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Walking with Rhinos

The Story of Anna Merz

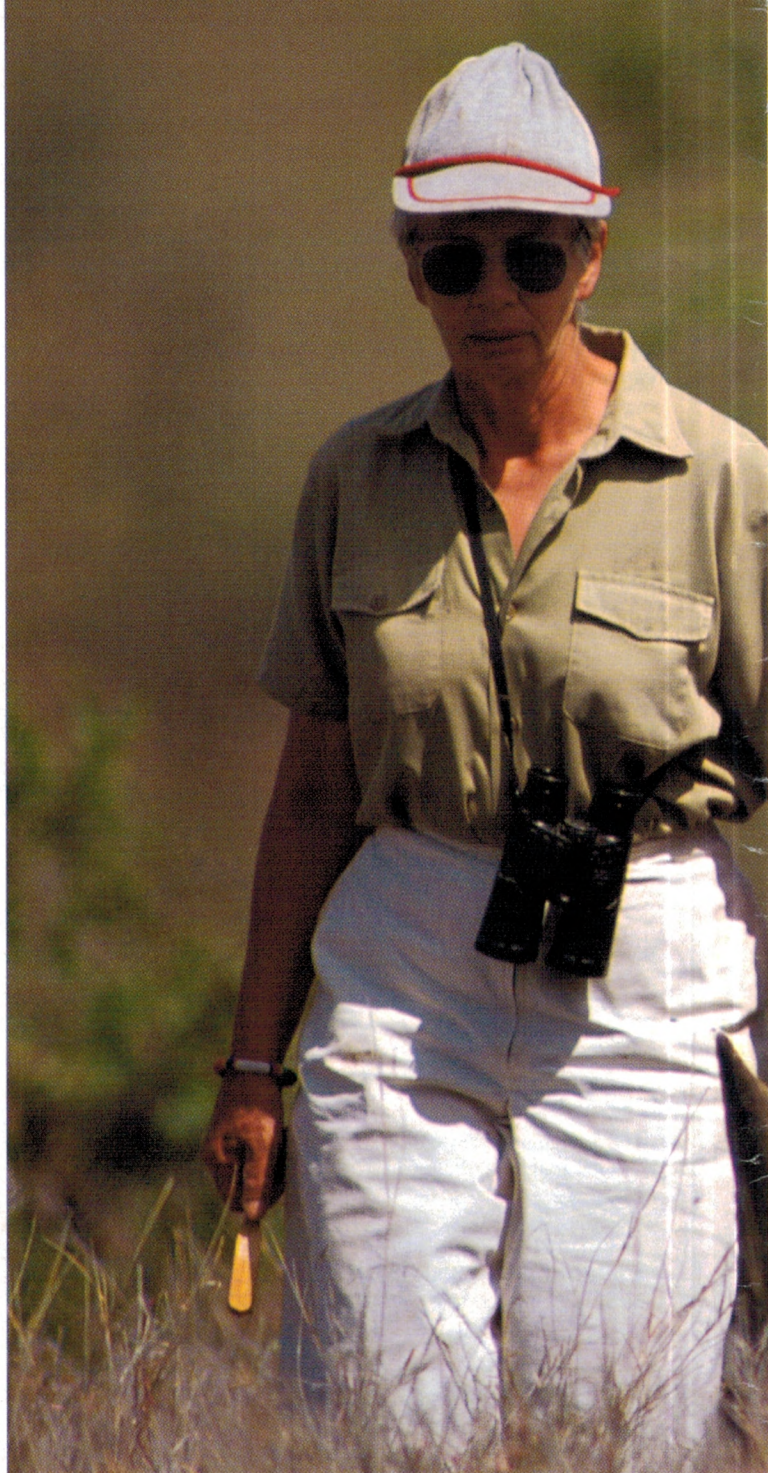


The day Samia the rhino didn't show up changed Anna Merz's life forever. But their remarkable story also changed the way humans think about – and protect – rhinos.

*By Elisabeth Braun
Photographs by Gerry Ellis*

It was a cool, hazy February evening at Lewa Downs in Kenya, and I was accompanying Anna Merz and her beloved dogs on their daily evening walk. Strolling through the ranch's vast expanse of acacia trees and scrub, we were soon joined—as if on cue—by Samia, a small, precocious female rhino.

