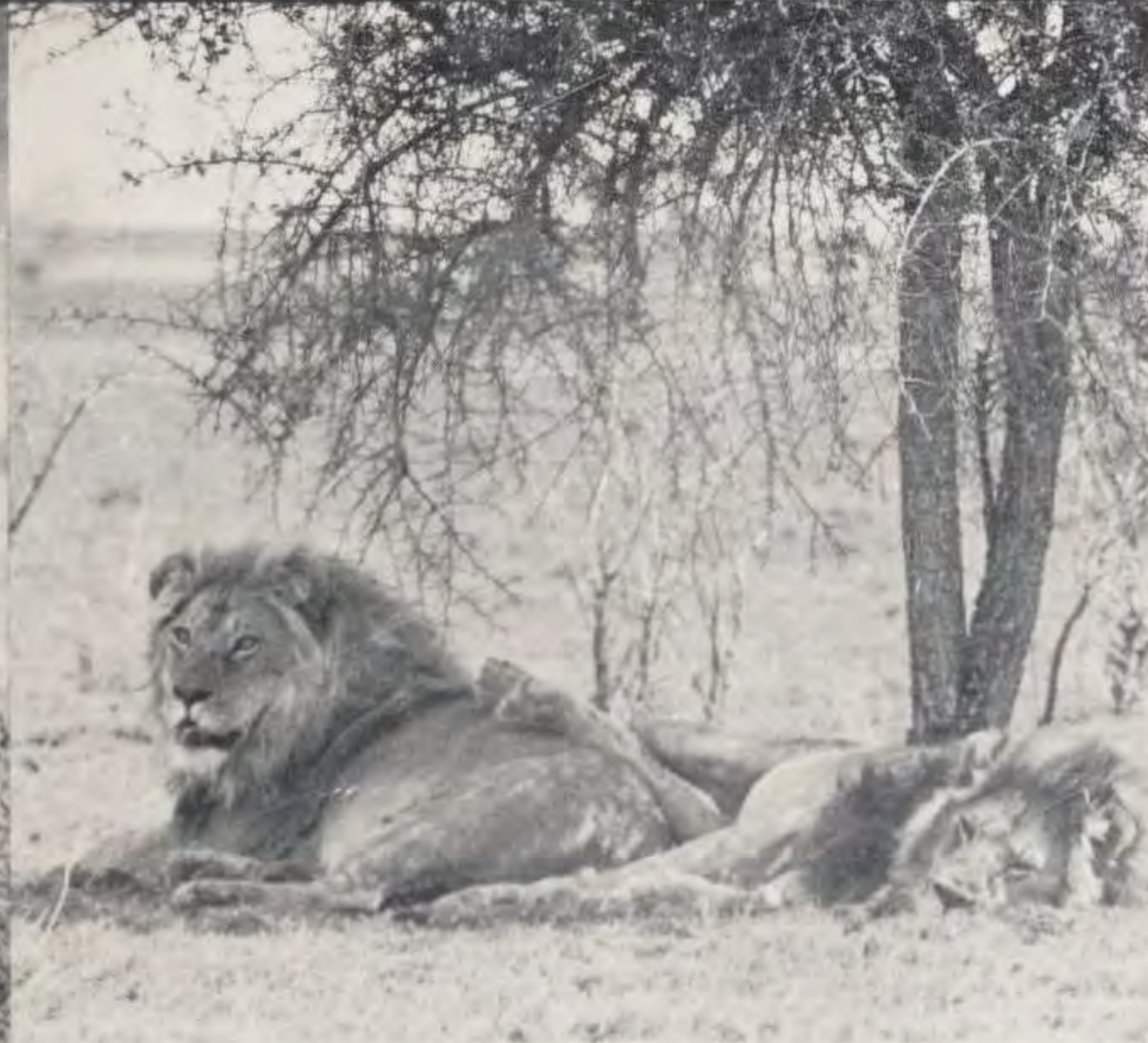




*My Adventures
with African Animals*

Erwin Bauer

PHOTOGRAPHS
BY THE AUTHOR



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The Relic

Nobody Loves

IT IS NOT EASY to like the black rhinoceros. And it is especially difficult if you have been forced to run for your life, to hurriedly climb a thorn tree, or if the fenders of your car have been smashed by a rhino's sudden charge. Of all the animals in Africa, this is the only one likely to attack for no reason at all.

