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Mike Condy remembers riding a black rhino around his back garden in Rhodesia, 1962

Mike Condy talks to Hermione Lister-Kaye about his childhood pet, a black rhino named Rupert



Photo: Courtesy Mike Condy

By **Hermione Lister-Kaye**

7:00AM BST 04 Jul 2014

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My dad was the head vet of Operation Noah, a huge conservation project to relocate wildlife when the Zambezi river was dammed, creating Lake Kariba. One morning in May 1962 they darted a female black rhino and unfortunately she moved into the water just as the drug took effect. She drowned before the rangers could get her out. She was lactating, which meant she had a baby, and they found this tiny rhino, no more than six weeks old. Dad brought the rhino home to look after. Rupert [named after Rupert Fothergill, the head ranger of Operation Noah] was shipped up to suburban Salisbury [now Harare] from the Zambezi valley. We put him in a cowshed at the bottom of the garden but that night there was an extremely cold frost and the next morning he was almost on his last legs. Dad brought Rupert up to the garage and made him a nest out of hay bales and used infrared lamps. It became his little haven; we had to coax

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him out – he was very nervous at first. Then quickly he became part of the family. I think he thought he was just another Condry kid – he would go in and out of the house as he pleased.

I am the oldest of four. That's Diana, then aged three, at the front, with David, six, Catherine, seven, and me at the back, aged eight. This photograph was probably taken a month before Rupert left us in November 1962. He was quite big by then and was drinking milk with a straw from a bucket. He would have eight pints four times a day. When he first arrived he weighed 150lb; six months later he weighed more than 500lb. We couldn't believe how quickly he grew. Dad had analysed the milk of his mother and found it to be very high in protein and very low in fat. Rupert always loved bananas and lychees. We tried to introduce him to the natural vegetation but he didn't like that, so he ate sadza [maize meal] made into a porridge.

We knew we couldn't keep him for ever, so after six months it was decided that he would go to Matobo Game Reserve, where there were no lions. Mum cried and cried – it was like sending off her little boy to boarding school. Two years later we went to visit. Rupert came out of the bush and we were shocked to see this huge animal. Mum began calling, 'Come Rupey my boy...' Rupert let out a strange little squeaky sound – not what you would expect from such a big animal. We were convinced he had recognised us.

Sadly, not long after that Rupert was found dead in the bush. It will always be a mystery why Rupert died because he was very healthy and everyone was happy with his reintroduction. It was only in the making of a documentary, My Wild Affair, when I went to Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in Kenya, where black rhino have been raised, that we found out rhino are still considered babies up to the age of three. We had sent him back prematurely. But no one had ever hand-reared a rhino then; we had no point of reference, you couldn't Google it. So we had given him a chance and given him lots of love, and he was a very happy little rhino for the time that we had him.

The Rhino Who Joined the Family: My Wild Affair will be shown on July 16 at 9pm on Animal Planet

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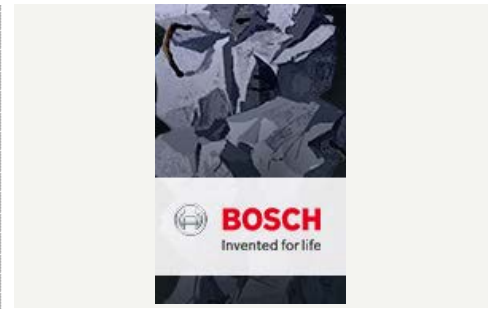


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capetonianm · 7 days ago

Sweet memories of Rhodesia, possibly the best country in the world, now reduced to poverty and chaos thanks to the despot who was installed as a puppet by the do-gooders after they betrayed all Rhodesians and Ian Smith.

As a result, everybody is now far worse off than before, but they have their 'democracy' so that's all fine. Peter Permatan Hain and the rest of you, hang your miserable heads in shame you vile creatures.

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Steve Brown · 9 days ago

I grew up on a farm in what was Northern Rhodesia, on the banks of the Kafue River on the Copperbelt. One day one of the African farmworkers brought a tiny animal to the house, he'd heard it whimpering in the bush and didn't know what else to do with it. 'It' turned out to be a baby female hyena. A search of the area where 'It' was found produced no clue as to what the fate of the mother was.

My mother bottle fed it for a week or so, then my father offered this small creature some minced fatty beef. Whooooof! There was no looking back after that.

It (and that was her name) grew rapidly and developed some fearsome teeth. My brother, sister and I used to watch, fascinated, as It crunched huge bones as if they were straw. Despite this strength, It was always as gentle as a kitten with us, she loved being scratched and groomed. She'd lay down and, when one side of her had received enough attention, she'd roll over to present her other side.

It adored my father and she'd follow him all over the farm. She adamantly refused to get into any form of vehicle, but would resolutely follow my father's pick-up with the typical lurching run of her species.

When she was about three years old, she took to staying away from the house for a couple of days at a time. Then she just stayed away.

About a year later, at sundown, when we were sitting on the verandah, we heard the "Whoop! Whoop" of a hyena. It appeared from the trees onto the lawn. She had two or three other hyenas not far behind her. My father stood up and slowly approached her. The other hyenas disappeared. It sniffed my father for quite some time and then turned and disappeared into the bush.

We never saw her again, but we sometimes heard hyenas calling and we hoped it was her.

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PetaJ · 10 days ago

I also grew up in Rhodesia and this story reminds me of one of my own. A local farmer arrived at the house one day with a baby duiker he had found in a trap dug by the farmworkers that had killed its mother. He was christened Bambi for obvious reasons and my father put him in an old chicken coop while my mother started hand-feeding him. However, after a couple of days the poor little thing's nose was raw from trying to get out so my mother brought him into the house and he followed her around all day. His favourite thing was to sit on the sofa next to my father in the evening watching TV. If my parents turned the set off before the old black-and-white contrast squares appeared meaning that there were no more programmes, Bambi would leap off the sofa and jump up and down in front of the set until it was turned back on!

After a while, he started to eat leaves and grass outside in the garden. When he was about seven months old he mysteriously sickened, his body bloated and he died. We were heart-broken. The local vet did an autopsy and discovered that he had eaten a particular kind of leaf of which the chemical composition changed with the onset of the first rains. Had he been with his mother she would have prevented him from eating them. Rhinos are also herbivorous so perhaps something similar is what happened to Rupert.

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riley7 · 11 days ago

I had friends in Rhodesia and it was a beautiful Country and very stable... Now we see what dung allowed to rise to the surface looks like.... To me, though a nobody, Mugabe is a war criminal... And why does thr world allow this dictator to treat people in the manner he does?..... Long ago I leaned it is not the color of persons skin that is important, it is the "color" of their heart in life that is important...

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