

Intimate NATURE

The Bond Between
Women and Animals

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FAWCETT COLUMBINE
THE BALLANTINE PUBLISHING GROUP • NEW YORK

her chest. It was cajoling, and it drew the birds up onto the edge of the nest, flapping their wings.

One and then the other would take its place at the edge of the nest. Testing for flight, they would jump up, teeter, flap their wings awkwardly, and eventually fall back into the nest, seemingly exhausted or hoping that Mama Bird would see their difficulty and just bring them their food. But she just continued her song, low and sweetly, "It is your time, it is your time, you must come, you must come."

All of this I watched for hours from my station out beyond the porch, beyond the driveway, crouched low, sitting, watching, and waiting. Each new attempt drew my silent urging in consort with Mama Bird for them to go up and out. I dared not even go to the bathroom.

Finally the bigger of the two birds made his most courageous effort. He unfolded his wings, and stretching them, he went even further than before. He pulled himself up and out as if unwrapping to become a larger bird. It was as though the timer of his instinct had just gone off, and he knew something now that only moments before he hadn't. Once more he mounted the edge of the nest. With wings in motion, he chirped to Mama Bird. She, in return, cooed low and soft, steadily imploring, imploring. In measured response, a loosened grip, an edging forward in one last tilt that almost looked like falling, the bird flew off.

Having held my breath, for how long I could not say, I gasped and lunged slightly forward. With my heart pumping the sound of oceans through my ears, time stood still, all was silent witness, and one flight stood out from among countless first flights taken.

HAND-RAISING A RHINO IN THE WILD

Anna Merz

Samia, the female black rhino who was my pride and my joy, was born ten years ago in the Ngare Sergoi Rhino Sanctuary on the western side of Lewa Downs, a 45,000-acre cattle ranch situated on the northern slopes of Mt. Kenya. I have lived all my life with animals and I have hand-raised many, but Samia was truly unique. Between us there existed a love, a trust, a reaching out for understanding unlike anything I had known in a relationship before. With her there was none of the usual relationship between man and beast. I never tried to discipline or hold her; she lived as a wild rhino. Yet of her own free will, she kept alive with me the bonds of love, trust, and friendship until her death.

Early in 1984 the sanctuary received its first rhinos, including Samia's mother, Solia. At the present time there are nineteen white and twenty-two black rhinos. Twenty calves have been born here. Not all have survived, but those that died, died of natural causes; none have been poached.

On February 15, 1985, Solia gave birth to a calf, Samia, and promptly deserted her. At that time I knew virtually nothing about rhinos, and certainly nothing about raising rhino babies, not even the proper composition of black rhino milk. Over weeks and months I battled with Samia's unending bouts of diarrhea, dehydration, and abnormal temperatures. As a tiny baby, she slept in my bed, causing matrimonial complications with the amazing messes she produced. Raising her was a series of crises, but at about six months, she started to stabilize.

Each day I walked her over ever-increasing distances to introduce her to the world of which she would be a part and its inhabitants. I remember our first encounter with a group of giraffes; long black eyelashes aflutter, they peered at us with astonishment, this strange combination of old woman, baby rhino, and black dog. Samia didn't see them until they moved and

then, in terror at their size, dashed between my legs for safety. This was not a practical proposition and I sat down with a thud. Unable to get under me she compromised by sitting on my prostrate form, snorting her disapproval.

Samia learned quickly that I did not really appreciate being knocked over, even in play, and as her strength grew so her gentleness with me increased. As we walked, she would, of her own accord, offer a helping tail to pull me up the steeper trails. When I weaned her at three and a half years, I expected the bond between us to loosen, as would be only natural, but it never did. For ten years, Samia and I were companions, and even when she was mature and integrated with the wild rhinos, she usually returned to visit with me at least once a day.

