



PHOTO BY NORTHERN RANGELANDS TRUST

RHINO CONSERVATION

On the Road for Rhino

Brothers adventure into the wild in aid of an anti-poaching effort

BY MYLES & RORY ROOT

In May of this year we set out on our motorbikes from our home on the edge of the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, Kenya's greatest stronghold for Black and White rhino beyond the much smaller Nairobi National Park. Our job as volunteers would help an anti-poaching initiative begun during the Covid pandemic, when many rangers across the African continent were laid off, tourists were not present as watchdogs, and economic stress might tempt people to poach these great creatures for their horns.

We took long rough roads for the Sera Rhino Sanctuary. Established in 2015 as a 107 sq km² sanctuary, this was the first rhino sanctuary on this scale in East Africa. At the time the idea of a community in the northern frontier setting aside their land for the protection of an endangered species in an area historically plagued by insecurity and illegal firearms was treated with much skepticism amongst traditional conservationists. Time has proven this to be unfounded. The crash of rhino has not diminished but grown. Ten rhino bred and the Sera population currently

stands at 16. Over 85 people are permanently employed in their own home county of Samburu.

With the increasing security for the rhino, the whole area has stabilized, encouraging communities to graze livestock in areas that historically would not have been possible due to insecurity and ethnic conflict. Other wildlife is also now flourishing within the sanctuary, including 15 Beira oryx, 26 Grevy's zebra, and 70 impala. Because of this growth, Sera Rhino Sanctuary could join the top wildlife destinations in Samburu County, and indeed northern Kenya, in the next 5 years. It is part of the Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT) founded by Ian Craig.

"Connecting the reality of a situation on the ground with the effective use of emerging technology is a challenge," said Craig; "Myles and Rory's time on boda boda's traveling the different arterial routes feeding into the Sera rhino sanctuary made this connection a reality enabling those caring for Sera's rhino to make the most effective decisions in providing their protection. Sera's rhino are in a safer place thanks to the Myles and Rory's enthusiasm, sleeping rough and working with the communities to make this connection."

2015

Year the Sera Rhino Sanctuary was established.

TOP
Rory Root join Sera Sanctuary rangers who find a Black rhino.



TOP
Our favourite sundowner spot, a large kopje called Lontopi just above 91 Camp.

BELOW
Stopping in the midday heat for tea and bread at a small lugger.



Normally, to protect rhino in Sera, management use a combination of security measures: support from Kenya Wildlife Service, the deployment of 5 community policing teams with National Police Reserve status, over 49 community rangers and rhino monitors. With the support of Dimension Data and Cisco, Sera is now using the very latest technology to protect and monitor rhino. This includes remote cameras and monitors strategically positioned to portray images back to a central control office based at the Sera Headquarters, where one can remotely watch waterholes and key routes used by wildlife and potential poachers. Also members of the two community land units of Lossessia and Serolipi provide local information and knowledge of potential threats to Sera's rhino. These security measures and layers of protection help provide the best possible protection of rhino at a time when the demand for rhino horn and associated prices remain high.

Because *Boda Boda* (motorbikes named after the beckoning shout "Border, Border") have become popular here in northern Kenya as elsewhere, they are used by poachers, Sera management requested our assistance to map all the *Boda Boda* routes leading to and from Sera. This information will be used to position monitoring systems around the sanctuary allowing the Sera security teams to see potential threats in real time, whilst also providing improved security to



Our first day out the two of us followed an elephant path on the eastern side of the conservancy.

the communities of Sera. With army ration packs and bedrolls we maneuvered our bikes through a huge locust swarm and then went tracking in the bush for several hours, arriving into 91 Ranger Camp around 6:00pm. After supper, we headed to bed looking forward to the day ahead.

The plan was to leave most of our stuff at the 91 Camp and take just essentials with us, going for 1 or 2 nights away at a time. We had a GPS to mark the trails and a radio to keep in contact with the rangers. Since we knew very little of the area, the rangers and their extensive knowledge were essential. Nearly all of them grew up herding livestock, thus they know the area. Add to this army training and modern monitoring technology, they are a force.

Our first day out the two of us followed an elephant path on the eastern side of the conservancy. We found a beautiful lugger with freshwater just under the sand and so decided to make camp there. After a nice evening watching the sun go down, we lay down under the stars for a good night's sleep, or so we hoped. Without tents we were completely exposed. Thoughts of hyena and lion kept us awake for a bit, but we soon fell asleep. Suddenly I was awake, with water on

my face and something running off into the pitch black. Slightly terrified I looked around with the torch... nothing. Rory, who was now awake, checked the tracks in the sand but couldn't determine anything. Utterly confused and a bit nervous, we stoked the fire, talked, then fell asleep again. Waking up to the sound of birds and the sun peeking into the horizon, we were very relieved and set off back to Camp 91.

The next few days went very smoothly. We camped out in more amazing locations, tracked lots more trails and saw some of the wildlife on Sera, which included a herd of Grevy's zebra translocated from Lewa, the original source of the Black rhinos now thriving here. A new calf born was born in late June 2020 so now 17 animals in Sera Sanctuary, 7 born since their introduction.

More about the Sera Rhino Sanctuary at website for Northern Rangelands Trust: www.nrt-kenya.org ●

MYLES ROOT is off to Edinburgh University later this year to study biological sciences. **RORY ROOT** is looking forward to a gap year of global exploration.

TOP
A Google Earth map indicating old and new routes covered by the Root Brothers.