

NIGHT WATCH IN KENYA

Elephant and Rhinoceros While

You Wait



THE ELEPHANT GETS BUSY

NO one who has not experienced it can imagine the great delight there is in studying the habits of wild animals at close quarters in their natural haunts; and when to this interest is added comfort and safety, the experience is well worth the while of those who are too sedentary or middle-aged for the more active forms of studying game.

An account has recently appeared in the *Field* of the tree-top observation post started in the Aberdare Forest by the Outspan Hotel, Nyeri, Kenya, and it was here that I spent a most interesting night, 40ft. above the ground on a platform with two rooms built on it and a large verandah skirting them. The party consisted of the owner, Mr. W—, Mr. B—, and Mr. and Mrs. T—. Soon after arriving I heard a slight sound below, and decided that some of the native porters must have remained behind. I crossed the room to the front verandah and looked out, and there below me, walking out from the bushes under the tree into the clearing, was a huge rhinoceros. I could scarcely believe my own eyes. We had chosen a full moon, as game was scarcely expected in daylight. Here, as early as 3.30 p.m. and within two minutes of placing the salt, was one of the wild beasts we had come to see. He must have been unpleasantly near during our activity. I watched him spellbound. How much larger than I had thought! Was he really so dangerous? He moved quietly and surprisingly slowly, and it was hard to believe he could at any moment turn at express speed across the intervening space.

He paused awhile, then quietly sauntered into the bushes ahead.

Presently a red forest duiker appeared and approached the salt lick slowly and timidly. At this moment the others arrived and mounted the tree.

At the same time a large bull rhino came into view on the far side of the clearing, and was soon followed by a cow rhino and her calf. This was more than we had hoped for. We impatiently waited for them to advance closer before possibly disturbing them with the clicking of the camera. We stood, without movement and without sound, as they slowly advanced. The two large rhino faced each other with lowered heads and stood for a while with noses touching. As they moved forward again we took cinematograph pictures with a Bell & Howell Filmo camera. Suddenly they seemed suspicious, faced us with a quick movement, and with a loud snuffling snort gazed in our direction. We felt sure they had scented us, but to our intense surprise and excitement discovered that their attention was riveted on an elephant that had come quietly out into the clearing just below us. We cast excited glances at one another, but did not dare to move to a more favourable position for photography. The elephant moved to one of the salt licks and knelt down to scratch out the salt with his foot, and as he got up we snatched the opportunity of taking a few feet

of film. He then moved out of sight—perhaps, we thought, disturbed by the slight sound of the camera. Judging by his complete indifference later, this supposition was incorrect.

The three rhino moved forward to the salt licks, and gave us an opportunity to record their movements on the cine-film; then the bull rhino disappeared into the reeds to wallow, and the cow and calf proceeded to the farther side and entered the only visible patch of water to drink, afterwards moving off slowly into the forest ahead of the glade.

After a short interval the elephant returned to the salt lick; he lifted a clod of earth with his trunk, but flung it aside immediately. He seemed to enjoy a great feast of salt for about fifteen minutes, when again the cine-camera quietly reeled off a few feet, but the light was fast fading. One or two stills were obtained with the small Leica camera. A



RHINO AT THE SALT LICK

far-distant aeroplane droned in the forest silence, scarcely louder than a buzzing insect, and the elephant trotted quickly into the undergrowth beneath and to the right of our tree.

Silence reigned; then at 6.20 a red duiker appeared, delicately stepping across the clearing with tail flicking rapidly. He advanced to drink

with many timid glances around, and the nearer he approached to the water the more timid he seemed to become; but at last he achieved his purpose, before the droning of the aeroplane was again heard, when he hurried off at the sound.

As darkness crept on several barks and snortings were heard, and the sound of monkeys. Bird sounds increased in a gradual crescendo, then died down; and frogs began to croak. It was now too late for photography, but we hoped for opportunities in the morning.

An elephant again visited two of the salt licks, the second time at 7 p.m.; but although the moon had risen, the light was dim, as it was not above the trees. A rhino was again seen with the spot light at 7.15.

As we were finishing our dinner we heard sounds, and located a large elephant, with the spot light, looking reddish-brown in colour, and apparently eating reeds on the farther side of the pool. In about ten minutes he emerged with wet, black legs which looked for all the world like boots in the indistinct light. What treasure, we wondered, had he found in the mud. He wandered slowly out of the arena to the left background.

At 8.55 an elephant appeared at the salt lick in the left foreground (up to now not as popular as the others).

The moonlight by this time was almost as bright as day with that magical brilliance peculiar to moonlight in hot countries. The patch of salt gleamed white against the dark background. The enormous pachyderm had arrived at the spot without the faintest sound. It seemed nothing short of miraculous that a monster of his bulk and weight could have covered the distance across the glade without disturbing a twig or dead leaf.

From 9 to 12.30 elephant mooched round the salt licks and pool, then disappeared finally—each entry being faithfully noted in the diary, by the light of the moon.

Between 1 and 2 a.m. rustling sounds were heard under our tree, as of some large animal moving about. All of us, with anticipatory thrills, crept out on to the chilly verandah.

A single rhino emerged, looking huge in the bright moonlight and close below us. He was soon joined by a second, coming from another direction. They snorted, then stood with noses touching in salutation for some little while and eventually following each other across the clearing, disappeared.

We heard the sawing sound of leopard, but they did not put in an appearance, much to our disappointment.

About 4 a.m. a single rhino returned to the left-hand salt lick, and after a while sauntered to the pool, then away to the left background, and disappeared.

At 4.30 a.m. a small animal, about duiker size, stood for some while at the left-hand salt lick, scarcely moving.

At 6.45 a small grey hyena came into view on the far side of the pool and crossed to the left background, his short hind legs giving him that gait, peculiar to hyenas, of having been kicked. This time the camera was ready, but he was of a retiring disposition, and kept to the shadows.

Not one of the four-footed creatures had looked up to our tree-top, nor had they seemed to sense us in any way. They had eaten some 240lb. of salt, for all the salt licks were empty by the morning. Two hours after putting it down elephant and rhino were eating it within 25yds. of where we were drinking tea.

K. T.



A VIEW OVER THE CLEARING FROM THE TREE TOP