Consider what a strange beast this is. A relic from the prehistoric past, the rhino has changed very little since the time he shared the earth with mastodons and saber-toothed tigers. An adult black rhino weighs more than a ton, wears two sharp horns on his ugly head, and may stand almost six feet high at the front shoulder. He may be twelve feet long, and his skin is practically an armor-plating. His appearance might be described as ludicrous if it were not so completely formidable.



The black rhino.

The rhino's eyesight is poor, but he hears and smells very well. His legs seem far too short for his body, which sags in the middle. This makes the animal look so clumsy and slow-moving as to be almost harmless. But this illusion has caused great trouble for many an unsuspecting human being. A rhino is surprisingly fast afoot. And for his size he is incredibly agile—agile enough to charge full speed in one direction, stop on a dime, and then charge off at top speed in another direction.

There are so many curious facts about the black rhino that it is difficult to list just a few of them. Horses, tapirs, zebras, and other rhinos (the African white, Indian, Javan and Sumatran, all of which are hovering on the edge of extinction) are its only living relatives. What they share in common is having an odd number of toes on each foot. A rhino's footprint in soft earth resembles a large ace of clubs.

At one time, black rhinos thrived in a large portion of the African continent. They preferred open bushlands, but also lived in hot desert areas, on grassy veldts, near the cool crests of 11,000-foot mountains (Mount Kenya, for example) and occasionally at the edge of damp jungle. They can survive without water for long periods, but prefer to have some handy, both to drink and to wallow in. They can do both at the same time. The sight of a rhino rising out of a mud hole is certainly reminiscent of prehistoric monsters or maybe of a scene in a grade B horror movie.

Apart from the fact that certain species naturally prey on others, wild animals get along fairly well with each other. The grazing animals usually are compatible with other grazers. But rhinos do not get on well with other animals, which

generally give an approaching rhino plenty of room to pass. Rhinos do not even get along with other rhinos.

Take courtship, for example. When mating, most prospective parents are inseparable and seem to show great affection. But not rhinos. The female attacks her suitor over and over—sometimes until he is so bruised and battered that he can barely stand up. Bachelorhood would be much better. Then a year and a half later, a single calf, which weighs over fifty pounds, is born somewhere in a lonely thorn thicket.

The calves are not cuddly and are only slightly more attractive than their parents. Just the same, the mother will defend the little one at any cost as long as it is still suckling, and this may be more than two years after birth. But the baby *always* walks *behind* the mother, probably figuring it would be charged if it walked ahead. A black rhino isn't really full grown until it is five or six years old. Then it begins its own completely sullen and solitary life.

A rhino's horns, especially the front one, grow bigger and bigger as the animal ages. The front spike, which is really closely packed hairlike fiber growing out of the skin, rather than true horn, has been known to grow almost four feet in length. However, a good average size would be less than two feet—say as long as your arm. Two very famous rhinos, believed to be mother and daughter, in Amboseli National Reserve, Kenya, were named Gladys and Gertie by game rangers. Both had front horns nearly four feet long. These two have been filmed by thousands of tourists visiting the Reserve. It's interesting to note that Gertie's daughter, Pixie, was born without ears.

There has been a tremendous drop in the rhino population



The draining sore on this black rhino's flank was inflicted by another rhino.

in the last hundred years, and that is a great pity. Spreading agriculture and civilization have destroyed most of them because rhinos pay no attention to fences, to farmers or to their gardens. So these relics have to be eliminated by any means. Also, the strange and preposterous belief in Asia that rhino horn has medicinal value (which it hasn't) has caused widespread poaching (killing for profit). The horn is sold for fantastic prices on the Indian market—for as much as \$12 per pound. Poachers place snares over pits in the earth, poisoned spears, or arrows to bag the rhinos.

In most places, rhinos tend to feed at night. They are browsers. They move through the brush like four-legged tanks and their pointed prehensile upper lips gather in twigs, buds, and branches, like a vacuum cleaner. Many of their favorite plants are very prickly and thorny; you'd think that swallowing and digesting them would be painful.

