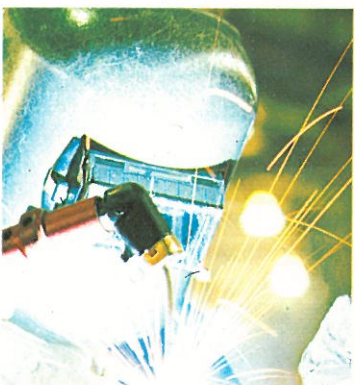
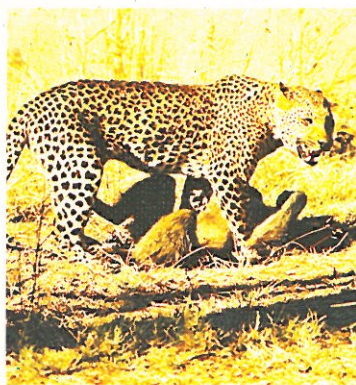


# CHILDREN'S BRITANNICA



YEARBOOK 1997



# MY LIFE WITH SAMIA

by Anna Merz

*Anna Merz, who worked with chimpanzees in Ghana for many years, now runs Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, a sanctuary for rhinos in Kenya. She was broken-hearted when Samia, the black rhino she had raised from birth, died in an accident. The 11 years she spent with Samia as a surrogate mother and a friend gave her a unique understanding of the social behaviour of these strange and misunderstood animals.*

Samia's mother, Solia, was one of the first black rhinos to be sent into the newly created Ngare Sergoi Rhino Sanctuary in Kenya in 1984. We did not realize that she was pregnant at first because rhino mothers show little sign of pregnancy before giving birth; they are so big that a calf weighing 35 kilos makes little impression

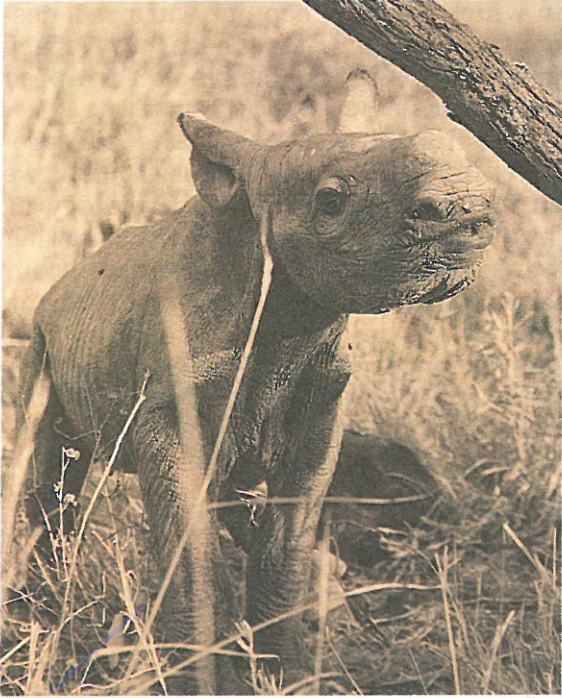
on their waistlines. The birth of this calf came as a complete surprise to all of us.

When we first found Samia, she was lying in long grass making little high-pitched squeaks more like the chirp of a

The black rhinoceros, seen here amongst the thorn bushes and acacias of Lewa Downs, can survive only in protected sanctuaries.

Gerry Ellis/Ellis Nature Photography





Anna Merz/The Rhino Trust

When Samia was three days old she became so cold and weak that Anna Merz decided to take the baby rhino into her own bed to warm her.

bird than the noise one would expect a rhino to make. Solia was already some distance away and moving steadily further from her baby. All day we watched, hoping that she would return to nurse her, but she did not. For some reason she had no milk and seemed to realize that she would not be able to raise her calf. When the second day dawned and the baby's cries were incessant, I decided to try to give her a bottle of milk. Little was known in those days about the correct formula for rhino's milk, but I did the best I could, following radioed instructions from the vet in Nairobi. The little rhino, under protest, drank. On the morning of the third day the baby was cold and weak, and her mother was several kilometres away. We realized that the only hope for her survival was for me to hand-rear her.

