

RHINO GUARDIANS

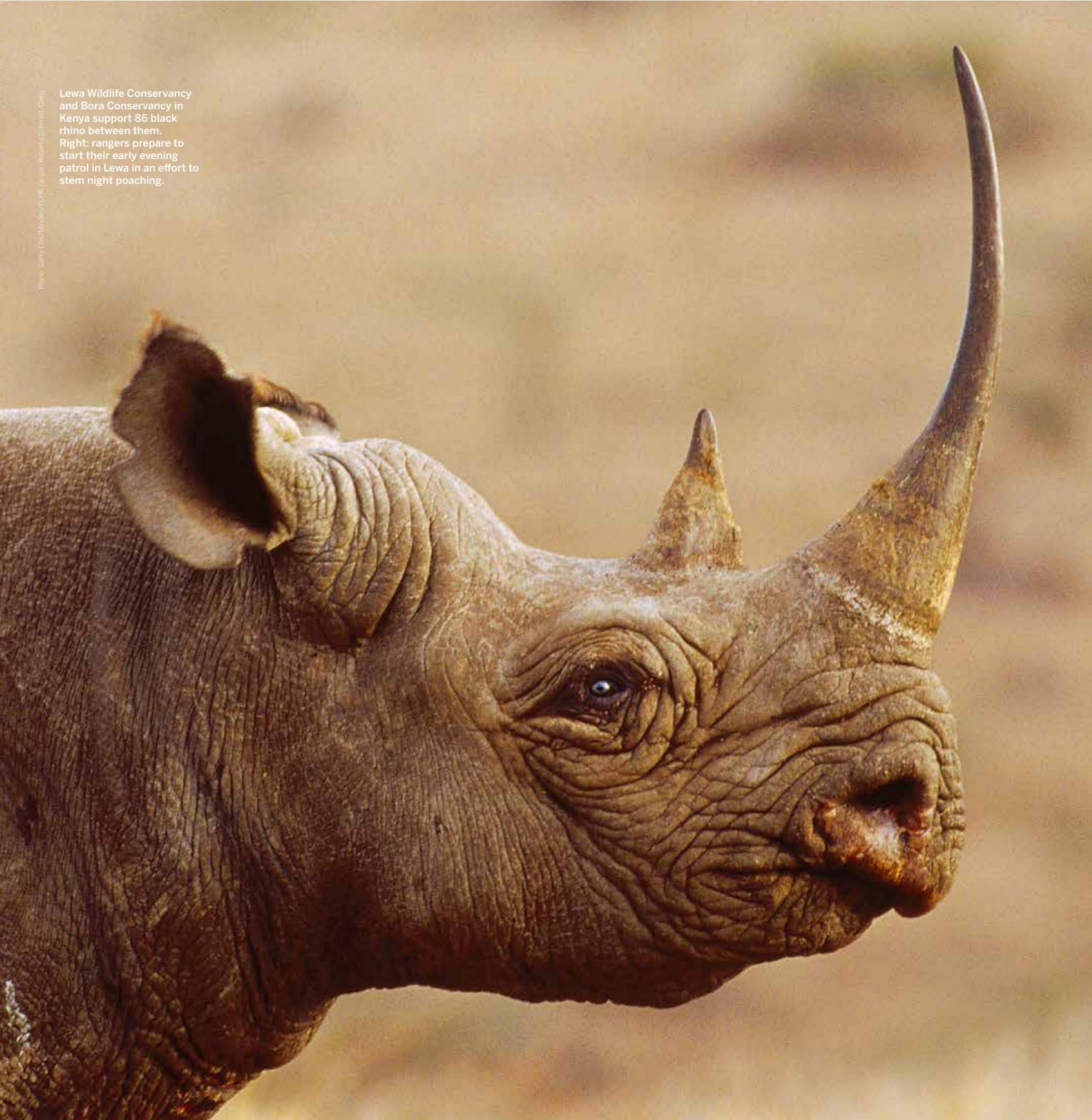


Local people and teams of rangers are winning the battle to save black rhino in Kenya.

Joanna Eede reports.

Rhino: Gerry Ellis/Minidiv/FLPA; ranger: Roberto Schmidt/Getty

Lewa Wildlife Conservancy and Bora Conservancy in Kenya support 86 black rhino between them. Right: rangers prepare to start their early evening patrol in Lewa in an effort to stem night poaching.





