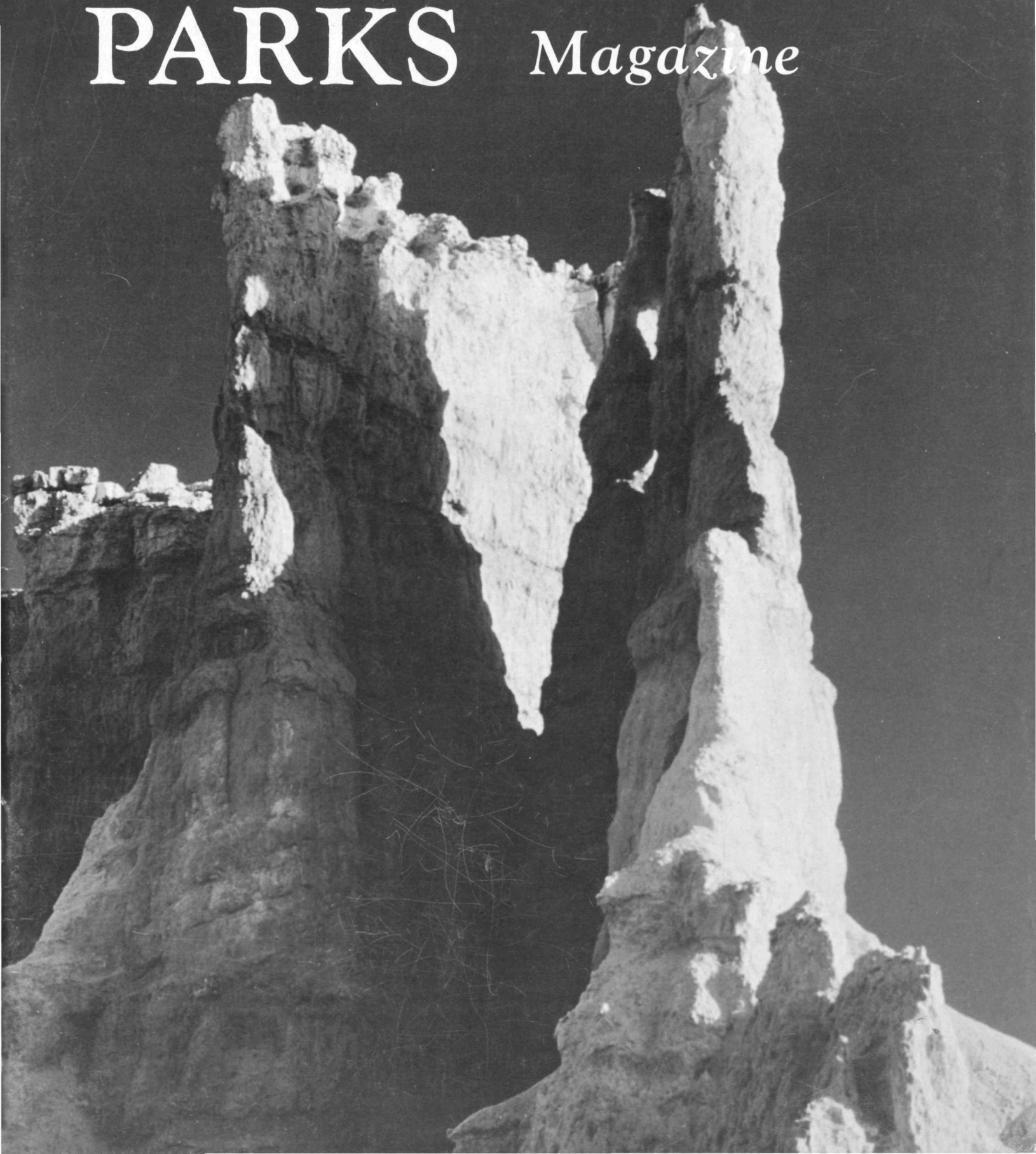


MARCH 1970

# NATIONAL PARKS *Magazine*





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COVER "Gulliver's Castle" by Donal W. Halloran

Grotesque rock formations, gnarled trees, sculptured logs, alpine wildflowers, spectacular vistas—Bryce Canyon National Park offers many photogenic subjects for the photographer, so a park naturalist capitalizes on this fact in developing an interpretative program for visitors (page 10).

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**T**he national park idea, now nearly a hundred years old, has played many vital roles in wildlife protection and preservation; but none is more dramatic, perhaps, than that concerned with the effort to save from extinction the white rhinoceros of Africa. Except for a few survivors in the southern Sudan and a small but carefully guarded herd of the southern subspecies in South Africa, those remaining in Uganda are the last of these immense mammals.

Most conservationists and many other people know how the white rhino has been poached to near-extinction for an utterly useless horn. Some people have heard about the last-ditch rescue operation in which a breeding nucleus was transferred from its home in Uganda's West Nile District to the comparative safety of the country's widely known Murchison National Park. Few, though, know how the transplanting scheme has progressed—or will have heard of Obongi, the park's hand-reared white rhino, whose career was a barometer for the as yet unproved operation.