## LEWA – A PLACE OF SAFETY

Lewa Downs is a large cattle ranch on the northern shoulder of Mount Kenya, just north of the equator. The farm is owned by the Craig family, and supports a wide variety of wildlife, as well as cattle which benefit from the protection of the high electric boundary fence.

When Anna Merz first met the family in the early 1980s, no rhinos had been seen on the farm for almost ten years. Although they had not been killed on the farm, poachers beyond the boundaries destroyed any straying animals. The Craigs were enthusiastic when Anna suggested creating a sanctuary for rhinos on their land, and in 1983 the 2,023-hectare Ngare Seroi Rhino Sanctuary was formed.

The newly introduced rhinos bred successfully, and in 1988 the area was doubled in size. Four years later the whole of Lewa Downs was turned into a sanctuary together with 6,475 hectares of government-owned forest reserve to the south of the property. A total area of 24,686 hectares, now known as Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, supports 45 black and white rhinos, protected by a team of 150 rangers.



Keith Scholey/BBC Natural History Unit

The electric fence around the sanctuary prevents elephants from wrecking crops on nearby smallholdings. These bull elephants are feeding on acacia trees at Lewa Downs.

## MY LIFE WITH SAMIA

### Early days

During the 20 years I lived and worked as a game warden in Ghana, West Africa, I had hand-reared many orphaned wild animals, including chimpanzees, but I did not realize what I was letting myself in for with Samia, as I called the little rhino. She suffered initially from constipation, followed by endless bouts of diarrhoea and dehydration, because her stomach could not tolerate the milk we made for her, which was not as low in fat as rhino milk. She had also received no colostrum (the rich first milk from the mother), which stimulates the workings of the digestive system. More seriously, she was unable to regulate her body temperature properly and was very cold. So, for the first few weeks she shared my bed, as this was the only way

When Samia grew up she became part of two worlds. Although accepted by the wild rhinos, she remained friends with Anna Merz.

*Gerry Ellis/Ellis Nature Photography*



in which I could keep her warm – a desperate measure! Later she learned to sleep in a stable with a horse blanket wrapped round her.

The first nine months of her life produced an endless series of crises, but as we survived each one the bond between us grew stronger. A good black rhino mother is inseparable from her calf for nearly four years, which is a very long time in the animal world. Unlike so many animals, the baby rhino is never left on its own to sleep while the mother goes off to feed. Mother rhinos are very affectionate towards their young, constantly reassuring them by touch. So, as I did not want to cause Samia even more stress, during the first months of her life I seldom left her.

We started going on daily walks with my dogs, so that she could explore the area around my home that would eventually become the core area of her home range. By watching what the other rhinos ate I would pretend to eat the food plants that made up her natural diet and so help her to learn how to forage for herself. Slowly, I introduced Samia to the places where the other rhinos had their dung heaps and encouraged her to use them herself. In this way she learned to recognize their scents and they hers.

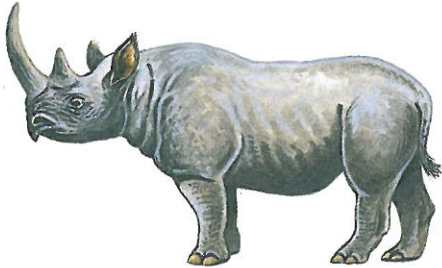
### Growing up

I finally weaned her at three-and-a-half years, about the same age that a wild rhino will wean her calf, though wild rhino calves start eating grass and browsing when only ten days old. Samia had always had her freedom by day but at night for her own safety she had slept in the stable. The first time I left her out at night she hung around the house crying, upset at being locked out. This went on for a few nights and I became worried in case she was not strong enough to hold her own against the lions, leopards, and spotted hyenas.

# Rhinos under siege

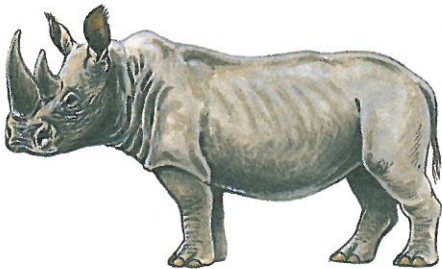
The prehistoric-looking rhinoceros has survived on the Earth for 60 million years. Once there were up to 300 species of rhinos, but now only five remain. In less than a quarter of a century human beings have driven them to the brink of extinction. Fewer than 12,000 wild rhinos survive in Asia and Africa today.

