

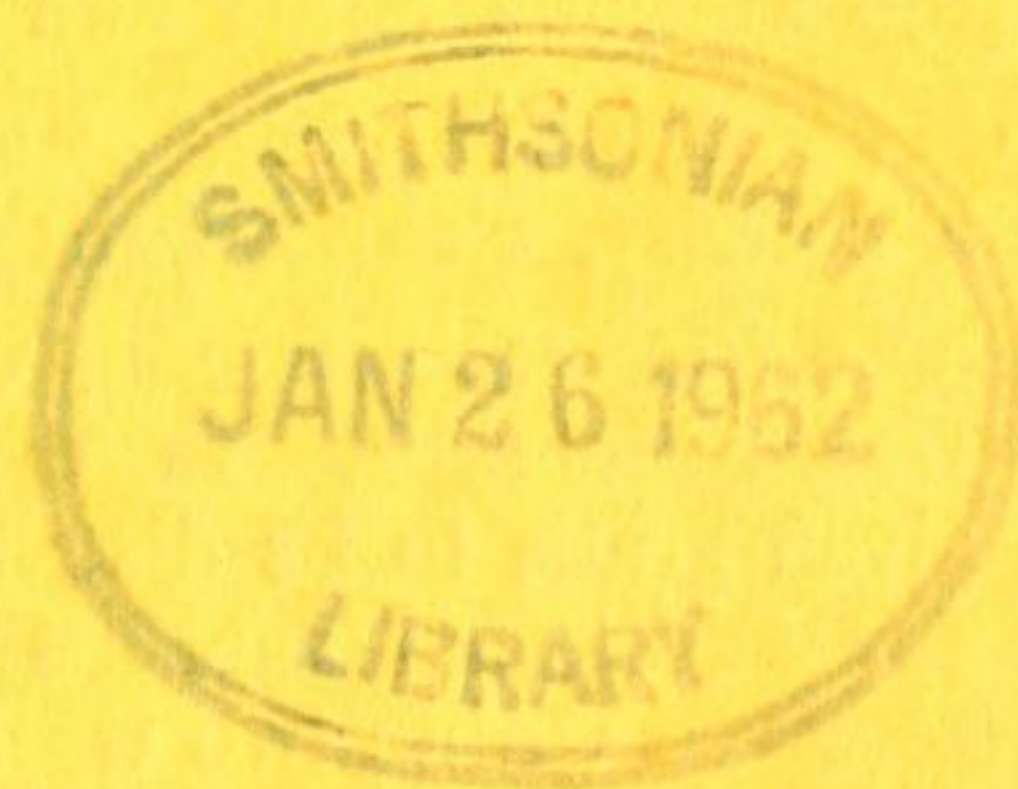
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The White Rhino of Hluhluwe

BY

O. H. DE ST. CROIX

*(With two plates)*

Mention of a game reserve in the Union (now Republic) of South Africa usually turns the mind to the world-famous Kruger National Park in eastern Transvaal, with its vast area and great range of wild life. It may not be generally known that there are a number of much smaller game reserves in different parts of the Union, some of them for the protection of a particular species in its former habitat. The province of Natal has been especially forward in establishing smaller game reserves of this kind, most of which are in the Zululand area. Among these are the two White Rhinoceros reserves at Hluhluwe and Umfolosi, of which the former appears at present to be much the better organised for casual visitors.

The Zulu language, though melodious to the ear, presents some formidable problems to the foreign tongue, with its register of clicks and other pitfalls of pronunciation. At first sight the word Hluhluwe seems to be one of them. But if the two 'hl' sounds are pronounced as rough aspirates and the ending is made to rhyme with 'Hooey' the result will be understandable to the local inhabitants.

This Reserve (estimated at 57,000 acres or 89 sq. miles) lies in the northern part of Zululand about 180 miles north of Durban and is easily accessible by motor road. For a start the way lies along the new Natal north coast national road and one might be travelling through the south of India so thick is the Tamil population of the towns and villages along the first 30 miles or so of the route. Then, after passing the modern town of Stanger, once the site of Shaka

Zulu's royal kraal a fine new bridge carries the road over the historic Tugela River into what is now the heart of Zululand. There is ample evidence hereabouts that sugar is king, for on either side of the road as far as the eye can see stretches an apparently limitless sea of sugar cane. It is not grown here in small patches as in India but in mass, sometimes extending unbroken over many acres. The result is that the pastoral scenery typical of Zululand, with its gently undulating down-like hills and occasional patches of bushveld, has been transformed.

