

THE THRILL OF THE BLACK RHINO

A few months ago, I was lucky enough to spend several weeks in iMfolozi Game Reserve in KZN, South Africa, filming rhinos in the context of their current crisis.

Jo Scofield | Producer, BBC Flight of the Rhino documentary

I have filmed white rhinos before. They are impressive prehistoric animals close up, and their sheer size exudes a sense of power and authority. This time though, we wanted to film black rhinos in the wild, as close as we dare get. Therein lay the challenge. Black rhinos are well known to be feisty and fast, and yet very shy. The cameraman Ralph and I went out for three weeks at the crack of dawn as the light is only good for filming until mid morning.

Luckily, we have Bom, our Zulu rhino tracker with us, who has been watching over these rhinos for 27 years, and knows exactly where they hang out. He scans the hillsides for a glowing golden shape in the dawn light, and bingo, we have our black rhino, suckling a calf, under a tree. We approach on foot and well downwind, carrying cameras, tripods and lenses. All our gear doesn't make for stealth tracking; it's cumbersome and trekking with it all is physically demanding, and you don't know if you are going to stumble across elephant, lions or worse!

is in slow motion. It's absolutely nerve racking. We look at each other unable to make a sound, all of us buzzed by being so close, knowing the danger and yet loving the intimacy of the proximity to such a special, but volatile and powerful animal. One sound or sneeze and it's all over, she will come straight for us.

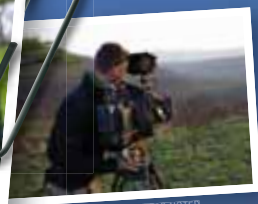
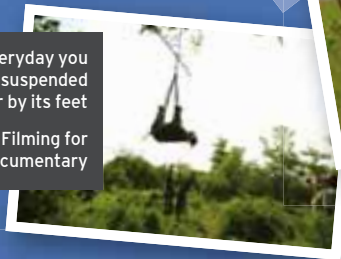
Bom signals to a nearby marula tree, our escape route. Rule number one: never be nearer to the rhino than your nearest tree! The female we are filming has a calf; Bom calls her Mama Longhorn, because her hind horn is taller than her front horn.

Black rhino are very inquisitive, so having bad eyesight means they will approach a suspicious sound or smell to investigate. Bom puts his old cap on a bush putting a 'smell' barrier between them and us. The idea is that she will stop at that, and head off. Well that's the hope!

Ralph gets some good shots, but she senses something, her ears are constantly swivelling checking out her surroundings. A flock of oxpecker birds launch themselves off her back into the air, and we are immediately 'busted'.

It's not everyday you see a rhino suspended mid-air by its feet

Far right: Filming for the documentary



ABOVE: FAR LEFT: JED BIRD; EXEMVELD KZN; WIEBEE.

ALL IMAGES: JO SCOFIELD, UNLESS NOTED

As we approach, the technique is to creep slowly, step-by-step. Each crackle on the newly burnt grass underfoot could potentially give our game away. We must get our camera close enough to get good shots, with a clear view through the bushes, all without the rhino seeing or hearing us.

Even breathing is slow and considered. Every move we make to set up the tripod

They are an early warning signal for her, and in an instant she is heading towards us. I am up the tree without looking back, and Ralph has abandoned his camera and is right behind me! Bom is nowhere to be seen?

She charges towards the tree, stops at the hat, sniffs it, snorts loudly, stampedes it, and turning on a penny, she is off, crashing into the bush, her tiny calf hot on her heels.

Everyone is frozen, except for Bom, who is laughing out loud. This is exactly the experience that keeps him fascinated by these creatures. There is nothing quite like a ton of rhino charging towards you to make your heart race! It's a real kick; I just hope the shots convey the same sense of excitement!

BBC



Flight of the Rhino

The documentary was shown by the BBC to UK audiences in February. We are currently running a campaign to raise money for Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park: visit www.savetherhino.org/flightoftherhino for more information