The Sumatran, Javan, and greater one-horned (Indian) rhinos live in Asia, while the black and the white are found in Africa. All five species are threatened with extinction, although some are actually increasing their numbers through careful conservation and breeding programmes.



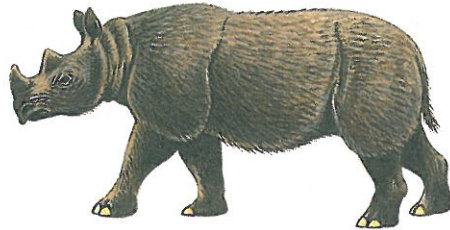
## Black rhinoceros

Grey in colour but can range from yellow-brown to dark brown. It has two horns and a protruding upper lip, which resembles a miniature elephant's trunk and is used when the rhino browses on bushes. It is not always darker in colour than the white. Black rhino numbers have declined dramatically in the last three decades, from an estimated 70,000 in the late 1960s, to an estimated 2,550 today.



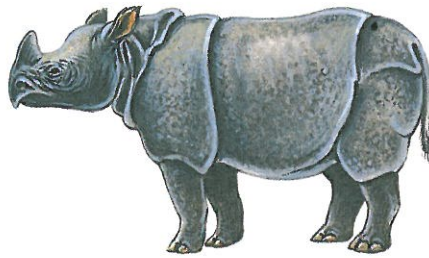
## White rhinoceros

Called 'white' not because of its colour, which ranges from slate-grey to yellowish-brown, but because of a mistranslation of the Dutch word for wide, which refers to its broad, square lips. There are two subspecies – the Northern White, found only in Garamba National Park in Zaire (32), and the Southern White, found mostly in South Africa (6,376). Total world population is estimated at 6,784.



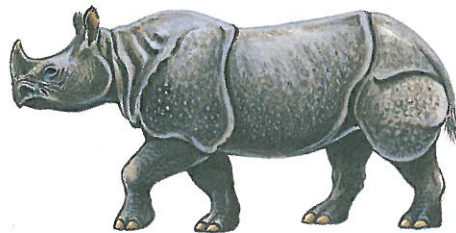
## Sumatran rhinoceros

The smallest species, it is hairy and dark grey-brown in colour with two horns. World population is estimated at between 450 and 800.



## Javan rhinoceros

Dusky grey in colour with a single horn, the Javan is the most threatened of the Asian rhinos. The total population is probably under 70.



## Greater one-horned (Indian) rhinoceros

The largest of the three Asian rhinos, this species has grey-brown skin and a single horn. The total population is about 2,000.

## MY LIFE WITH SAMIA

But this risk had to be taken so that she could learn how to live in the wild. And, to my total delight, she did. She became totally integrated with the other rhinos in the sanctuary and I watched her with them for many hours, feeding, sleeping, and playing. Amazingly, even after she mated and had her own calf she never ceased to be my friend and would visit me regularly, usually at dawn at the house. She would also sometimes join me on my evening walks with my dogs.