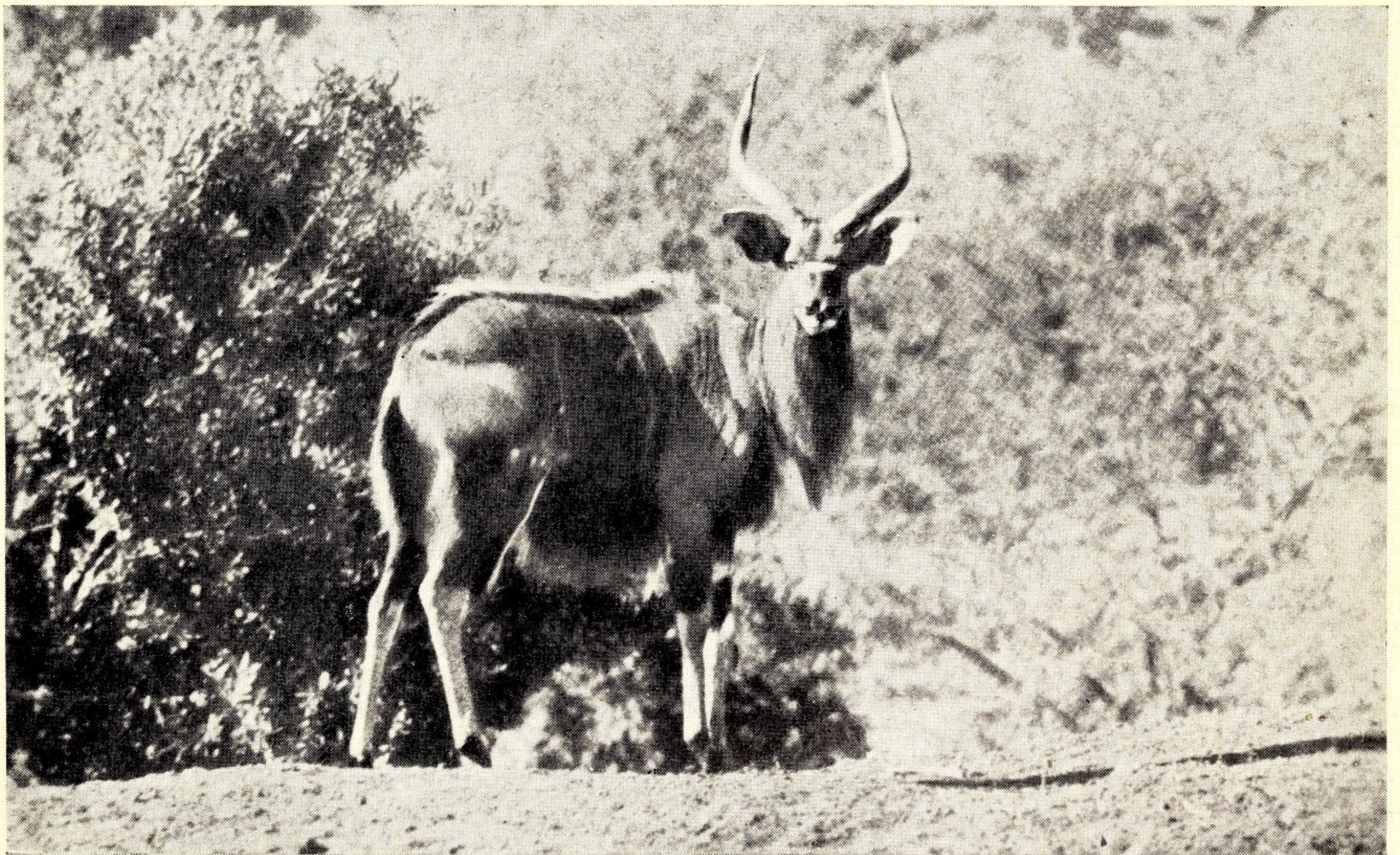
On reaching Mtubatuba some 150 miles from Durban there are signs that the modern way of life is being left behind. From here the road stretches away, metalled but not asphalted, to Swaziland and the Mozambique border. The way to the Reserve shortly takes a turning off inland and almost at once one is in a much wilder environment. It is now a landscape of steeper undulations, extensive stretches of bushveld, and occasional rocky outcrops. It is not a thickly populated region and only small bee-hive kraals are to be seen dotted about sparsely. There are not many signs of cultivation but cattle of many sorts abound and there is every appearance of overgrazing.