Samia breathed and snorted in different rhythms and tonalities. She ambled forward and turned her hefty bulk graciously to look back at Merz. I could only assume that Samia, ears pricked up and tail swinging gently, was trying to tell Merz something. After years of observing rhinos in her sanctuary, Merz knew Samia was communicating. And with the familiarity of well-attuned friends,



Gerry Ellis/Ellis Nature Photography

the two engaged in a banter that, in human terms, would surely be called a catch-up conversation at the end of a long workday.

This was a typical day's close at the Ngare Seroi Rhino Sanctuary—for Merz, for her dogs, and for Samia. Despite her freedom to roam the sanctuary's 61,000 acres, the then 8½-year-old rhino was often found lingering near Merz's residential compound on the ranch. Merz and Samia, it was obvious, were quite special to each other. And the deliberate interactions between human and animal on this day, as well as over the short 10-year course of Samia's life, amply demonstrated that there can exist a singular intuitive



Anna Merz and Samia. Raised to roam wild in the 61,000-acre Ngare Sergoi Rhino Sanctuary, the intelligent Samia made her daily visits to Merz a lifelong devotion.

Below: Powerful electric fences surround the Kenyan refuge to help keep black rhinos safe from poachers, many of them armed with AK-47s.

relationship of trust, understanding, and comfort between a civilized human and a wild animal.

It has taken Merz years to develop such a facility. In her quest to help save Samia's species, she has experienced unexpected, heart-warming rewards from the rhinos at Ngare Sergoi—and also her share of personal hardship and pain, recurring financial pressures, and at times the bemused commentary of conservation scientists on her no-nonsense methodologies. After establishing an impressive refuge for rhinos to preserve them from





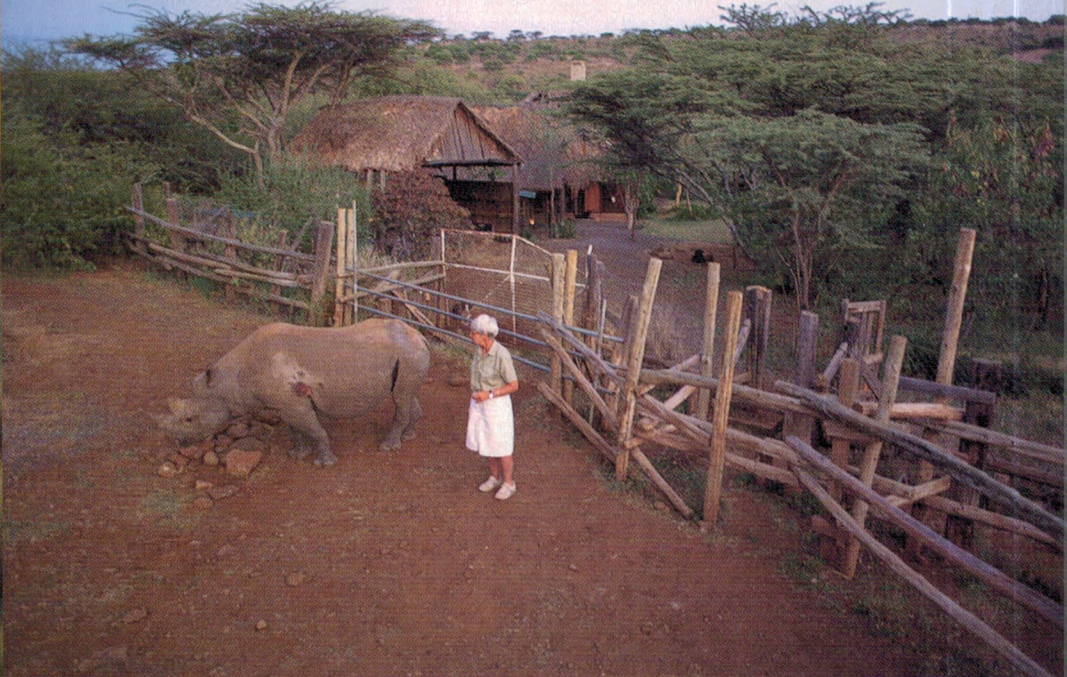
poachers, however, Merz has never considered giving up in the face of adversity. "The more difficult the situation gets," says the English expatriate, "the more determined I am."

