted.

□ Oxpeckers often see an approaching human long before the rhino and sound the alarm.

□ Mother and daughter black rhino pose for the camera on the last afternoon of our five-day visit.

□ Sometimes it can be a long run to the nearest tree.





- Roan and Bom escaping from a perturbed rhino
- White rhino, distinguished by their square lip, are far less aggressive than black..



>> “Sometimes I just get a gut feeling,” he said as we crept towards where we hoped the rhino we were after might be resting, “and when that happens – when the hairs on the back of my neck stand up – I follow my instinct and head off in a different direction.

“Lions will rarely, if ever, attack people. You can escape a buffalo or rhino by climbing a tree. But if you somehow insult an elephant, well, there isn’t a tree in the park that it couldn’t knock down or pull you out of.”

Suddenly Roan signalled us to remain silent – a signal I had long since learned to obey. He beckoned me to lower myself as much as I could and then motioned for Bom to lead me a little way uphill from the grove of trees at which we’d just arrived. I followed Bom until we reached a low and sturdy acacia tree into which, under instruction, I quietly climbed.

It was almost dark and this was my very last opportunity of encountering a rhino with Roan, but I couldn’t see a darn thing – just leaves and branches and hills and rocks and things. Then all of a sudden, out of the shrubbery trotted two huge black rhino (a mother and daughter, I was later told). I held my breath and prayed that the creatures would turn towards me for a photograph. The light was perfect and the animals were beautiful, but I was still looking at nothing more than a pair of oversized bottoms.

Then, as if on cue, they turned and ambled slowly straight towards me, passing directly beneath the branch I was on. ‘Suddenly they caught my scent (or heard my heart thumping, I’m not sure which), snorted, and hurtled away like a pair of runaway trains.

But I’d got my photos and could now leave the park a happy man. Roan was happy for me too, but I’m sure he was happier still when, several weeks later, he completed his project and went home to ‘civilisation’ and to marry his fiancé.

The data he’d collected and the scientific papers that have resulted from his hard work and risk-taking will no doubt play an important role in the survival of the species.

And as for the rhino themselves? Well, I truly hope they continue to breed and find a sanctuary in the Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park. □

**Map reference D8
see inside back cover**

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