

Keeping a close eye ON BLACK RHINOS

Rhinos might be large animals, but that doesn't make them easy to find, especially when their home is a landscape stretching out for hundreds of thousands of acres. Black rhinos, in particular, love to spend their time deep within the bush, so keeping an eye on them takes a lot of time and expertise.

Natasha Anderson | Rhino Monitoring Coordinator, Lowveld Rhino Trust

At the Lowveld Rhino Trust (LRT), our team is responsible for monitoring more than 200 black rhinos across the Buby Valley, a huge and incredible area spanning more than 740,000 acres. While it's important to manage the rhinos at a population level, it's also critical to be able to identify each animal when they are spotted, noting down their location, health and general behaviour. To do this, unique ear-notch patterns are marked on every rhino.

Knowing each individual within the population makes it possible for LRT staff to identify when individuals move from their usual areas, or go missing: critical information throughout periods of high rhino poaching.

Each day, rhino monitors leave their field bases to track rhinos. They're looking to locate fresh rhino spoor (footprints, browsing signs, fresh dung). One of the first places they'll check is the nearest water point, as rhinos tend to drink at night. From there, monitors follow the spoor on foot until they are able to visually identify the individual.

At the final point, when a rhino has been spotted, the tracker's experience is crucial. They must approach the rhino at a distance, remaining cautious so that they do not disturb the animal, which could be dangerous. Photos will be taken and, as much as possible, checks will be made to look for injuries such as snare or bullet wounds that may require veterinary attention.





ALL IMAGES LOWVELD RHINO TRUST



- From top, clockwise:
A black mamba spotted by a rhino monitor on patrol.
- Black rhino Susan, with her calf.
- Two young male black rhinos.
- Peeking through the bush, you can see the notch on this rhino's ear.
- Black rhino Nanzi, with her calf.

there has been poaching activity in an area, trackers will increase their patrol efforts to find any missing animals.

Once back at base, field information is verified to ensure correct identifications have been made (photos are checked against previous records of an animal) and all of the data is then entered into a monitoring database. This information is then analysed, providing accurate records to inform management interventions and plan anti-poaching strategies.

Such intense monitoring also brings us good news. In the last 12 months, our teams have spotted 25 black rhino calves, and there have also been signs of three additional calves, but these calves have not yet been seen; the size of the calf spoor indicated that they were still very small – in one case, only a week or two old. To ensure the health and safety of both our rhinos and our rhino monitors, we don't track rhinos when their calves are

this young, as the mothers are (rightfully so!) extremely protective and sensitive to any disturbance. Furthermore, young calves are not able to move long distances, particularly if their mother is disturbed and runs, so special effort is made not to unsettle these pairs.

Monitoring rhinos may seem like a very simple task, but such intense tracking takes a lot of time, effort, and expertise, especially in the huge Buby Valley. But without monitoring, we wouldn't have good or accurate knowledge about our previous black rhinos, or the best way to protect them.