APRIL 2017 THE HEAVY IMPACT OF A DECISION

There are now 86 black rhino living on the 93,000 acres (145 sq miles) of the Lewa–Borana landscape; a rhino hasn't been lost to poaching since 2013. But there is little room for complacency. In April 2017, South Africa's highest court legalised the domestic trade of rhino horn. Founder of Lewa Wildlife Conservancy Ian Craig believes that the knock-on effect of this decision will have a deleterious and lasting impact on rhino conservation across Africa. "Demand for and myths surrounding rhino horn will now be fuelled and prices will rise," he tells me. "Free-ranging rhino will require an ever-increasing level of security to keep them alive, and costs will spiral."



SUDDENLY HE IS UPRIGHT, ALERT, FACING OUR WAY, MAKING AN EXPLOSIVE 'PUFFING' SOUND.

wind direction. Black rhino are short-sighted, but their powerful olfactory sense makes up for poor vision, so it is crucial that Loicharu does not detect our scent. A sandgrouse erupts noisily from a whistling thorn tree and Loicharu's feathered ears twitch, rotate and twitch again. And then suddenly he is upright, alert, facing our way, making an explosive 'puffing' sound, his stocky body taut and ready to move. "I think he picked up a scent," whispers Sammy. "He can't see us from that distance, so is puffing to establish if we are rhino."



RHINO STORIES

When we don't return the puff, the rhino turns and thunders deep into the bush, the sound of splintering acacia thickets lingering long after he disappears from sight. Sammy is moved by our encounter. "This was the land of the black rhino, all the way from here to Ololokwe," he says. "All the stories from my father and my grandfather told of rhino everywhere." Samburu's wild landscape was home to black rhino for thousands of years, until the last one was poached in 1990. The species was once widespread across Africa, but a booming illegal wildlife trade and lack of secure habitat ensured that between 1960 and 1995 there was a 98 per cent collapse in numbers; now there are approximately 5,500 wild individuals left. Kenya is one of the black rhino's last strongholds, with about 696 animals, representing around four-fifths of the eastern black rhino subspecies. The illegal wildlife trade is a shady and lucrative business. Rhinoceros horn contains keratin, also found in fingernails and horses' hooves, which is ground into a powder and sold for high prices in far east Asia – primarily China and

A wind is blowing from the east, sending dust devils spinning across northern Kenya's plains as our Samburu warrior guide, Sammy Lemiruni, explains how to track black rhino on foot. We must walk silently in single file and obey his hand signals. We are in Samburu, en route to the 120km² Sera Rhino Sanctuary which, in February this year, became the first community-owned sanctuary in East Africa to offer a pioneering rhino-tracking safari to tourists. I am one of the first guests. It is hot – the rains are late and the gneiss rock face of Ololokwe, the monolith sacred to the Samburu tribe, is hazy. The snaking, ochre road is pot-holed and lined with flat-topped acacia trees, red termite hills and the blackened remains of scrub fires. Samburu herders haul back encircling branches of calendula to release sheep from an overnight corral, and boys with sticks look after goats, yellow water canisters slung across their backs. A mile behind the electrified fence that protects 11 of the world's Critically Endangered black rhino, we find three rhino scouts standing on a granite boulder, sharply silhouetted against the clear dawn sky. Samson is



holding a telemetry transmitter high above his head, searching for GPS signals emitted by microchips implanted in rhino horns. When the receiver bleeps it tells him 'No 7', a male called Loicharu, is nearby. We creep through arid, thorny bushland, pushing aside prickly commiphora bushes and avoiding lumps of white quartz and the sandy soil that crunches noisily underfoot. When we are 30m away from a species that has lived on Earth for 50 million years, we stop and watch. Loicharu is sleeping. We are close enough to study his thick folds of dark grey skin and powerful prehensile upper lip. I wait behind a sandpaper tree with a scout while Sammy inches cautiously forward; he stops when Loicharu stirs, and occasionally shakes his ash bag to check on

Clockwise from top left: red-billed oxpeckers travel on the backs of rhino; rangers scan for rhino in Borana Conservancy; a young orphan raised by humans is introduced to the wild; Samson holds a receiver to search for a rhino's signal in Sera Rhino Sanctuary.

