

The first rhino sightings for 7 years

Drama in the Selous

At last, after long delays, our new vehicles and boats have arrived, allowing us to increase considerably our rhino survey range and focus on the "new" rhino habitat identified by aerial reconnaissance. Visibility from the Kitfox II, our ultra-light surveillance plane, is improving as the bush (mainly deciduous Miombo woodland) dries out. There is always a good chance of finding new, unrecorded individuals in this vast wilderness.

While waiting for flooded rivers to subside and roads to become passable, we spent our time preparing the vehicles and equipment for the dry season. This is the peak period for rhino monitoring, when we collect vital data on population structure and distribution ranges. Then, in mid-July, I managed to take the first ever positive identification photograph of the illusive Selous black rhino. We have been trying to do this for seven years, so you can imagine the excitement!

George - one of the rangers - and I had been tracking this individual for days, becoming familiar with its distinctive behaviour and movements. When we finally found the rhino, it took still more time to get closer and convince the nervous ox-peckers that I was indeed a friend to their host.

It was a sub-adult in fair condition. We took off our shoes, binoculars and hats and crept closer, painstakingly slowly, until we could get the priceless shots. Later the same day, we found two more - a mother and her calf - but this time weren't able to get near enough for close-up ID photos, as the wind turned against us. Over the next three months we continued to find new rhinos, adding to our understanding of their population and their behaviour.

Friedrich Alpers, Project Scientific Coordinator, The Selous Rhino Trust

A Kidai Rhino Ranger's Experiences

The rains are late this year. It suits us as the animals move over larger areas, into more open terrain, which makes it easier for us to track. This was yet another beautiful calm morning as we headed north on our monitoring patrol. Today we are a team of four. I picked up fresh prints and we quickly planned our 'follow-up' by assessing the terrain, vegetation zones and heading.

We made good ground over broken terrain. Rather than focusing only on the tracks, we examined the full surroundings to 'read' what the situation could tell us. Every set of prints gives a complete story - of the animal, its behaviour, its mood and the purpose of its 'safari' (journey).

We were walking into the breeze so the rhinos could not smell us, despite their very acute sense of smell. This group of 'rhinos on safari' consisted of three animals, which is quite unusual as black rhinos are generally solitary animals. What was really exciting was the presence of a young calf: about 7 months old and very relaxed, I could tell from its footprints. We noted fresh - very fresh - signs of browsing, but what gave us real pleasure was a fresh dung pile from the older female (presumably the mother).

From this fresh dung sample we can identify the individual rhino that has 'dropped its lunch'. This is important because we can distinguish between different individuals and groups, enabling us to determine if small isolated groups are genetically related.

Back in the bush, the signs indicated we were getting very close, a fact confirmed by my heartbeat as we crept forward. With the sun high in the morning sky, the earth was warming and so was the air. Suddenly we heard a loud snort and trampling feet as the ever-alert animals made their way to safety. Presumably the mother had 'sniffed' us.

I logged the morning's exciting events making sure to note the measurements of the spoor, browsing signs and vegetation species, dung samples taken and our patrol detail.

We were happy: we'd found the rhinos alive and well. This is my work and I am proud of what I do. I would like to share my experiences and daily challenges with you, my readers!

This morning the winds changed in the rhinos' favour, enabling them to detect us and move away. Tomorrow that may not be the case as professional poachers with automatic rifles track these last remaining rhinos and kill them all (including the young hornless calf), to trade in their horn.

Help us, my team and I, to carry on our work and to keep the changing wind in favour of the rhinos because, just like us, every rhino should have the opportunity to grow old in peace.

George Atanas
Ranger, Kidai Ranger Station

Kidai Range Station

