

# GREAT STRIDES MADE IN DRUGGING TECHNIQUE

by NICK CARTER

IN the December issue of *Wild Life* last year, I described how the work of immobilising rhino was being carried out by the Game Department, making use of the Parke Davies muscular anaesthetic, Sernyl.

As is now widely known, the object of immobilising rhino is to enable the Department to pen and transport this splendid species to safer areas, away from the encroachment of man and the depredations of the poacher.

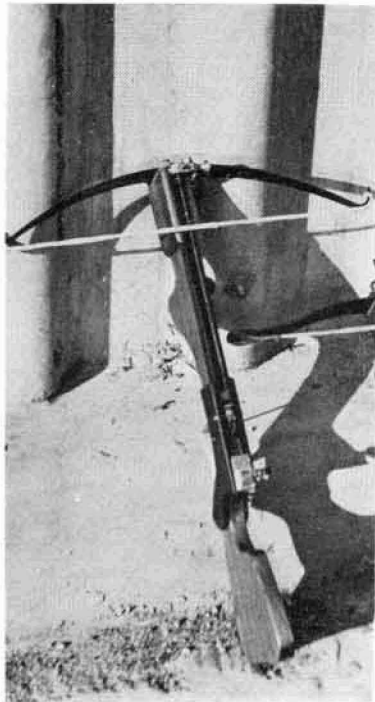
Those were early days, days of partial experiment, but now I am able to report that we have taken great strides forward and have just completed a most successful period of drugging, penning and transporting which more than fulfils our earlier hopes.

The area chosen for the continuation of the task is known, generally speaking, as Simba, and lies some ninety miles down the road from Nairobi to Mombasa.

Here is thick bush country on the edge of the Wakamba reserve where rhinoceros were once plentiful but where their numbers decrease every month through poaching and the advance of so-called cultivation; a system whereby any man can turn a few hundred acres into a dust bowl and then, following the example of other farmers of all races, shout for game control once any wild animal sets foot over the edge.

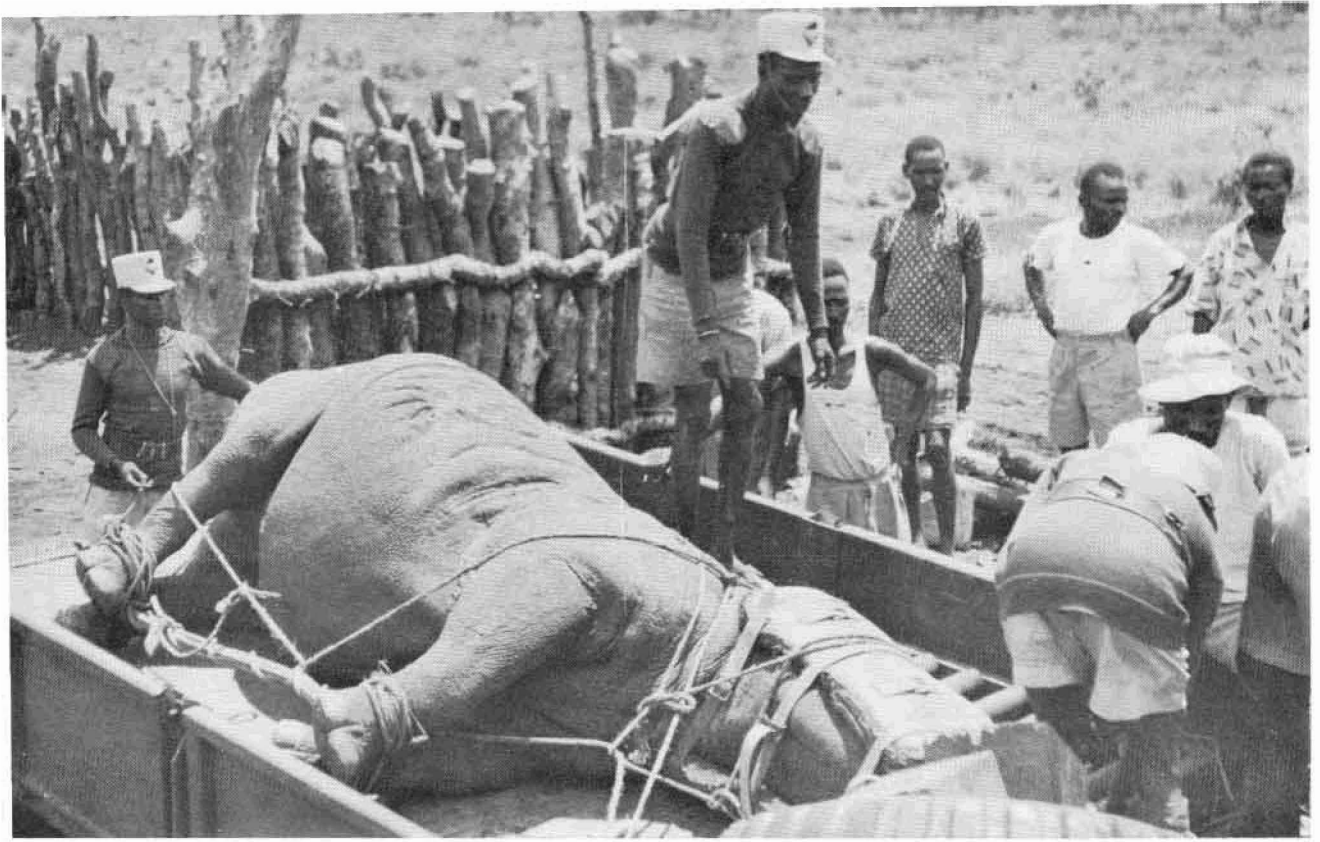
Here it was decided to try to do two things at once, time being short. To continue the use of Sernyl and to perfect the technique of capturing wild, in some cases very wild, rhinoceros in thickest bush conditions where no trapping vehicle or other device could operate. This meant spending a lot of time and a lot of patience and the difficulties were considerable.