BLACK RHINO

Vietnam – as a panacea for medical conditions. Poachers have links to international arms, drugs and organised crime syndicates. They hack off rhino horns with axes and leave the animals to bleed painfully to death.

“The world needs to de-mystify the belief that rhino horn is a cure-all,” says Ian Craig, founder of Lewa Wildlife Conservancy. “Consumers need to be aware that they are culpable victims of a complex commercial lie, fuelled by human greed, and driven by a small number of unscrupulous individuals.”

But poaching is a hard nut to crack. “There is no magic bullet,” says Cathy Dean, director of Save the Rhino International. “But well-trained rangers, better law enforcement, education and targeted marketing to reduce consumer demand all play a role.” Vital, too, is the evolving ‘community conservation’ movement that is cleverly integrating the survival of black rhino with tourism and the enhancement of local lives.

BEHIND BARRIERS

The genesis of northern Kenya’s community conservation movement lies in Lewa Wildlife Conservancy. Lewa was established as a black rhino sanctuary in 1983. “I watched black rhino being annihilated during the 1970s and ’80s,” says Ian. “We learned that putting rhinos behind fences is the only way to keep them alive. There is too much greed in the world to keep them safe otherwise.”

Lewa’s rate of rhino reproduction was so successful – by 2013 the number of rhino had exceeded the conservancy’s ecological carrying capacity – that it has been able to restock other depleted areas. Eleven rhino were moved from Lewa to its western neighbour, Borana Conservancy, in 2013. A year later the fence separating the two conservancies was removed, creating a robust 93,000-acre ecosystem that is now home to 13 per cent of Kenya’s black rhino. In 2015 it moved 20 black rhino to Sera Conservancy. “As

FIGHTING BACK: TRAINING RHINO RANGERS

Every anti-poaching ranger endures months of SAS-style training in patrol and night tactics, navigation skills, first-aid, aviation and evacuation training. Some rangers are taught to handle bloodhounds and Belgian Malinois attack dogs, while all have Kenya Police Reservist status, which awards them the powers to arrest and prosecute. It also gives them the right to bear arms: they carry Heckler & Koch

guns, together with bottles of water, a spare radio battery, tourniquet, chemical light stick, fruit and biscuits and – because 100 per cent of black rhino are killed after dark – night-vision goggles. “Rangers aren’t allowed to use deodorant or soap,” says Rianto Lokoran. “Poachers would smell them a mile off.”



RHINO PROTECTION REQUIRES A FLEET OF AIRCRAFT, HELICOPTERS, ARMED ANTI-POACHING RANGERS AND UNARMED SCOUTS.

Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) and Lewa, with funding from organisations including Tusk Trust, to move rhino into the pastoralist-owned Sera Conservancy. The project demonstrated that community conservation can also bring about peace between tribes.

HARMONIOUS EXISTENCE

“These rhinos are the peacemakers,” says Pauline Longojine, chair of Sera Community Conservancy. “They bring our neighbouring communities together.” And as every tourist who tracks rhino pays a conservation fee of \$175, substantial revenues return to the community. Saruni Rhino, the lodge in Sera Conservancy that offers rhino tracking to tourists, recently provided the people of Sera with their first dividend in dollars.

“Wildlife is crucial to the rest of life,” says Will Craig, owner of Lewa Wilderness lodge. “Conservation projects such as Sera require wildlife tourism to provide employment, and the conservation of fast dwindling natural habitat.” Ian Craig agrees. “Sera Sanctuary is the first peg in the ground to show that livestock and wildlife can coexist,” he says. “Kenya will be a richer place for the success of this.”

While the success of the sanctuaries has led to an increase in the rhino population, the threat to black rhino is still huge. “I can’t tell you how massive it is,” says Ian Craig. The 24/7 task of keeping black rhino alive is a complex and expensive one. Rhino protection requires a fleet of Piper Super Cub light aircraft, helicopters, a core team of armed anti-poaching rangers and unarmed scouts.

“We all work as one big team,” Edward Ndiritu, head of the Lewa-Borana Anti-Poaching Unit, tells me when I visit Lewa HQ. Edward sees the people who live around Lewa’s borders as intrinsic to the conservancy’s work, and a primary source of security intelligence. “Our community is our first line of defence,” he says. “Most of our ‘intel’ comes via our networks on the ground. If our neighbours aren’t safe, we aren’t safe.” Rianto Lokoran, a commander in the

such, Lewa’s legacy stretches way beyond its own borders,” says Charlie Mayhew, CEO of Tusk Trust.