Soon another turning branches off and thence the way is over little more than a rough track. In a few miles this reaches the fenced and gated boundary of the Reserve. Here visitors have to check in with their reservations at the gate lodge and are also given comprehensive information and instructions covering their stay. The road then runs for several miles through the Reserve itself. At first it is past open savannah and park-like country. Presently thick bush closes in on both sides and, although a fair speed is being kept up, quite a variety of wild life is to be seen in fleeting glimpses. A troupe of baboons, a party of guinea fowl, several wart hog and Impala antelope, a solitary Nyala buck are all visible by the roadside and scarcely heeding. Then of a sudden the road starts twisting and climbing through picturesque scenery up to the ultimate destination.

The camp site is ideally located along the flat top of a narrow ridge at an altitude of about 1500 feet (460 m.) above sea-level. Coolness is thus assured at all times of the year and an absence of insect pests. There are delightful views on either side over grass-covered hills and deep wooded valleys. Thick forest lines the valley floors wherever perennial watercourses run and, where the hillsides have been sharply weather-carved, rocky cliffs and peaks protrude to vary the scene. Sometimes through binoculars wild life can be watched without even moving from the camp itself.



Visitors' Rest Camp at Hluhluwe Reserve

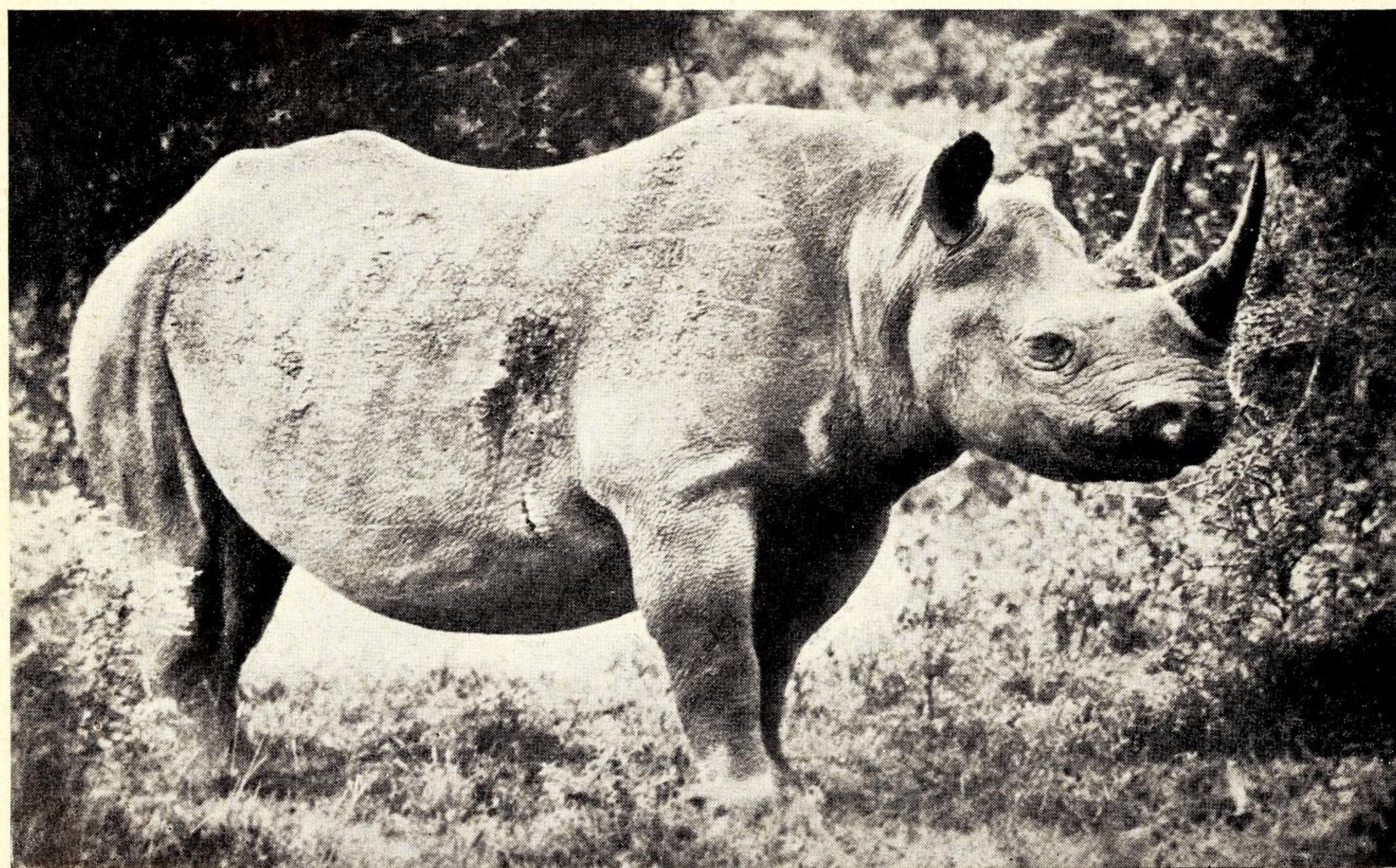


Nyala Buck in Hluhluwe Reserve

*Courtesy : Natal Parks, Game & Fish Preservation Board*



Square-lipped ('White') Rhinoceros



The Common, or Black Rhinoceros in Hluhluwe Reserve

*Courtesy : Natal Parks, Game & Fish Preservation Board*

Accommodation in the camp is of two kinds. There are cottages (not shown in the illustration) each absolutely self-contained and designed to house under one roof a party of up to six people if necessary, but four more comfortably. The suite consists of 2 large bedrooms, a sitting room, a dining room, a bath-room and a fully-equipped kitchen with store-room. The rondāvels (which are as shown in the illustration) are bed-sitting rooms for two with washing and eating facilities centralised externally. In either case the