

A LUCKY ESCAPE FROM A VERY UNLUCKY CIRCUMSTANCE



The rhino monitoring undertaken by the Lowveld Rhino Trust (LRT) relies predominantly on the age-old skill of spoor tracking. Fortunately this skill is still strong in Zimbabwe and is invaluable in both monitoring and protecting rhinos.

Natasha Anderson | Rhino Monitoring Coordinator, Lowveld Rhino Trust



Above: Squirt suckling while Mabuya receives her eye-drops

Monitoring patrols deploy daily to locate the target rhino spoor – be it a particular cow and calf combination or a single animal. The spoor is followed till the rhino is seen and its identity confirmed. Systematically, the entire population is confirmed with positive photo identifications.

The fact that thousands of rhino sightings are achieved by these men without incident is testament to their skills both in tracking and safely observing these magnificent but potentially very dangerous animals. Occasionally though, circumstances do contrive against them. It is remarkable how in an area of over 3,000km² two patrols tracking two different rhinos can end up in the exact same thicket.

Unfortunately for Constance Mpotegwa, a rhino monitor with LRT for over ten years, the upwind patrol's scent was carried onto the sleeping rhino he was quietly observing. Instantly alarmed, she was up and fully alert and running from the perceived threat – straight into Constance. Fortunately years of experience informed his response and instead of trying to run at such close quarters, which would have most likely resulted in a serious goring, he lay down flat and the cow ran over him, stepping on his chest and resulting in only a fractured collar bone. A lucky escape from a very unlucky circumstance.

Unfortunately, good rhino-tracking skills are not only held by monitors and anti-poaching rangers. Rhino poachers continue to pick away at these populations in an ongoing war of evolving tactics with anti-poaching units closing down one point of weakness only to have the poaching gangs identify an alternate attack. Combined, Bubye and Save Valley Conservancies have lost a detected total of 17 black and six white rhinos in 2015. Though the losses are significant for these populations, they are maintaining overall population growth due to the excellent breeding performance.

Under the current circumstances of high poaching threat, maintaining an accurate as possible picture of these important Key 1-rated rhino populations is vital. To help achieve this, LRT undertakes annual rhino management operations to ear-notch calves before they leave their mothers so their identity can be accurately known. So far

in 2015, 41 calves have been notched and there are 50 additional calves still too young to be notched but identifiable through their association with their mothers. These rhino management operations also provide an opportunity to conduct a sort of snapshot 'audit' of these populations by using fixed-wing and helicopter aircraft to spot and identify rhinos seen over these operation periods. Over 21 operational days in 2015, 352 rhino sightings were made from the aircraft, with 219 different individuals confirmed.

In addition to these routine management operations LRT also responds to emergency situations such as the capture of orphaned rhinos and treatment of injuries caused by snares, bullets or fighting between rhinos.

Grants

Since November 2014, Save the Rhino has sent a total of £23,651 to the Lowveld Rhino Trust, including \$8,000 from Knowsley Safari Park and €6,000 from Dublin Zoo (another €5,000 about to go) as well as other miscellaneous donations and core funds.



MABUYA & SQUIRT

Two rhinos that have required support recently are Mabuya and her calf Squirt. Mabuya was found wandering blind with penetrating wounds to the head, likely the result of a poaching attempt.

She was captured and her wounds treated – including twice-daily eye-drops over many months. While held in the bomas for treatment she gave birth; sadly Squirt developed serious diarrhoea so he was removed for treatment and is now being hand-raised with a poaching orphan called Sabi.

Mabuya's wounds healed well but she did not regain vision despite lengthy treatment. She has now been free-ranging for over three months and has worked out where the reliable water sources are, moving around her new home-range encouragingly well.



Above: A rhino ranger monitoring a black rhino