After a night of feeding, the hot day is whiled away snoring in the shade of bushes or maybe by taking a mud bath. The latter could take a couple of hours. If the rhino is ever happy at all, it must be during and after the bath—at least, his snorts and occasional cavorting suggest contentment. He may also knock down a few small trees and trample them in the process, just to show his happiness.

The black rhino does have one true and valued friend—*Buphagus erythorhynchus*—the red-billed oxpecker which is more widely known as the tick bird. It is really a convenient friendship for both. The noisy ash-brown bird with slim build feeds on the ticks and blood-sucking insects which infest the ears and undersides of the rhino. In return for this fare, the oxpeckers flush up with loud chirring cries of danger when



This black rhino is about to make a headlong charge at the author's land rover.

anyone or anything approaches the host. The bird has better eyes than his big friend. More than one rhino owes his life to this alarm at the advance of poachers.

Rhinos have always had a hard time staying out of trouble. Once, while spectators in passing cars watched in disbelief, an angry male fought a five-minute draw with a 3,400 pound 1957 Chevy on the busy Nairobi-Mombasa road. The car was demolished beyond repair, and the rhino later died of head wounds.

The big brutes have charged other cars too numerous to mention, including the writer's, whole herds of elephants, lions, farm tractors, and, several times, the locomotive on the main line of the Uganda Railway. They always came out second best in the train and tractor contests, but it wasn't for lack of effort. On the other hand, a beagle, the watchdog on a Tanzania farm, drove away a large rhino which had invaded a melon patch.

A rhino ended the life of Bwana Cottar, an Oklahoman who became famous as a professional hunter in East Africa. An old bull in Kenya's Ngong Hills killed four Masai herdsmen before he was shot while looking for a fifth victim. This one got in the habit of ambushing his victims as they drove cattle toward Ole Debesse wells. He must have been a grisly sight suddenly materializing from the dark bush at twilight and bearing down on the unfortunate natives.

The black rhino's bad disposition has been blamed on, or attributed to, many things. The thorny diet, for one. That could make anybody mad and keep him that way. A second theory which is probably true at least part of the time is that the charges aren't charges at all—the animal is just rushing

up to satisfy its curiosity. Well and good, but how about all those punctured radiators?

A third theory places the blame for any rhino's nervous behavior on his extreme nearsightedness. Whereas other big animals, such as the Cape buffalo, have good vision and can see what goes on around them, the black rhino might feel only fear and uncertainty. So he charges headlong toward a target which he suspects rather than sees. The target may turn out to be somebody's touring car.

There are some loopholes in this last theory, as in all the others. The white rhino, which lives in a family group, is equally myopic, but is so docile and trusting that only a very few of them have survived. And all of these are in parks or preserves.

The white rhino is even larger than the black rhino and is therefore the second largest (to the elephant) land mammal still living. But the black isn't really black in color and the white isn't white. Both are gray or whatever the color of the nearest mud hole. The word white is erroneously taken from a South African word meaning wide, for the shape of the mouth. The white rhino is sometimes called the wide-mouthed rhino.

In recent years, Africans (with financial help and biological advice from Europeans and Americans) have been trying to protect the rhinos, both black and white, which still remain. It is understatement to say that this has been a dramatic business; there have been violent armed clashes with organized gangs of poachers. And such modern devices as drug-filled darts (shot from crossbows) and helicopters have been used to subdue, immobilize, and then transport full-grown rhinos



from poaching areas to new homes in national parks. It's a rugged, frequently dangerous task to handle such awesome and unpredictable beasts. Accidents have happened.

Since beginning this unusual conservation project, the game rangers in charge have discovered still another way in which black rhinos are unpredictable. Shortly after being placed in temporary captivity (for observation before being released in new homes), the animals become as tame and friendly as can be. Some far less aggressive animals in the wild never become tame when captured, but some black rhinos learn to respond when they are called to be scratched behind the ears or fed a bucket of oats. And a young female white rhino grew up in the garden of a game scout in Murchison Falls, Uganda. It played with his children, but eventually had to be sent elsewhere. The cow liked to lean against the scout's house in the shade. Nobody minded until the house collapsed.

Not many human beings really love rhinos, but a whole generation would hate to see them vanish. The African bush would never be the same without these surly citizens.

(opposite) A white rhino in Murchison Falls National Park. Far more docile and predictable than the black rhino, he is in danger of extinction.