

The ongoing tale of **rhino orphans**

It is seven years since we released the first of our hand-raised black rhinos back into Buby Valley Conservancy. Some readers of *The Horn* may remember a story about five hand-raised black rhinos—Lisa-Marie, Carla, Blondie, Millie and Sassie!

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Not all stories of hand-raised wildlife end well, and black rhinos are no exception. Seeking human company, lacking rhino social skills, and naïveté about predators can all prove fatal flaws after their release. Buby Valley Conservancy has now raised and released a total of 10 black rhino calves, making special efforts to minimise human habituation with the overarching objective of giving calves the best possible chance of reintegrating back into natural, socially complex, black rhino populations.

The first hand-raised black rhinos released in Buby Valley Conservancy were Carla and Lisa-Marie back in 2009. This pair were released at two-and-a-half years old and remained together for two-and-a-half years until Lisa-Marie wandered off in the company of a bull. It may be that they

chose separate areas to establish their home ranges, but evidence does point to hand-raised rhinos being somewhat geographically challenged in the wild, at least initially, and these girls possibly didn't know how to

find each other again after becoming distracted, and have remained separated ever since. Both produced their first calves at a respectable age of seven years old, and we await their second calves soon.

Out of the ten hand-raised calves, we have lost two

Blondie; orphaned at five months old from poaching, was raised with three other youngsters and released as a group of four when she reached two-and-a-half years old. Four months after release, he was hit by a vehicle speeding past a waterhole at dusk. Maybe a wild rhino would have run from the noise of an approaching vehicle sooner? Or maybe people should not speed past waterholes at dusk in wildlife areas. Either way, Blondie was killed. His three companions, the females Millie and Sassie and the young male, Ollie, continue to live together and now, four years later, Millie and Sassie have successfully raised their first calves.

The most recently released youngsters, Sabi and Squirt, were both less than two weeks old when they entered the hand-raising facility. These two were probably the most challenged in terms of their ability to interact with other rhinos, with next-to-no experience of wild rhino life with their mothers. The pair, as expected, remained together after release and met up



with other rhinos at waterholes without incident. Tragically, two months afterwards,

a non-resident bull came to the area and went on a calf-attacking rampage, killing two-year-old white rhino Sabi, and badly injuring Squirt. The bull had lived 15 km to the north for over 14 years without any difficulties, and his actions came as a complete surprise. It is impossible to be certain why this bull behaved this way, but he has been translocated to a new area, in the hope this stops similar behaviour.

The remaining two of the ten hand-raised individuals are Bebrave and Long Playing (BB and LP for short). This pair are quite the celebrities, having featured in a TRAFFIC-facilitated demand-reduction campaign promoted by The Body Shop in Viet Nam. Released three-and-a-half years ago, the duo remain companions and are often joined by the area-dominant bull, Romeo. LP is now five years old and believed to have mated recently so we look forward, hopefully, to seeing her first calf in around 15 months' time.

Top to bottom: Lisa-Marie and Carla; A calf and her poached mother; Millie learns to take milk from a bottle



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