### Adulthood

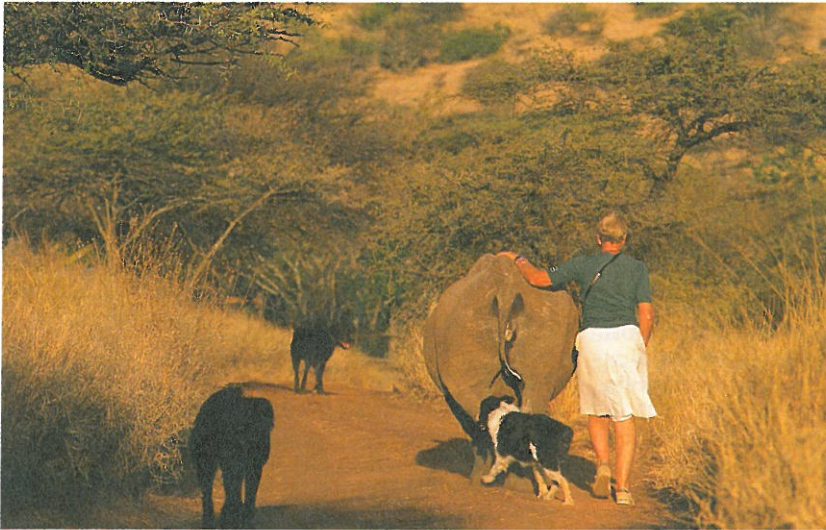
Over the years, as she matured into a beautiful adult rhino, her attitude towards me changed. A rhino, like a horse, has a very nervous temperament and if a young rhino is frightened it will always seek refuge under or behind its mother. After the first few months of Samia's life this instinctive reaction sent me flying on many occasions. But, as she matured, she seemed to realize that her surrogate mother was a lot less substantial than she was, and gradually our roles were reversed. She became increasingly protective towards me. If we met buffaloes or other rhinos on our walks,

she would stand between them and me, huffing and puffing.

On one occasion, when I was caught out rather late in the swiftly gathering tropical dusk, three rhinos appeared on the path ahead. Once again, she reacted to my fear with her usual intelligence. Although she was normally on good terms with these particular animals, she trotted up to them showing real aggression, and surprised at her behaviour, they retreated.

### Disaster

On 21 November 1995 tragedy struck. Samia and her seven-month-old calf, Samuel, fell over a cliff, probably as a result of some kind of conflict with her aggressive mate, Kenu. She died instantly but her calf was still alive when I found them that morning. At first I did not realize the extent of Samuel's injuries and hoped that he would survive, but when the vet came he told me that his back was broken and that he would have to be destroyed. The next day the game warden from the Kenya Wildlife Service came to dehorn Samia, so that her body would not attract poachers. We laid mother and calf



Samia would sometimes join Anna Merz in the evenings when she walked with her dogs.

Gerry Ellis/Ellis Nature Photography

side by side, covered by a sack of bougainvillea flowers and, with great sadness, I said good-bye.

### Samia's Legacy

Samia was, throughout her life, unfailingly affectionate in her behaviour towards me. She was also more resourceful than any animal I have known apart from chimpanzees. No gate or door could defeat the dexterity of her protruding upper lip and only a lock could stop her. As soon as she was big enough, she learned to open the rear door of my Suzuki jeep and take out the horse food.

From Samia I learned that rhinos communicate not only by body language, but also by an incredible range of noises ranging from tiny bird-like "eeks" to the roars of an enraged lion. I also learned that rhinos communicate among themselves by regulating their breathing, producing a series of long and short breaths of varying intensity, rather like a morse code, and that certain patterns of breathing are used again and again in similar circumstances.

In the early days of building the sanctuary, I was constantly told that rhinos were stupid and aggressive creatures, and

At dawn Samia would bring her young calf Samuel, seen here at one month old, to visit Anna Merz at her house.

Jack and Pauline Bellamy



Gerry Ellis/Ellis Nature Photography

To protect the rhinos against poachers, Lewa Wildlife Conservancy employs a team of 150 armed rangers to patrol the sanctuary.

that, after working with chimpanzees, I would find them very boring. Nothing could be further from the truth. My own observations of wild rhinos would, in the end, have shown me their intelligence, but the wonderful opportunity of living for 11 years close to Samia gave me a unique insight into the true character of the rhino.

### Endangered

Tragically, these wonderful, sensitive, and intelligent animals are threatened with extinction. In Africa between 1970 and 1994 some 95 per cent of all black rhinos were killed for their horns, which are more highly valued than gold in the markets of the Far East, where they are ground into powder and used in traditional Chinese medicine. Worse still, in some countries, rhino horns are being hoarded in the hope that if the rhino does become extinct, the value of the hoarded horns will increase sharply.

Rhino populations around the world can only survive in heavily protected sanctuaries, like Lewa, created for them within their natural habitat. These sanctuaries, combined with a complete ban on the trade in rhino horns, provide the only hope for the rhino's survival.