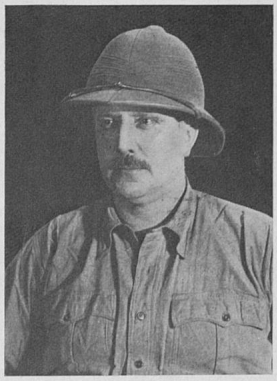
LASSOING A RHINOCEROS

A Camera and Rope Thrill

By CHERRY KEARTON



Mr. Cherry Kearton

IT all began in New York. There I met Colonel C. J. Jones (better known as "Buffalo Jones"), and we discussed wild animal life. Jones quoted—or rather, misquoted—a line from the Bible about Man having dominion over all the creatures of the earth. "Yes," I said, "—thanks to the rifle."

"No," said Jones; "an active and intelligent man of to-day could subdue any wild animal without a weapon at all."

"You mean you would tackle a rhino with jujitsu and strangle a lion with your hands?"

"No," he said. "I should use a rope. Just a rope—in the form of a lasso. Come with me to Africa and I'll show you how it is done."

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The preliminary encounters went off easily enough. Jones and his two cowboys successfully lassoed a wart-hog, a cheetah, an eland and a giraffe, and I used my cameras each time to good effect. Then we decided to make the attempt with a rhinoceros—and since the average rhino weighs from two to three tons, this was no trifling undertaking.

One day, a cowboy rode up to me full of excitement, with the news that a sleeping rhino had been discovered and that Jones was watching it. When we reached the place I dismounted and crept to within 30yds. of the animal. I placed my camera in position and then signalled to Jones, who gave a yell like a Red Indian and dashed forward. The rhino quickly got to its feet with a snort and at once bolted into some bushes 12yds. away, where it and its pursuers were lost from my sight.

There are not many African animals that can run faster than the rhino, and this one stretched the horses to the utmost for three good miles. Of course, I had to follow as quickly as I could, but it is no easy matter to ride at speed across ground dotted with the holes of wart-hogs and jumping hares, when you have to carry a camera and tripod weighing 90lb. Particularly in the heat of the African sun. The camera and tripod were on my back, and I had to hold them with both hands while contriving to keep the horse on a short rein; and if we had stumbled I should have come a dreadful cropper with that weight behind me.

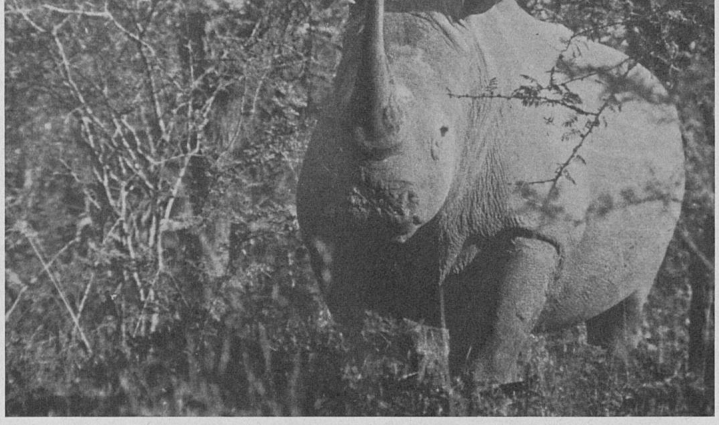
However, we managed to keep upright, and in due course I overtook the others where the rhino had stopped in a dip of the ground and turned on the defensive. There was a little pool in the centre of the dip, and, plunging into this, the great creature stood facing the horsemen. I let my horse go and set up my camera on an open piece of ground where I had a good view of the pool, although if I was attacked I had no protection of any sort except a solitary thorn tree—and that was 70yds. away. My assistant, with another camera, was stationed at some distance on my left front, closer to the tree, and then all seemed ready for our great struggle.

The excitement began at once. One of the cowboys went too near the pool and immediately the rhino charged. The man wheeled round with the rhino close at his heels, and they passed me 30yds. away. Then the animal charged another horseman, and afterwards a third, puffing and snorting, and apparently determined to get one of them.

The peculiarity of my own position was that I was all right as long as the rhino was on my right or in front of me—but I should be very much the reverse of all right if it got to my left, where the wind would blow my scent directly to it. If that happened, as I knew, it would charge me, and as I could not reach my horse I should have very little chance of escape.