Merz began her rhino-saving endeavors in the early 1980s, when American Esmond Bradley Martin, a world authority on the illicit rhino-horn trade, alerted her to the precarious status of the endangered rhinos of Africa and Asia.

"The rhinos were in Kenya, I was in Kenya, and the rhinos were in terrible trouble," recalls Merz, who resolved to establish and fund a sanctuary specifically for black rhinos. She then set out to find suitable habitat. After a lengthy, often frustrating search for an understanding and cooperative landowning partner, Merz met David and Delia Craig, who invited her in 1982 to establish a sanctuary at their ranch, Lewa Downs—now the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy. At last, the Ngare Sergoi Rhino Sanctuary was born.

Located south of snow-covered Mount Kenya, a six-hour bumpy car ride north of Nairobi, Lewa is a vast terrain of upland grass plains dotted with thorn trees and bushes and divided by deep wooded valleys. Initially the Craigs extended 5,000 acres to the sanctuary, but by 1993 the sanctuary had grown to 61,000 acres, including the Ngare Sergoi Forest Reserve to the south of the property. Around this vast terrain, 42 miles of 8-foot-high, 5,000-volt electric fencing was erected to deter ever ready poachers. Vigilantly patrolled by game guards, the fencing has done its job, and to date no rhinos from Ngare have fallen victim to the lucrative trade in their horns.

Nestled in the sanctuary is Merz's fenced-in compound of houses, stables, and bomas—a collection of individual thatched-roof structures that withstand both summer and winter and welcome the intermittent rhino arrivals and not-too-frequent human visitors. This is a place for animals and only secondarily for humans. To Merz, it is home. Her faithful companions are her dogs



Left: The illicit horn trade has reduced black-rhino numbers to a dangerous low of 1,500 to 2,000 in sub-Saharan Africa.

Above: Merz and Samia outside her sanctuary compound.

Below: Merz and local trackers on one of their daily forays to monitor rhinos in the safe haven.



and a small, dedicated support staff of local trackers, workers, and assistants.

The working days at Ngare Sergoi are long, particularly for the trackers who monitor the movements of the rhinos on the expansive terrain, and they are often full of the unexpected closer to home. "One thing unknown here is boredom," says Merz as she explains how easily the sanctuary can be called to alert. One of the early rhinos, Morani, liked to bang Merz's ancient Land Rover with his horn. The noise delighted him but frequently set off the fence alarm. "Is it a *shifita* [Somali poacher]," Merz would worry, "or two giraffe bulls having a tête-à-tête over the top of the wire, or a tortoise wandering along the fence touching the lowest wire with his shell?"

So far, Ngare Sergoi has successfully protected its

rhinos. It is one of what Merz calls "scattered arks in the form of national parks, reserves, and private sanctuaries that will ultimately safeguard species from being pushed into the abyss of extinction." With that abyss particularly close for East Africa's rhinos, Ngare Sergoi aims to help stabilize Kenya's rhino population and build up their numbers through undisturbed breeding in a congenial environment—so that newborn rhinos may eventually be translocated to other suitable Kenyan habitats.

Godot—aptly named, since Merz and the Craigs waited so long for him to arrive—was the first rhino at Merz's sanctuary. A massive and awe-inspiring fellow, he had to be evacuated from the Kitengela, a conservation area adjacent to Nairobi National Park, after he insisted on straying beyond the park's borders—a potentially fatal enterprise.

Since then dozens of rhinos, all of Kenyan origin, have come to or passed through the sanctuary and been christened with indigenous names, such as Shaba, Solia, Zaria, Rongai, and Amboni. As Merz had hoped, Ngare Sergoi has seen some of its rhinos give birth; and it has seen others reintroduced to areas where it is hoped the species can replenish itself. Today, 23 black rhinos and 22 white rhinos call the sanctuary home.