A rhinoceros, which has once heard the twang of a bowstring and felt the sting of a poisoned arrow which, through sheer inefficiency on the part of the Bowman has failed to kill it, is unlikely to stay around for long when the watchful tick birds screech the next time.



FIRST comes the cross-bow (above) which shoots the dart which Nick Carter fills (right) to knock out the rhino (below)





The crossbow which propels our darts pushes the projectile with the power necessary to enter the hide but not far enough to injure the beast. During the time that it takes the dart to travel seventy yards, the noise of the bow has warned an alert animal and it has jumped its own length before the missile can arrive.

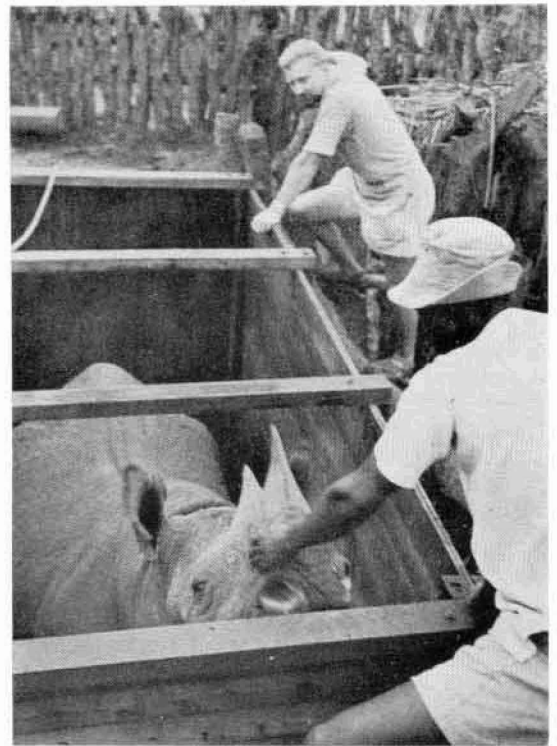
In these cases the only answer is to crawl closer and baffle the tick birds by intensive use of cover. The best range I have found is between fifty and sixty yards. If one gets any closer the tendency is for the power of the bow to break the needle or to distort the syringe casing. One also has less room for manoeuvre should the animal decide to attack.

It is our proud boast that in over a year of continuous hunting the Game Capture Unit has never had to shoot a rhinoceros in self-defence. It has also learnt some simple forestry lessons and can now tell at a glance whether a tree is climbable or not!

Having hit the animal the next problem is to follow its tracks until the drug takes effect and it goes down. Game Scouts were recruited, mainly from the Turkana tribe, and practised on the real thing time after time, in teams of three until this work became as routine as the rest of it. No rhinoceros which has been knocked out has ever been lost, thanks to their work.

The problem of moving an unconscious beast from the bush to the pen was largely solved

*THE drugged rhino is loaded on to a three-ton lorry, its head protected by a pad (above)  
Then comes the moment of release when the still-drunk beast leaves its cage*



through a generous gift from an American safari club of a five-ton, four-wheeled drive diesel powered lorry fitted with rolled ramps, a winch, levers and scotches. We improve on this equipment as we meet fresh hazards.