accommodation is fully and comfortably equipped and spotlessly clean. Literally, all the visitor has to bring are his food and drinks, except drinking water. All one has to do on arrival is to hand over one's supplies to the well-trained Zulu staff and the rest, with very little supervision, can be left to them. The camp has its own electric supply with current cut off between the hours of 10 p.m. and 5 a.m., running hot and cold water, with flush sanitation, and a limited petrol supply; telephone and telegraph facilities are also available. For all this the inclusive cost of occupation (excluding food and drink) should average between 15 shillings and 25 shillings per head per day only, according to the type of accommodation used.

Other items of administrative interest are: no dogs are allowed, bookings may not be made for more than 5 nights or more than 3 months in advance, there is a vehicular speed limit throughout of 25 miles (40 km.) per hour, and visitors are strictly confined to camp between sunset and sunrise, no one may camp out or sleep in a vehicle within the Reserve, no one may tour the Reserve without an authorised Game Guard or get out of a car while touring unless accompanied by him. It does not need much imagination to appreciate that these regulations are framed for very good reasons in the best interests of the visitors themselves.

Our arrival coincided conveniently with tea-time and, once the essentials of registering at the camp office, unloading gear, and onloading some tea are complete, we are ready to make the most of an evening excursion. A Zulu guide is allotted to us without delay, a strapping young man in smart khaki uniform and obviously capable of dealing effectively with even the most tiresome visitor. His knowledge of English is limited but one of the party is fortunately fluent (though clickless) in the Zulu language which adds very greatly to the interest of everything. These Zulu guides are also guards vested with certain powers, the tangible evidence of which is a pair of handcuffs fixed to their belts. They seem to be men carefully picked, not only for their physique and intelligence, but also

for their knowledge of and interest in wild life. They are certainly an impressive body of men who would be a credit to any organisation.

