

## CONSERVATION

### New rhino project for the Selous Game Reserve

In a northern part of Tanzania's huge Selous Game Reserve, a new rhino project has been created to keep alive one small group of black rhinos (*Diceros bicornis minor*). They roam freely in an area of about 100 km<sup>2</sup> just north of the Rufiji River. These rhinos survived the poaching massacre of the 1980s and are the only known rhino population in the northern Selous. Back in 1980 there were perhaps 2,000 in the Selous, an area the size of Denmark, but by the early 1990s less than 200 black rhinos survived in the entire game reserve.

From when the new rhino project got going in early 1996 until March 1997, the game scouts frequently spotted rhino tracks in their area. Then, for four worrying months, there was no sign of them. Had they been poached there or had they moved out of the protected area to fall into the hands of poachers? During the long rains in April and May 1997, when the grass was tall, it was difficult to find rhino tracks anyway, and perhaps the patrollers were simply not seeing signs. Since July 1997, however, the game scouts have been finding fresh tracks once more, and in September they confirmed that they had seen the tracks of six different rhinos, including a sub-adult and a calf. The rhinos are still safe and are breeding.

Richard Bonham and Bim and Lizzy Theobald started the Sand Rivers Rhino Project in November 1995 with the Director of Wildlife and the Project Manager of the Selous Game Reserve. Bonham, who has taken walking safaris in the Selous since 1986, had always been aware that a remnant

group of rhinos still existed in the north, but in this remote and isolated part of the country, he thought that keeping silent about the rhinos would secure their best protection. That was until the poachers arrived. Bonham, while tracking a rhino and her calf, walked straight into a poachers' camp, and he later received information through the game division intelligence team that these rhinos were already targeted by poachers. Something had to be done to help.

Bonham and the Theobalds, who had just finished building Selous's first-ever luxury, small lodge called Sand Rivers Selous, discussed the problem with some of their clients, who immediately put in funds to refurbish the abandoned Kidai Patrol Camp and to supplement or pay the salaries for seven game scouts who arrived at the camp in early 1996. Since then, Sand Rivers Rhino Project has raised over £35,000 pounds, with £19,000 contributed by the British government. This is a unique project for rhino conservation in East Africa organized by a tourist lodge. The anti-poaching team has been provided with uniforms, and important anti-poaching equipment such as a global positioning system, night vision binoculars and infra-red automatic cameras, and Sand Rivers assists with fuel and transport.

In just over a year, the anti-poaching unit has busted seven fishing gangs, captured and burnt about 20 canoes and confiscated sackfuls of fishing nets. No rhino has been poached since the patrol team arrived. The game scouts are an important deterrent to all potential poachers. They are also helping to prevent elephant poaching, which is once again on the rise. In

September 1997, professional hunters discovered six elephant carcasses on the south bank of the Rufiji River. The elephants had been illegally killed and their tusks had been taken. Bonham also found a poached elephant recently, whose carcass had been burnt to try to hide it. With elephant poachers returning to the Selous once again, the few remaining rhinos are more likely to be spotted and killed as well, and they need all the protection they can get.

Tragically, however, the driving force behind the fund-raising for the Sand Rivers Rhino Project, Lizzy Theobald, died suddenly of malaria after visiting the Selous in August 1997. It is vital that funds continue to be sent to Sand Rivers, if the rhinos are to survive, and for the Project's founder not to have died in vain.

*Lucy Vigne and Esmond Martin*

### **A new tool for targeting conservation action**

In spring 1998 BirdLife International will be launching its latest book, *Endemic Bird Areas of the World: priorities for biodiversity conservation*. This will be the first detailed account of the world's 218 Endemic Bird Areas (EBAs). These are uniquely important places for birds and other wildlife. BirdLife International's Biodiversity Project makes a unique contribution to the identification of priorities for biodiversity conservation by using birds – one of the best-known groups of animals – as indicators of areas of high endemism. Limited conservation resources can most effectively be directed at these places.

The study shows that:

- Over 25% of all birds (2,561 species) have restricted ranges, being confined to areas of less than 50,000 km<sup>2</sup> (which is about the size of

Costa Rica);

- These small areas overlap to form what are called Endemic Bird Areas such that the majority (93%) of restricted-range species are encompassed by 218 EBAs;
- The restricted-range birds include 816 species that are currently classified as threatened. This is almost three-quarters of all threatened bird species;
- Sixty-two species that had restricted ranges have become extinct in the last 200 years;
- EBAs are found around the world, but most (77%) of them are located in the tropics and sub-tropics. The top countries for EBAs are Indonesia, Mexico, Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Papua New Guinea and China, all of which have more than ten each;
- The natural habitat in most EBAs is forest, especially tropical lowland and montane moist forest;
- EBAs vary considerably in size (from a few square kilometres to more than 100,000 km<sup>2</sup>) and in the numbers of restricted-range species that they support (from two to 80);
- Historically, some 20% of the world's birds were totally confined to EBAs whose area covered 2% of the earth's land surface. Today almost half of the EBAs have lost more than 50% of their key habitats, and 20% of the world's birds can be found in only 1% of the earth's surface where these habitats still remain;
- Most EBAs have one or more threatened or extinct restricted-range bird species. Many restricted-range species are at serious risk, even in EBAs where the habitat remains relatively intact. This is due to their intrinsic vulnerability of having a small range and/or population;
- The majority of EBAs are important for other wildlife that has restricted ranges. For example, there is an