We had a nice problem not very long ago when a bull rhino fell unconscious into a nine-foot deep washaway of a river bed, out of which he could hardly have extricated himself if conscious. We got him out and brought him home, though it will always remain a mystery he did not break his neck when he fell.

Once in the pens the animals are unroped and encouraged to rise as soon as the pen door has been firmly settled. They usually recover their senses after about four hours though they can be kept down longer, of course, by the administration of a larger initial dose.

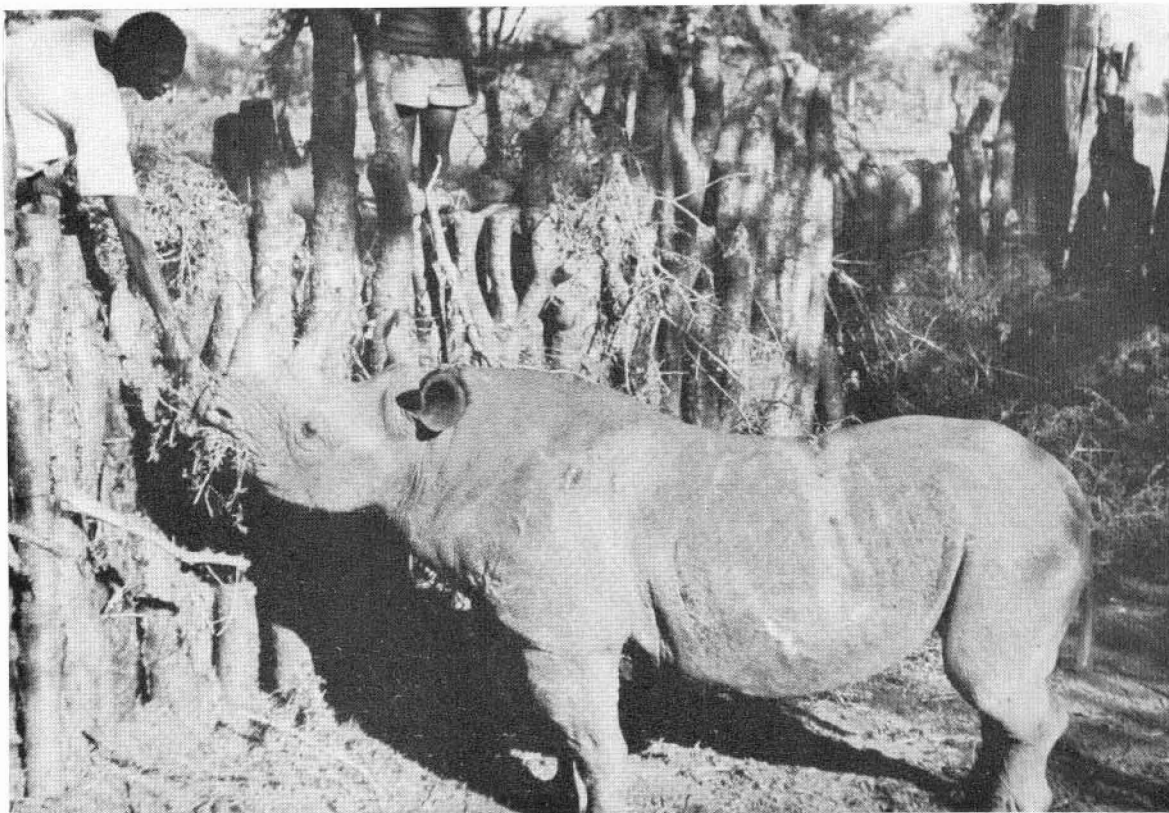
Once they get to their feet the pens are cleared of all spectators and the camp is quietened to allow them to recover with as little fright as possible. Here the presence of another rhino in the pen next door helps enormously,

the newcomer often standing as near as it can to its neighbour, whose movements, noise and smell partly reassure the recruit that all may yet be well.

Thanks to the co-operation of the Wild Life Society, it has now been possible to provide the Capture Unit with a European assistant and for the first time in our short history we had to stop hunting the other day until new pens were built as five animals were caught in a sudden rush of success.

Our thanks are also very much due to Mr. Monks, the Nairobi chemist, Dr. Werthessen of the Darajani Primate Research Station and Mr. Archer of Nairobi who produces our precision crossbows.

We look forward to expanding our work in the near future and are convinced that the capture and translocation by drugs of wild life of all sizes and temperaments is here to stay. Without it, the future of the rhinoceros would be gloomy indeed.



*A week in captivity and you've got him eating out of your hand*