So, fully imbued with confidence in our guide now installed in the car, we set off not long after arrival down-hill in the opposite direction to that from which we came. It is the dry season and dusty, but the grass is short, visibility good, and the animals concentrated where there is good grazing. Almost at once we are in sight of Wildebeest (Gnu), Zebra, and Impala, the last named in some numbers. Presently, as the road descends into thicker bush, we begin to see Nyala in ones and twos but quite frequently. This is a species which is not so well known as most, being shy and a lover of dense cover. But it is quite a speciality in this Reserve, where it can be seen at very close quarters and to good advantage. It is not very spectacular as antelope go, yet the illustration will show that it has a distinctive beauty, a good deal of which is unfortunately lost without the colouring. The adult buck is a deep chocolate-brown with irregular, cream-coloured, vertical stripes, and quite modest horns with a single backward-sweeping twist. The doe and the young are a vivid chestnut and always seem to be in the sleekest of condition.

The next animal to come on view is a patriarch among male baboons sitting with a bored, proprietary air on a rocky eminence quite close to the road. But he is allowing no familiarities, for as soon as the car stops he turns his back rudely and ambles away. He utters a grunting signal call to his troupe as he goes and the swaying of trees all over the hillside shows that they are taking rapid but unseen evasive action. A little further on the guide suddenly jerks to the alert and says the word for which we have all been waiting—'Rhino'. But even with 2 pairs of binoculars trained on where he is pointing there appears to be nothing but the usual termite heaps and rocks protruding from the bushveld. Then one of them shifts and turns and the identification is obvious. It is a tribute to the guide's keenness of sight that he could pick out an object like this from a moving car about a quarter of a mile away. A quick appraisal of the situation now shows that we are up-wind, too far away and also that the light is wrong for photographs. So the car is turned and a long detour made to another road, which brings us down-wind and much closer to the objective.

We are now about 150 yards (140 m.) only from the nearest rhino and are able to see with some disappointment that it is one of the nearly related and much commoner 'Black' species. But the disappointment is partly offset by the prospect of possible excitement.

For the guide at once makes it clear that no liberties whatever are to be taken. We are allowed to get out of the car but only to move a few paces from it. The doors are all left wide open and the engine running, so that a very quick get-away can be made if necessary. As soon as the binoculars are focussed the reason for these precautions as also for most of the rules governing all conduct in the Reserve become obvious. The 'Black' Rhino is a most vicious and aggressive-looking animal. Though very heavily built his quarters give an impression of ponderous agility concealing a deceptive speed of movement, like an outsize all-in wrestler and just as ugly. His head is held high, tapered and fully armoured, the business-end of a powerful, self-activated battering ram. This one, the bull of the party, is evidently feeling his responsibilities and prepared to take on anything. He has detected the presence of humans but is unable to locate them precisely, which is exactly what our guide had planned. He shifts about, testing the air and snorting unpleasantly. We watch him closely through binoculars while photographs are taken, to the reassuring accompaniment of the car engine ticking over healthily. He is joined by a female of the species which appears to have a soothing effect; a third animal remains rummaging in the bush. But this interesting encounter has to be cut short since the position of the sun indicates a move homeward, somewhat to the guide's relief. He is under no delusion as to the Black Rhino's real character. The way back to camp is now by a wide circuit, touching the boundary of the Reserve, which has to be covered at fair speed. Yet there is something of wild life to see almost continuously. Unfortunately birds are not very plentiful in such dry weather. Guinea fowl are the most conspicuous and there are several glimpses of a small bustard, whose shyness makes exact identification impossible. A stop cannot be resisted when a herd of Buffalo is sighted, though some way off, grazing slowly along a steep, grassy slope. Except for the adult bulls they are not nearly such impressive animals as their Indian counterparts. Time has by now almost run out and the study of them has to be abandoned. As it is, the camp gate is reached only just before sunset.

