



A decade of rhino marathons

As a child, I watched on television as presenter Nick Baker ran the Marathon des Sables in a rhino costume. I had no idea then that I would one day do a marathon in one of those famous costumes – and certainly not more than once.

Vicky Rees | Rhino Runner



This year marks my tenth consecutive London Marathon in a rhino costume (minus the 2020 Virtual Marathon – more on that later).

'Rhino marathons' have been my annual highlight since 2012 when, aged 18, I completed my first race. A keen runner, my ballot entry had been unsuccessful, but in the commiseration magazine, I spotted a costume just like Nick Baker's... I love both animals and a challenge, so I applied. To my delight, and perhaps my parents' horror, I was accepted.

After numerous cake sales, street collections and pub quizzes, a few occasions when I took a cheeky afternoon off school to run, and a costume alteration to shorten my rhino, Marathon day arrived. I remember dancing at every bandstand and pausing for a photo with a little girl's class teddy. Of course, I also remember chafing and sweating profusely.

I finally crossed the finish line, exhausted but elated, with a time of 7:35:31. Instantly, I wanted to do it again. Then, and every time since, crossing the line has somehow erased the gruelling preceding hours.



I also very much walked the virtual marathon of 2020 – my only marathon without wearing a costume, having had my daughter by c-section three months prior. It was truly surreal to be joined by my newborn and mum for a rainy marathon around my village.

Whilst it all began with marathons, rhinos have shaped other parts of my life. I shoehorned a trip to Uganda's only rhino sanctuary, and a dissertation on the politics of rhino conservation there, into my undergraduate degree, and then completed a rhino-themed Master's in African Studies. Spending time with rhinos and rangers was incredible, and highlighted the sad plight of such beautiful animals.



Whilst subsequent races have blurred together somewhat, the best (and worst) moments stand out. Going to the wrong start line and having to sprint across Greenwich Park pre-race was bad enough in 2014, but I did it again in 2021, missing my start wave. Surprisingly, 2021 then ended up being my best race psychologically; a marked contrast to 2015's 'wall' at mile 11. My favourite event, however, was in 2017, as my mum, an invaluable supporter of my previous marathons, ran for Save the Rhino too: we crossed the finish line together.



A few things unite every marathon; the fantastic support from Save the Rhino, the pre-race nerves, getting called 'rhino man', and the brilliant atmosphere. It truly brings out the best in spectators and runners.



I love the bit of the course where the route doubles back, and the faster runners, suffering at mile 22, cheer me across the barrier as I plod through mile 13.

Speaking of plodding... I am reliably one of the last finishers of each 'crash' of costume runners. My finish times have ranged from 6:19:47 (2014) to 7:53:35 (2019). I owe my faster races to Paula Radcliffe's strategy of counting steps. I would force myself to run for a hundred paces, then walk for fifty, mile after mile. I trained more for my earlier marathons. The last few have been more mind over matter: to say I 'ran' them feels an exaggeration!

This journey has been a consistent feature of a decade of huge changes and personal challenges. I am immensely grateful for the opportunity to have participated – it has been such an honour and a joy to get to know the Save the Rhino family, past and present, and to play

a small part in the vital conservation work they do. Looking forward, I hope to do the ForRangers Ultra marathon in Kenya – and at least part of it in costume! So... bring on the next 10 years?

Vicky has completed an extraordinary 10 London Marathons for Save the Rhino in the last 10 years, raising more than £14,660 in total!

Want to join Vicky on the start line in 2023? Apply online: www.savetherhino.org/get-involved/events