**O**riental people believe that ground rhinoceros horns have magic and aphrodisiac properties, so these unfortunate animals have been hunted intensively. Over the years Uganda's white rhino have suffered their full share of poaching; but until the late 1950's when organized poachers moved in, poaching was essentially casual and not a matter for the greatest concern. However, by 1960, having proved far too powerful for the wholehearted but thin resources of the opposition, poachers had reduced the white rhino population from more than 300 to something under 50. The shadow of extermination was there for even the

**D. S. HENDERSON**

# WHITE RHINO



## THE ROAD BACK

blindest to see. Talking, placatory noises, and the constant promises to "review next year" so common to governments everywhere would no longer do, or Uganda's representatives of the world's rarest mammals would be gone.

This was the background for the event in which, during March 1961, Obongi (then a calf of around 2½ years), her mother, and eight other white rhinos found themselves captured and, after many bumpy miles in trucks and a trip over the Nile, released into Murchison Park.

But there were casualties. Nobody had caught white rhino before, and Obongi's mother died shortly after re-

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR



lease. As a result, the young calf found herself pursued and captured for the second time in a matter of days—this time to remain under “care and protection” until she was entirely capable of looking after herself. Left to her own devices, predators soon would have had her. Thus Obongi—the name comes from the West Nile area where she was first caught—came under the care of Roger Wheeler, the park warden. Over the years, in a relationship neither one-sided nor fleeting, Wheeler kept a close eye on Obongi’s well-being.

The young of wild animals, if taken early enough and kept at least for the period of adolescence, will become tame and friendly. But Obongi had known 2½ years of freedom, so it was reasonable to expect an initial display of resentment and suspicion. Yet almost immediately she became friendly and trusting, a temperament she retained until she was released. The only thing that stopped her from being just another refugee from the wilds was her size. As park officials found, it was one thing to feed and play with a young antelope or cat, but quite another to do the same with a ton or so of extremely powerful, if well-intentioned, white rhino.

In fact, Obongi’s friendliness presented a problem when the time came for her release. The task was not to teach Obongi to fend for herself, but to persuade her that the company of her own kind was more rewarding than that of humans. Basically, she needed a fresh start, sufficiently far off to preclude a hike back to the lodge but sufficiently near an understanding human community to buffer the final transition. In effect, this meant a ranger post.

Ranger Wheeler returned from leave in July 1964 to find that things had misfired. Released during his absence, Obongi had promptly discovered the park’s airfield and had attached herself with great devotion to one of its porters—a local tribesman who, after the first shock, seemed undismayed. Indeed, he soon realized that his new “duties” frequently saved him from the more arduous work of airfield maintenance for which he was officially paid. The fact remained, however, that Obongi not only presented some hazard to air traffic but, more importantly, was unlikely to find a mate. It was clear that she would have to move.

Two problems confronted Roger Wheeler: where to send the animal and how to persuade her to leave. A white rhino could scarcely be driven, not even Obongi. There was, too

**D. S. Henderson, an unusual combination of big game hunter and wholehearted conservationist, spent 11 years in Uganda as a police officer. On leaving the police, he devoted much time to antipoaching work. For a while he led police investigations into the West Nile white rhino poaching.**

—and no one was more aware of this than Wheeler—something increasingly touching about this huge but gentle creature with its unshakeable faith in man. Whatever the answer, it could not include anything even remotely unkind.

Wheeler’s solution was masterly. He called Obongi’s adopted porter, told him to summon his charge, and, having found her, to start walking toward the Pakuba Ranger Post. So Murchison Park provided a strange and touching sight—a grown man leading a white rhino through the bush, with the enormous mammal making unmistakable efforts to convince the world that it was really *she* who was doing the leading! Reaching the ranger post around nightfall, the porter slipped away into the darkness to leave the unfortunate Obongi to a solitary night in the bush.

The next day Obongi, puzzled and perhaps sad and disillusioned, attached herself to the ranger post, where she remained until she was finally wooed away nearly a year later by a persistent bull. Finally, in August 1967, shortly 6 years after her capture, she produced her calf, a perky youngster whose appearance brought quiet satisfaction to all concerned and who, with another calf born about a week previously, was a vital step in the effort to ensure that Murchison Park’s white rhino are at long last established.

The story of Obongi is happy, tying in as it does with the last-ditch experiment of transferring white rhino to Murchison National Park. Yet the story came within measurable distance of not being written. A moment’s madness, a moment’s official carelessness, disease, a bush fire—any of these misfortunes could wipe out the Murchison herd overnight. And outside South Africa the remaining white rhino hang on grimly in the West Nile and southern Sudan, with only the slenderest of long-term prospects. Certainly—and again outside South Africa—whatever future the white rhino may have seems inextricably tied to the Uganda government’s continuing interest and vigilance. Its officials have a great responsibility in the matter, and they need all possible encouragement.

**Epilogue.** In July 1968 Obongi was speared in the left shoulder by a poacher. The wound healed, and more patrols were sent to the area. Later, park rangers discovered Obongi’s 19-month-old calf alone in the bush. Vultures were sighted circling an object in the Albert Nile. It was Obongi. Poachers had crossed the river by boat from the West Nile and killed her and anchored her body with stones and ropes some 100 yards offshore. The horns had not yet been removed. Rangers were posted in ambush overnight. The next morning the poachers returned, pulled the carcass ashore, and cut off one horn. As they started to cut off the second, the rangers leaped from ambush and arrested them. They were safely in custody, but Obongi was gone. ■