During our time together, she taught me so much about the world of the rhino that I could never have learned otherwise. I also tried to teach Samia what I thought she would need to know in order to survive. But I was not always successful. To help Samia develop her sense of smell, I hid, hoping she would put her nose to the ground and search after me. Instead, she went to the garden gate, opened it to let the dogs out, then galloped after them straight to me. By no stretch of the imagination can this be described as instinctive behavior.

Rhinos are not, as reputed, solitary, bad-tempered, stupid animals. I had been warned that after my experience with chimps in Ghana, I would find them dangerous and boring. Rather the opposite. Rhino intelligence is close to that of chimps and their outstanding characteristics are curiosity and nervousness rather than aggression. Through her incredible intelligence, Samia was able to reveal a great deal about the social structure of rhino society and much of the complex methods of communication her species uses, including a wide variety of noises and the regulation of breathing to form a sort of Morse code of sound.

In the beginning of our relationship, I was the teacher and the protector. As she matured our roles reversed, and she showed herself capable of teaching and protecting me. A few weeks before the birth of Samia's own calf, she joined me, which was not unusual, when I was walking the dogs one evening. The thick tropical dusk was falling when three rhinos emerged on the track ahead of us. To avoid them I would have to make a long detour through the thorny bush in the dark. Samia, sensing both my fear and my indecision, realized my predicament and took charge of the situation. She knew these three white rhinos well and would normally have ignored them. Now, she trotted up to them, ears laid flat, huffing and hurrumphing angrily, and they retreated in astonishment at her aggressive behavior. Satisfied that they were routed, she returned to me and the dogs and escorted us safely past where they had been. When she was satisfied that we were safe, she left us to resume her own affairs.

When Samia was mated it was by the wild and violent-tempered bull Kenu. He was a small but immensely powerful rhino and many times he came near my house. On one occasion, Samia saw I was in danger and moved very quickly between us with the intention of stopping his charge. Another day Samia and Kenu visited me together. I went to the gate to greet her not realizing he was there. She stood between us and I could sense his rage and hatred of me, his desire to obliterate both me and that gate that stood between us. For forty long minutes we three stood together and I could both see and hear the breathing patterns by which they were communicating with one another. I could literally see the control that Samia was exercising over his behavior. The first time she protected me, I thought it was chance and good luck, but the second and subsequent times revealed her focus and intention. From running to me for safety, she had come to act as my protector against buffalo and her own kind, but never had I expected her to actually protect me from her own mate.

On the morning of April 11, 1995, I learned, via a radio call, that Samia had had a baby. With both joy and terror, I and a tracker crept to where I could see her, feeding quietly. Deep in the long grass near her flickered the tips of two long ears. There was no sound but that of Samia's munching. I was relieved because I knew from painful experience that baby rhinos cry only if they are in trouble. Half an hour later, the tiny creature staggered to its feet, wobbled round Samia's hind legs, thrust its wee nose into her flank, and started to suckle. Samia stopped feeding and stood quietly while it drank from first one teat and then the other. There was no doubt that she had milk, nor was there any doubt as to the baby's sex—Samia had a son.

Two days later, I was watching her with two trackers and was so absorbed that I did not notice the change in the wind. The trackers moved back but she had got my scent. Now what? These long years of observation have taught me that rhinos are fiercely protective mothers and very solitary for the first year of their baby's life. My knees were shaking so much I had to sit down. Then Samia came to me and, as she had in the past, rested her great head in my lap. While her baby stood a scarce foot away wearing a bewildered expression, I rubbed behind her ears and gently told her how clever she was and how beautiful her son was with his huge ears, blunt nose, big feet, and pearl satin skin. Obviously the bond we had created over the past ten years had withstood his birth.

When Samuel was still a few days old, Samia came to me, leaving him sleeping under a nearby bush. She was standing beside me when he awoke and cried out in fear at finding himself alone. Samia's action was swift and wholly instinctive. She swiped me sideways with her head, knocking me to the ground, and ran to him. Seeing that no harm had

befallen him, she returned to me, still sitting where I had fallen. She thrust her nose at me and I assured her that I was unhurt. Then she turned and, as often in days gone by, presented me with her tail for a pull up!