When leaving us for the night our guide made it firmly but politely clear that a very early start was called for the following morning. So the whole party is up with the sun and witnesses a smart parade of the entire staff of Camp Guides. As soon as they are dismissed we are rejoined by our man and are soon on our way to a part of the Reserve not yet visited. At this early hour wild life is afoot in abundance. At first it is wart hog which steal the show, since they



are the quite unwitting comedians of the bushveld. Almost invariably they greet the visitor with a prolonged and searching stare. With snout held high and the formidable array of tusk well to the fore, there is a distinct resemblance to a senior army officer flaunting his traditional bristling, white moustache in highly truculent mood. The scrutiny complete, there is an abrupt about turn and the hog makes off at a smart trot, his whip-like tufted tail held rigidly vertical as an eloquent sign of extreme disapproval. His plump little hind-quarters seem to work overtime in keeping up with his more shapely forelegs and look like those of a squat scrum-half whose shorts are too tight for him.

Impala are on view in large numbers all along the road. A small herd composed entirely of bucks all with fully-developed horns shows what beautifully graceful creatures these antelopes in the adult male stage really can be. Elsewhere some does with fawns give an exhibition, for no apparent reason, of their well-known running-jumping act. In succession they literally soar through the air with a series of immense, leaping bounds as though impelled by hidden springs in their feet. If there were to be an animal Olympiad an Impala would surely be the hop-step-and-jump gold medallist. Further on a large herd of Wildebeest puts on for our benefit a sort of mass manoeuvre like a squadron of riderless cavalry on parade. They wheel and counter-march raggedly and then finish facing the car in a bunched, irregular line-abreast pawing the ground and snorting as though expecting applause.

Two new species now appear. A family of Waterbuck are seen standing close together in the open, frozen to inconspicuousness. Stocky and well built with heavy neutral-coloured coats, the buck has thick, corrugated, lyre-shaped horns and they all give an impression of extreme physical fitness and a capacity for endurance. Then there is a passing glimpse of two doe Kudu, rather unshapely and inelegant, with dowdy colouring and nervous, spinsterly temperament. They lack distinction but raise our hopes high of seeing a buck of the species, which certainly must share with the Sable (apparently not represented in this Reserve) a claim to being the most imposing and handsome of all the antelopes.

At a point where the road runs along the crest of a bare ridge commanding a good view the car is stopped, and the whole party deploys to bring binoculars into play. A long way off there is a herd of buffalo, aloof and grazing busily. But they are too far away to be watched with any interest. Somewhat nearer, on a steep open hillside is a large object like an animated, earth-coloured tank-lorry,

shambling around evidently in urgent search of fodder which is not so plentiful in this very dry season. The guide confirms that it is a 'White' Rhino but it is too far off to approach closer on foot and judging by its restless movements it has no intention of staying put for very long. So we have to be content with this very distant view until in a few minutes the Rhino disappears in its strenuous search for an adequate meal to start the day.

We now turn homewards on a circuitous route but there is still one more interesting encounter to come. From the top of a tallish thorn tree protrudes a row of shapely heads and at first sight it looks as though some of the larger antelope population have been indulging in climbing exercises. But closer inspection reveals that we have met the Reserve's one family of Giraffes. We advance to meet them on foot and, since they do not move, stand staring at them at a few yards' range with the thorn tree in between. The Giraffes, a female with partly grown young, remain motionless and return the stare with gentle, melting eyes, looking down on us with a pitying expression on their faces. Soon tiring of this mutual admiration society, we retrace our steps leaving the Giraffes still in the same position as when we first saw them. On the way we meet the bull of the herd, a huge handsomely-marked animal, by now quite a well-known character in this Reserve. He appears overjoyed at seeing us and follows like a dog back to the car. Even when we get in and slam the doors he still stands close by as if expecting something. He is now so close as to be within touching distance and we see every detail of his markings, including large numbers of ticks clustered on his underside. But the limit is reached when, overcome by curiosity or impatience, he tries to push his enormous head in at one of the windows. We start off abruptly back to the camp for, however friendly his intentions, a Giraffe of this size might be quite capable of overturning the car.