Ian Craig’s vision is based on community-centric conservation: the principle that tourism, wildlife and community are fundamentally interconnected. “Lewa supports peoples’ livelihoods through initiatives in healthcare, water, micro-credit and education,” says Wanjiku Kinuthia, Lewa’s communications’ officer. Lewa’s security team is on hand to tackle local security issues.

If the families that live near Lewa’s boundaries are increasingly aware that their livelihoods are intertwined with those of iconic African species, the reverse is also true: neighbours help Lewa-Borana with the daily challenges of keeping tabs on wild animals. “The operations room often receives calls informing that an elephant has trampled on crops,” says Wanjiku. This philosophy gave rise to the Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT), which now works to transform people’s lives, build peace and conserve natural resources in 33 communities.

NRT’s mission is no small task in a region of Kenya that was once a lawless no-go zone, scarred by cattle rustling and conflict between the different peoples that call the landscape home. But the model is working. In 2015, NRT partnered with the

Above: rangers risk their lives protecting Lewa’s black rhinos. Top right: a black rhino mother and calf. The conservancy’s rhino are breeding successfully.



A rhino in Lewa Wildlife Conservancy is tranquillised ready for translocation (this picture), peers out of a hole in its crate (top left), and is moved to Borana Conservancy by rangers and wildlife vets (left).

Translocation (x3): Carl de Souza/Getty; rangers: Roberto Schmidt/Getty; rhino: Tu De Roy/Minden/FLPA

BLACK RHINO

HOW TO SEE BLACK RHINO

KENYA

The best places to see eastern black rhinos are conservancies. These include the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy (www.lewa.org), Borana Conservancy (www.borana.co.ke), Ol Pejeta Conservancy (www.olpejetaconservancy.org) and the Sera Wildlife Conservancy, which now has a new camp called Saruni Rhino (www.sarunisamburu.com). Black rhino tracking safaris in Kenya are offered by several wildlife tour companies, including Journeys by Design (www.journeysbydesign.com/experiences/walking-with-rhinos), Natural High Safaris (www.naturalhighsafaris.com), Natural World Safaris (www.naturalworldsafaris.com),

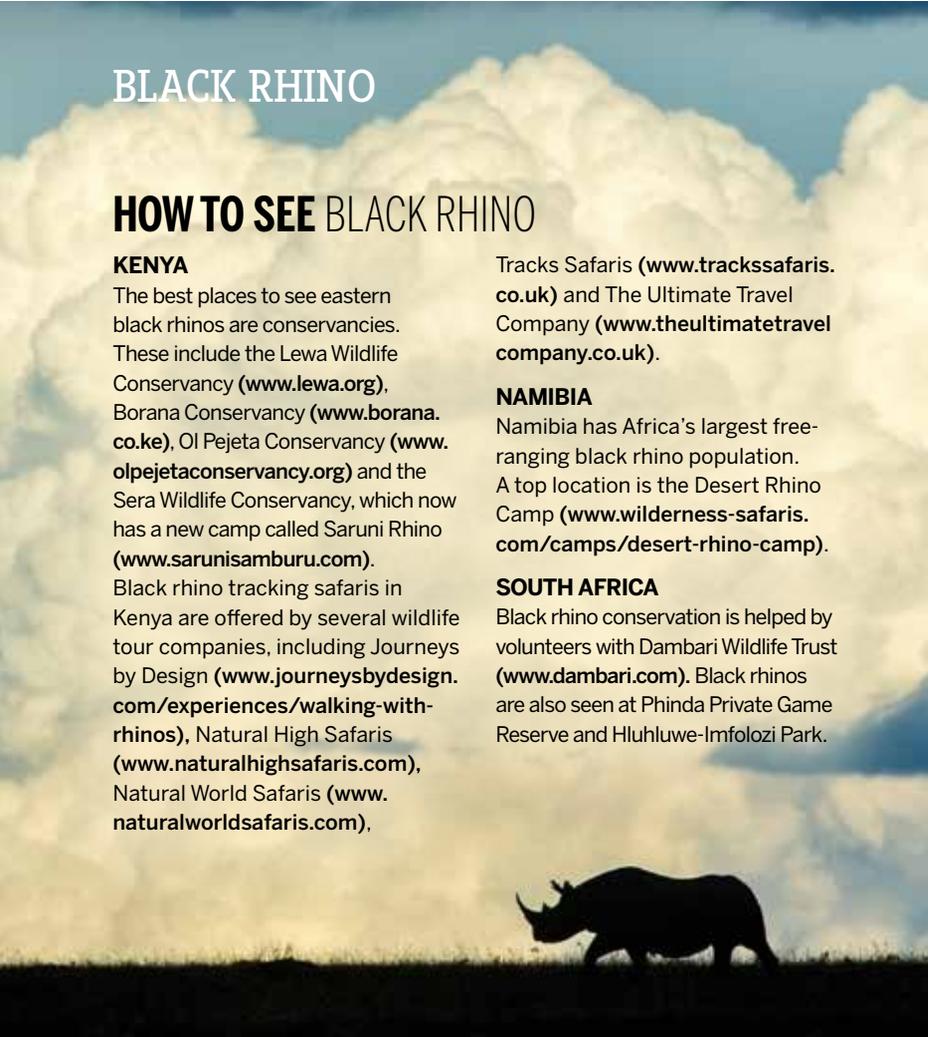
Tracks Safaris (www.trackssafaris.co.uk) and The Ultimate Travel Company (www.theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk).