But Merz's all-time favorite was Samia, who was born at Ngare Sergoi on February 15, 1985, and died there just 10 short years later. Merz knew Samia every



day of her life at the sanctuary. She had hand-raised her for 3 1/2 years through many life-threatening crises to adulthood after Solia, Samia's mother, abandoned her newborn for lack of milk. Merz nurtured Samia as a wild animal that experienced human contact and understanding, but she never treated her like a pet. She delighted in their close bonds, which grew deeper each year. And she rejoiced at the safe birth of Samuel, the progeny of Samia and Kenu, who mated in Ngare Sergoi's wilds. In her book, *Rhino at the Brink of Extinction*, she wrote, "When I brought the newborn rhino calf home . . . I was not looking for any reward other than the satisfaction of seeing her live and become self-supporting and independent. She has, however, repaid me a thousandfold for all my troubles and anxiety. She has given me her love, her trust, and her friendship."

Despite her deliberate intellectual detachment, Merz was not prepared for the tragedy that struck on November 21, 1995. Alerted to potential danger when Samia and her three-month-old Samuel did not make their usual appearance at her compound, Merz and one of her trackers set out for a search. When they found Samia, she was dead, having fallen over a cliff after what appears to have been an altercation between her and her ill-tempered mate, Kenu, the night before. Samia died instantly, but Samuel—who had never yet left his moth-

er's side—followed her into the chasm. He was still alive but fatally injured with a broken back when Merz and the tracker found the two rhinos the next day. With no realistic hope of the infant rhino's survival, Merz had to make the difficult decision to put him out of his misery.

A sense of gratitude for having known such closeness with a wild animal echoes with every word Merz uses to recall the incident: "Now at home with the wind in the north I can smell them sometimes—she whose breath was always so sweet. I have lived my life with animals and have hand-raised many, but my relationship with Samia was unique. . . . I never tried to discipline or hold her—she lived as a wild rhino, as part of the local community. Yet of her own free will, she kept alive the bond between us."

In fact, when Samuel was born, Merz expected the deep bonds between her and Samia to break, and she says she was prepared for that. But quite the opposite occurred: Samia continued to seek Anna's company. Once, when tiny Samuel cried out for his mother, Samia rushed instinctively toward him, bumping Merz to the ground on the way. After the mother had seen to her son, she returned to Merz to offer her, as she had so many times before, her tail for a "pull-up."

Samia had lived to adulthood and given birth to a son. But many female rhinos in Kenya have not been so



Joni Prudek

Left: Two males engage in a territorial dispute. Even if initially hand-raised, Ngare Sergoi rhinos must learn wild ways in order to survive, mate, and rear young.

Above: David and Delia Craig gave over thousands of acres of ranchland to help Merz establish her sanctuary.

fortunate. Between 750,000 and 1 million black rhinos once roamed the entire sub-Saharan. Although the wanton killing of rhinos for their horns had been going on for centuries, the first wholesale slaughter began in the mid-19th century when Western adventurers and relentless traders arrived on the African continent and sold the powdered horn mostly to an

eager Asian clientele. Consisting of keratin, the exact same substance as human fingernails and toenails, rhino horn was ground and mixed with other ingredients and used as a fever-reducing ingredient and miracle medicinal substance. Despite research establishing the fever-reducing quality of rhino horn as being equal to that of two aspirin tablets, the myth of the curative powers of rhino horn runs deep and to this day has a loyal following.

Today 1,500 to 2,000 black rhinos remain in Africa. About 400 are in Kenya; the only other viable populations reside in South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe. The persuasive skills of Esmond Bradley Martin and other experts and the pressure of various advocacy groups and government authorities have reduced rhino-horn shipments to North Yemen, where the intact horn has traditionally been fashioned into decorative dagger handles, a sign of Yemeni manhood and wealth. Taiwan, too, remains a target of international lobbying. With Asian horn fetching up to \$52,000 per kilo, Taiwan is said to use rhino horn as bullion to back its national currency. Banking on the extinction of all rhino species, Taiwan could

expect to garner a huge return on its investment in poached rhino-horn stock.