Since we have still not had a proper view of the real object of our visit, our guide insists that there will be no siesta. As this is our last afternoon we are obliged to admit the force of his contention. So at about 2 p.m. we set off again. It is the hottest time of a not very hot day and, unlike us, most of the animals are by now enjoying their siesta. But whereas the majority of them find full concealment in so doing, the 'White' Rhino, as our guide well knows, has long since given up trying to hide his enormous bulk merely for the observance of a daily routine. Thus for one who knows where to look it must be the easiest time of day to locate this animal and

by the way our guide is looking out of the window he is obviously confident of success. Sure enough before long he makes an urgent signal to stop and leaps out while the car is still moving. We look in the direction he is pointing and there, about half a mile (800 m.) away under an acacia tree, lies a mountainous grey shape, so large as to make the tree look like a lady's parasol. Binoculars identify it at once as an enormous 'White' Rhino, lying fast asleep with his legs tucked under him and his snout resting on the ground as if tired of supporting the large, scimitar-like nose-horn. The guide explains that we are now to make a tactical approach on foot to within range for close-up photography, and off we go at a cracking pace. A Zulu's idea of a cross-country walk is austere to say the least. It takes no account of thorn bushes, rocks, dry water-courses, steep banks, and the like; nor does it make any allowance for the softness engendered by 'civilised' life. We follow as best we can and are soon past caring. Then of a sudden, before we are fully prepared for it, we find ourselves with nothing but about 40 yards of bare veld between us and the still slumbering Rhino. The guide obviously scornful of our sweating and breathless condition, whispers that the time for photography will be strictly limited. We try to steady ourselves by looking through binoculars and are fascinated by what we see at such close quarters. But the Rhino is not alone, for clambering about his body are two ox-peckers, drab-coloured birds of the starling family, with blood-red beaks and about the size of a myna. Their function is to relieve their host of ticks and other parasites and this they are now doing with tireless energy, not omitting the most intimate and impertinent inspections. By way of reciprocation they appoint themselves as watchmen and presently these two give the alarm. The Rhino springs to its feet with surprising agility and at once stands facing us, apparently having been warned of our exact position.

The first impression is of a creature of gigantic size, like a sizeable elephant on short legs. It is now evident that this is a fully adult male and one is told that these stand nearly 6 feet at the shoulder and can weigh up to 5 tons. Yet its whole bearing and attitude reflect a humble docility which dispels any feeling of fear at the proximity of so huge a wild animal.

It may here be explained that the designation 'White' as applied to this species is really a misnomer and that it should more properly be called the 'Square-lipped' Rhino from a physical attribute which the illustration does not show clearly (the illustration incidentally

is of a much smaller specimen than that described). For whereas the other species is a browser and, as we saw yesterday, stands with his head held aggressively high, the Square-lipped Rhino is so equipped for grazing, and stands ponderously with its head held low like a corpulent old man bowed at the shoulders.

There is something enthralling about standing within a stone's throw of one of the world's rarest and largest land animals. It does not take long to realise why this one so nearly suffered extinction. For despite its great size and potential strength it is ill-fitted either physically or by temperament to protect itself against man's incessant persecution. Its equipment requires a sheltered, inoffensive life in an environment governed solely by Nature's own checks and balances.

The Rhino returns our inquisitive stare with timid, puzzled eyes and turns from side to side as if uncertain what to do next. A cloud of flies and other insects rises from its body at each movement and hangs around it like a haze. Then, satisfied as to our harmlessness and evidently convinced that it is not worth while resuming the interrupted siesta, it ambles slowly away on an erratic course across the veld grazing at random as it goes. We watch it out of sight with mixed feelings, composed of sympathy for such a mountain of helplessness and of satisfaction that something substantial has been saved from the welter of 20th century destruction.