NAMIBIA

Namibia has Africa's largest free-ranging black rhino population. A top location is the Desert Rhino Camp (www.wilderness-safaris.com/camps/desert-rhino-camp).

SOUTH AFRICA

Black rhino conservation is helped by volunteers with Dambari Wildlife Trust (www.dambari.com). Black rhinos are also seen at Phinda Private Game Reserve and Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park.



Above: in the north of Kenya, conservancies that involve the local community and support active conservation on the ground are some of the best places to see black rhino. Left: using a prehensile lip to browse shrubbery.

THE SCOUTS SCAN THE AREA AS OXPECKERS RIDE ON THE BACKS OF RHINO. "BIRDS SEND US MESSAGES," RIANTO WHISPERS.

unit, agrees. "Even the night watchmen who guard their cattle help us protect rhino. If they hear gun shots, they tell us."

Rianto tells me about the rangers' courage and commitment as we drive across Borana's rolling grasslands at dusk. Silent in the back of his 4x4 are two anti-poaching rangers in camouflage fatigues, ready for their night's deployment. The light is fading fast when the rangers jump from the vehicle and crouch in formation, one facing due north, the other south. Then they walk soundlessly into a stand of juniper trees on the brow of the hill, from where they will have a vantage point over Borana's highlands and the emerald groves of Ngare Ndare river, to Lewa's vast volcanic plains.

IN TUNE WITH NATURE

The night passes without incident. At dawn, I rejoin Rianto. With him are three Maasai scouts – Kimiri, Nelson and Moses – who are patrolling the western reaches of Borana in order to spot a female rhino called Linda and her calf, Sam. Their daily monitoring is a vital way of keeping tabs on rhino locations, behaviour and state of health, and their extensive knowledge of the lands is borne out of childhood years spent in the bush.

We walk to the bottom of Gaitumu Kidogo hill and head towards the riverbed. Close to a watering hole – "A favourite place for lion," says Kimiri – the scent of wild mango fills the air, and a red-billed oxpecker flutters from a tree. The scouts watch it cautiously then quickly scan the area as oxpeckers ride on the backs of rhino. "Birds send us messages," Rianto whispers. "Nature speaks to us." We keep walking. A 4x4 carrying tourists bumps past and a grey kestrel flies in and out of the stony-bottomed lugga. Soon, the men find fresh rhino dung under a euphorbia tree; they raise their binoculars to study the pewter-green plains ahead.

There, walking away from the low waters at Borana's dam, is Linda, her long horn shining in the sun, her baby trotting behind her. The four men are happy to have found them and I am once more struck by the stark human contrasts at play within the complex world of rhino conservation: the corrupt criminal gangs in thrall to the dollar with their butchering poachers, and the forward-thinking team of rhino 'guardians', that cuts across tribal, ethnic, professional and geographical borders. A team that believes, as conservationist Michael Dyer says, "We have a moral obligation to look after wildlife for the next generation." 🐘



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