Despite efforts to safeguard Kenya's rhinos deep in the interior, the long, unprotected borders with Somalia to the east and with

Ethiopia to the north do not bode well. Armed with AK-47s left over from endemic guerrilla warfare in the region, Somali *shiftas* cross the unpatrolled border, kill whatever rhinos they can, and swiftly transport their horns overland to the African coast. There they are loaded on small local dhows drifting down the coast to such commercial ports as Mombasa, where more

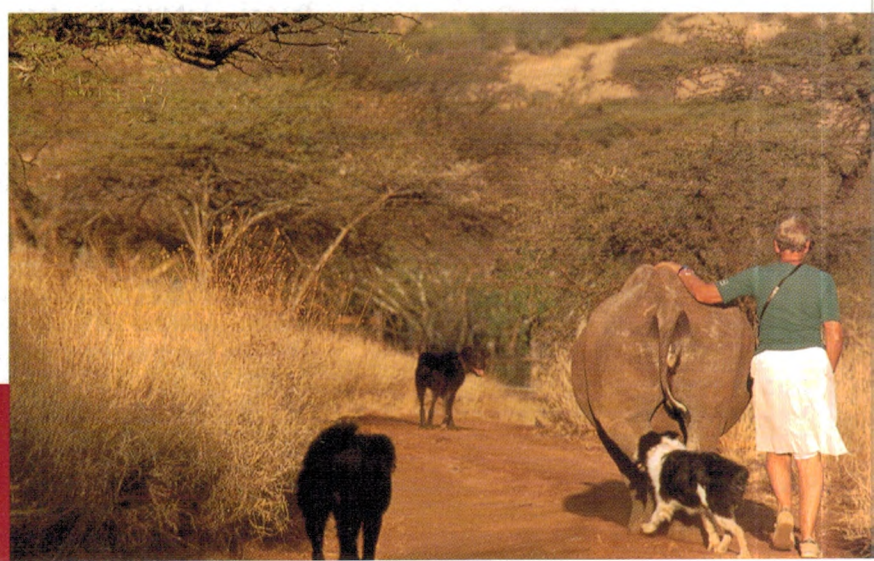
seaworthy vessels wait to load the illicit cargo and take it across the Indian Ocean to destinations farther east. Animal and human life are readily expendable in this sordid business, and the pitiful fees paid to African collaborators in a single poaching are often more than they would earn during a whole year of regular employment.

All of which underscores the difficulty—and importance—of personal contributions such as Merz's and the Craigs'. "When people are dying of starvation and disease and need money to survive, you cannot expect governments to set aside funds for wildlife protection," laments Merz. Help, she believes, must come from the private sector. At Ngare Sergoi, that is just what has happened, though one could argue the effort has been aided by the personal contribution of one rhino as well. And that, of course, would be Samia.

Elisabeth Braun, author of Portraits in Conservation: Eastern and Southern Africa, has lived and worked in Namibia and elsewhere in Africa.

For more information, contact the Rhino Trust, 4045 N. Massachusetts Avenue, Portland, OR 97227. (503) 288-3521; e-mail, RhinoTrust@aol.com).

For years Samia joined Merz and her dogs on evening walks, a daily ritual that ended when the beloved rhino—who taught the world much about how her species communicates—met an untimely death.



Animals

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Special Report

Peregrine Paradox

Captive breeding has put more peregrine falcons back into California's skies, prompting wildlife managers to consider withdrawing protections. But, writes Galen Rowell, the world's fastest raptors are still a long way from regaining their place as a self-sustaining wild species. **20**



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Mica Makes the Grade

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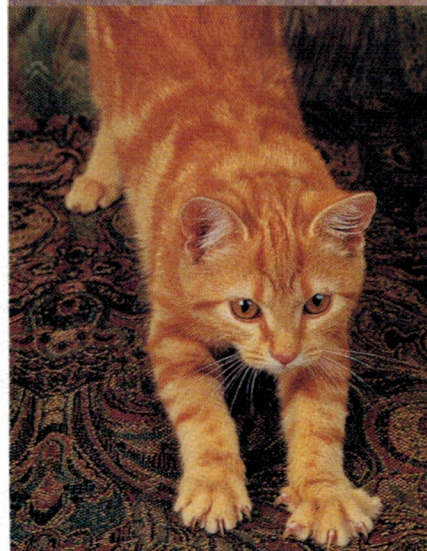
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Cats hate change. Moving means change. Ergo cats hate moving. But, advises W. Bradford Swift, there are ways you can make moving day less of a hair-raising experience for the feline in your life. **26**



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Cover: Peregrine falcon photograph by Galen Rowell/Mountain Light.



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