As a finale we are taken to a place where the track ends on the bare summit of a hill, whence a fine view is to be had. From here there is a panorama covering a large area of the Reserve and comprising almost every type of scenery to be found in the South African bushveld. With a few sweeps of the binoculars our now practised eyes can pick out most of the species which have been encountered at closer quarters. Zebra are present in numbers but it is surprising how such a dazzle-coated creature can make itself so inconspicuous in broad daylight merely by standing still in the shadow of a tree. On a grassy slope below us stands a solitary Secretary Bird, easily identified by his slate-grey plumage and lanky build, a characteristic but increasingly rare sight in this type of country. He is an eagle on stilts, the arrangement of whose head feathers gives him his name and makes him look like a lean and spindly individual who has not brushed his hair. As we watch he struts about with a rolling, nautical gait searching the ground for food in a most un-eagle-like way. In some scrub jungle just beyond a rhino is moving around, but it is impossible to determine the species with only a rear view of its broad back. Overhead a pair of Bateleur Eagles soar

and wheel in widening circles. While so doing they display their curious propensity for side-slipping instability in flight as though indulging in a form of controlled aerobatics. Can this be due to their having been equipped by nature with most unusually short tails?

Then an excited comment from one of the party draws all binoculars to the point on which he is focussed. The glint of sun on a moving horn betrays the presence of a large animal. Can it be the one species we have so far missed seeing? A pair of binoculars is handed to the guide and without hesitation he confirms that it is what we hoped for. At last we have located a Kudu buck and a very fine one too. At first he is half concealed by the bush on which he is browsing. But soon, as if to oblige, he steps out into the open and stands in the full afternoon sunlight, showing to perfection what a superbly magnificent creature a male Kudu is in its prime. He is as large as a medium-sized pony and beautifully proportioned, with long, massive spiral horns flowing straight up from his head in perfect symmetry. The guide says there is a second buck present, having somehow spotted it with his naked eye. He points disdainfully to help out our fumbling efforts with the binoculars; at last we pick him out standing still in shadow, a marvel of protective coloration. He is every bit as fine a specimen as his companion, and it seems absurd that we could so easily have missed such a large animal in the open. But even in daylight the mouse-dun coat broken up with pale, irregular, vertical stripes provides a perfect camouflage when motionless. Now for several minutes we are able to enjoy an uninterrupted view, in a setting that could hardly be bettered, of a species which is certainly one of Nature's masterpieces. Then of a sudden they both appear to sense that they are under human observation and fade quietly into the bush.

We return to our base for the last time, reluctantly but with a feeling of deep satisfaction at having seen all we set out to see under such delightful conditions. There is a distinct atmosphere of depression the next morning at having to go back so soon to the 'civilised' way of life.

What lessons does the example of the Hluhluwe Reserve hold for the Indian conservationist? Local conditions and the type of wild life to be preserved do, of course, differ widely. But certain broad conclusions can undoubtedly be drawn.

Here in the first place is evidence that to be successful a Reserve need not necessarily be of enormous size, even if located in a settled agricultural region. For given good grazing with adequate perennial

water supply, both properly husbanded and conserved, and provided species suitable for the environment are selected for preservation, it is evidently possible to contain a large stock within a limited area without undue straying. In this context Hluhluwe maintains a very considerable stock of grazing and browsing animals without, so one is told, any predators. It would clearly be inadvisable to introduce lions in so restricted an area, but there appears no reason why leopard or cheetah could not be allowed. In the circumstances one wonders how the necessary checks are provided so as to prevent the usual consequences of overpopulation, which in the case of some species already appears to be in sight. Possibly judicious control is exercised by the wardens themselves or some of the lesser predators may in fact be present unseen in small numbers. It is an interesting question on which the writer unfortunately was unable to obtain any authoritative information.

Then again conditions at Hluhluwe give a satisfactory answer to the charge commonly made, and unhappily too often substantiated, that a game reserve merely creates a poacher's paradise. This will only be so if there is an inadequate staff or a staff insufficiently trained and of the wrong calibre or not vested with powers appropriate to the efficient discharge of their duties. The confiding behaviour of most of the animals in this Reserve bears eloquent enough witness to the very thorough control over human molestation which the staff is able to maintain.

Finally, and by no means least important, there is the practical demonstration that a well-stocked and intelligently-administered game reserve, backed by a soundly organised and comfortably (but not luxuriously) equipped rest camp can be an attraction to visitors from overseas in large numbers. 20,000 people visited the park in 1960, and it can hardly be denied that this represents a significant national asset.