Soon after the start, this happened, but fortunately one of the cowboys succeeded in distracting the creature's attention just as it was about to charge. Then it got the scent of my assistant, I shouted to the man to get up the tree—his only chance. But this man, unfortunately, had no experience of Africa, very little athletic agility, and he had never before tried to climb a thorn tree—which is an art in itself. Consequently, he put up his hands to a branch, swung up his legs, and then found that the sharp barbs prevented him from climbing any further. Meanwhile, though his ends (so to speak) were safe, his middle was hanging down only a foot or two from the ground, and well within reach of the rhino's horn.

In another half-minute he would have been caught and tossed. But I yelled to him to leave the tree and run for his life, and luckily he did so. More luckily still, the rhino stopped for an instant to vent his anger on the camera, smashing the tripod; and during that instant a cowboy rode up and drew the rhino off on another fruitless chase.



WHITE RHINO DEBATING A CHARGE

The white rhinoceros, only found in Uganda and Zululand, is a much bigger animal than the commoner black rhino, but much less dangerous. This one was only twelve yards away and took fright at the sound of Mr. Kearton's cine-camera

This time the animal was once again led to my left, so that for a second it stood hesitating, sniffing the air because it smelt me but could not locate my exact position. I kept perfectly still—there was nothing else to do—praying that with its short sight it would not see me. If it had seen me, all would have been over in less than a minute. But fortunately there came another distraction, and the chase continued.

All this time ropes were being thrown, but so great was the animal's strength that most of them broke. One went surely home on the rhino's leg, and a cowboy kept hold of the other end, being dragged here and there in each charge since the strength of the horse was far outmatched. But it was clear from that moment that the rhino would not escape us . . . provided that our supply of rope did not give out, and that we could finish before the daylight failed.

Actually the fight went on for another hour, during which I had several other very narrow escapes. Then we found that although many broken ropes were dangling from the animal's body, and the one that was fastened to its leg still held, we had only one whole rope left—and time was very short. So we changed our strategy. We tied one end of the last rope to a loose, heavily-rooted tree-stump, and one of the cowboys held its other end. Seeing this moving stump, the rhino immediately attacked it, and in so doing became entangled, for the loose rope ends became caught in the roots. This again slowed things up, and enabled two of the cowboys to remain roped to the animal, and yet to keep at a safe distance. Then several bits of broken rope were carefully withdrawn and tied together; the new rope so made was thrown and it caught the animal by another leg: then with two men on the other end this rope was slowly hauled in and lashed to the foot of a tree.

The rhino put up one more struggle, charging at a cowboy as the last knot was tied to the tree and only missing him because he jumped in the nick of time into the branches. But that last rope held, and there was the great creature captive and harmless. There was no severer test to our contention that man could subdue wild animals with only a rope than this, but we had triumphed at last after the most exciting struggle I have ever known. The captive was afterwards released.

NATURE'S DANGER SIGNS

Colouration Which Warns and Deceives

PROTECTIVE or obliterative colouration of animals is a well known form of camouflage, although we are as yet a long way from a full understanding of all its aspects. A different form of protective colouring is that which safeguards its owner by warning its enemies that it is better left alone.

The commonest case of such colouration is the American skunk, which is so conspicuously banded with black and white that it cannot escape discovery, either by day or by night. Indeed, it does not make any attempt to conceal itself. Its main method of defence is to squirt nauseating liquid from glands near the tail, and its striking colouring is thought to be intended to warn enemies that it is better to keep at a distance lest worse befall them.

Such warning colouration is not well represented among the inhabitants of the Indian jungles, although the black and white quills of the porcupine are considered by some to serve this purpose. They cannot, however, be very successful in this way so far as tigers and leopards are concerned, since both of these carnivores consume considerable numbers of porcupines, whether they are warned off by strikingly banded quills or not.

Yellow and black is a warning colouration that is worn by many poisonous creatures such as snakes, wasps and caterpillars in India, and in some other countries such as South America, where the venom from highly coloured toads is so powerful as to be used even for poisoning the tips of arrows.

Another type of colouration is that of mimicry. By this is meant, not the resemblance of a sitting bird to its surroundings or of a moth to a tree-trunk, but cases where the body loses its identity by assuming the likeness of some other creature.

Such examples are uncommon among mammals, and are chiefly to be found among butterflies, in which, species that are edible by birds sometimes take on the form and colouring of others that birds dislike. An Indian example is the bee hawk-moth, which, by looking like a bumble-bee, tends to escape attention from those birds which feed on butterflies and moths, but not on bees.

Another example is the Indian cuckoo, which is only too well known to every dweller in the East under the descriptive name of the brain-fever bird.

This parasitic bird closely resembles the Shikra or Indian sparrow-hawk in appearance, and takes advantage of this resemblance to deposit its eggs in the nests of babblers, while the latter have fled in terror from what they imagine to be an extremely pugnacious and active hawk.

F. W. C.