I never attempted to touch her baby, but slowly he got used to my scent and his inborn fear of me lessened. Almost daily at dawn, Samia would come to visit me with him at heel. Each day would start with the knowledge that they were well and safe and that she knew how to raise and protect her child. Frequently, hand-raised animals do not.

I had worried whether Samia would appreciate the dangers surrounding her baby; there was so much I had not been able to teach her. But after some time, I realized that these fears were groundless. Samia had also always been fully aware that I only pretended to eat thornbushes and had not been able to teach her how to manipulate the thorn in her mouth. But at four months, Samuel browsed on these same thornbushes alongside his mother. It was something very beautiful to behold. I watched Samia's affection for her baby, saw how the bond between them became stronger, and felt quite ridiculously proud of her.

Because our April rains virtually failed, I started to supplement Samia's natural browse with a small quantity of alfalfa so her milk wouldn't fail. Almost daily at dawn, she came to my garden fence with her baby. As soon as she heard me open the door, she called to tell me that she was there and hopeful of being fed. The rest of the day she spent in the bush. Seeing her thus was my greatest joy.

Then tragedy struck. Samia did not come to visit me one morning. I went down the valley with Patrick, a tracker, to look for her and found her dead. She was lying on her back below the cliff from which she and her child had fallen. Her death must have been instantaneous. Her baby lay nearby, still alive. I tried to help him rise, but being unable to do so, sent Patrick with the radio to call for help. For two hours, I knelt beside little Samuel, offering what poor comfort I could. Nearby a leopard was grunting, but I could not see it. The valley was beautiful, full of birds and color, and I thought of the many happy hours and days that Samia and I had spent there.

Ian Craig, who came with ropes and other people, realized what I had not, that the baby rhino's back was broken low down near his tail. A merciful shot ended his suffering. Later, after the local Game Warden had come to remove Samia's horns, the trackers laid Samuel beside his mother and I went to say good-bye to them and to cover them with a sackful of flowers.

Samia's death has to me been a tragedy. There was real love and friendship between us and I miss her all the time. Beyond that it was my dearest hope that through her life and that of her child, awareness of and caring for her species could be awakened. In her life, she had proved beyond all doubt that there can be a meeting between two wholly disparate species.

URSA MINOR

Judith Freeman

Nobody could remember a time when there had been so many bears in the valley, not even the old-timers who had lived there all of their lives. It was early fall, and the weather was turning. We had had the worst summer of fires in many years, and endured the ninth year of drought. In the high country of Idaho the berry bushes were brown, and the streams had dried up. Hungry and facing the prospect of winter, the bears began moving down into the valleys.

They visited ranches up and down the Salmon River, rooted in garbage behind the Clayton Store, and fed in apple trees under the cover of night. Then they grew bold and were spotted even in daylight. It seemed to happen almost overnight, the bears coming into our lives and creating what the locals began calling the "bear problem."

I guess it was a problem, although when I think of it now I see it more as a gift. And I think particularly of a certain brown sow and her cub.

It all began one night when the sound of something crashing out on the porch woke my husband, Tony, and me. I stayed in bed while he went to investigate. He crept into my study where there was a door to the back porch and a switch for the outside light. When he turned on the light and looked out, he saw a bear standing on all fours next to an overturned barbecue, looking back at him through the window.

My husband called out softly, "There's a bear out here on the porch," and quickly I went to see. We huddled together, both naked (and feeling somehow more vulnerable because of that nakedness), and peered out at the bear, only a few feet away.

It was a brown bear, and she seemed in no hurry to leave. Of course she sensed us there at the window, and for a while she stared fixedly at that spot. Her snout was a honey-brown color and her coat appeared