

THE WHITE RHINOCEROS IN UGANDA

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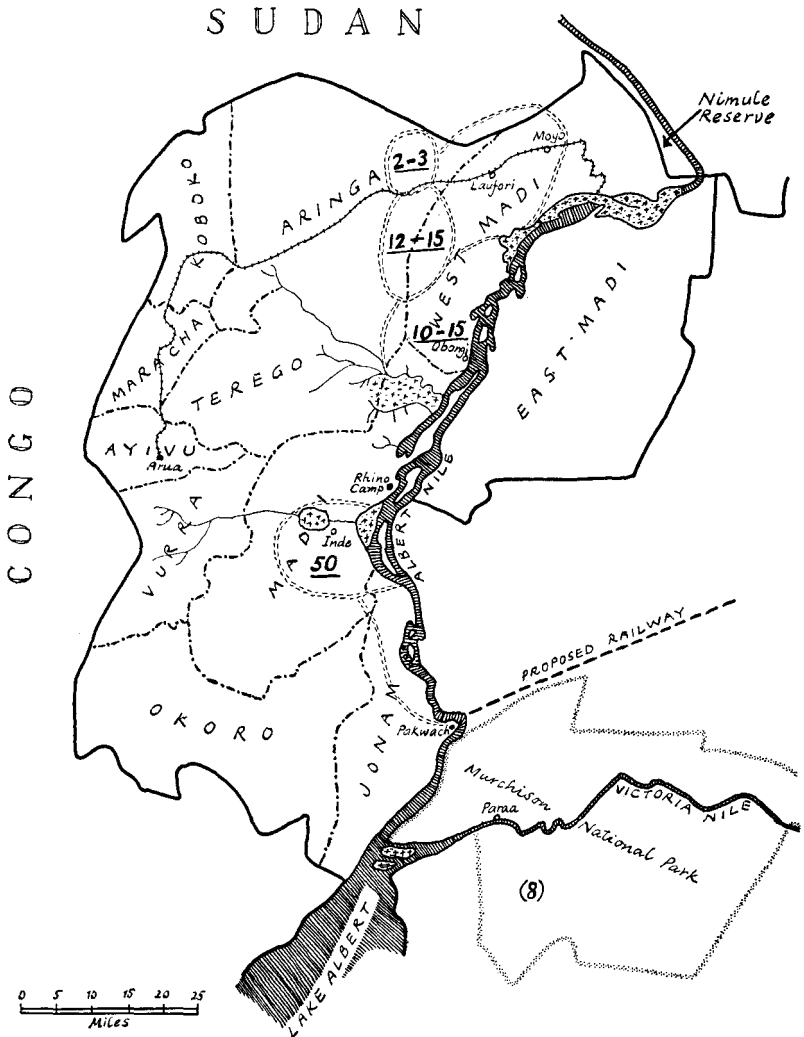
This article summarizes some of the results of a visit paid to the West Nile District of Uganda in July–August, 1962, with the object of studying the White Rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum*) in its native habitat. Its conclusions are based both upon official departmental reports and upon information received privately from officers of the Uganda Game and Agriculture Departments, from residents in the West Nile District and from others, to whom individual acknowledgment is made below.

The White Rhinoceros was formerly widely distributed throughout each of two extensive territories, a southern and a northern, separated by the great tropical rain forest region of the Congo and limited individually by such natural barriers as deserts, mountain ranges, and wide rivers. The southern territory lay between the Zambezi to the north and the Vaal tributary of the Orange River to the south, extending westwards into Angola but limited eastwards by the mountainous terrain of Southern Rhodesia and the Transvaal.

The northern territory (the later one to come to notice) included certain areas of the Sudan, of the Congo, and of Uganda, all lying to the west of the Nile.

To-day, as is all too well known, the former southern habitat is restricted to the Umfolozi and Hluhluwe Reserves in Natal and the northern habitat is confined to parts of the Western Sudan (the Bhar al Ghazal and the Nimule Reserve), to the Congo north of the Uele River and to the West Nile District of Uganda. In its present southern habitat the White Rhinoceros is safe under protection and is reported to be increasing in numbers. Its status in the northern habitat is less easy of assessment. According to Sir Eric Pridie (1962) it still flourishes in the Bhar al Ghazal district under the strictest protection: in the Nimule Reserve Captain C. R. S. Pitman (1963) reports an increase of numbers, due to the rigorous measures taken by the Sudan Government against poaching—the most serious single threat to the survival of this species. The Sudanese game wardens are armed, and under orders where poachers are concerned, to shoot to kill, with the result that rhinoceros poaching has become too hazardous a venture. In the Garamba Reserve and the northernmost area of the Congo an unknown number of animals may survive, but accurate information is impossible to obtain: all that is reported with certainty is that since the cessation of European control in the Congo, the export of elephant tusks and rhino horn therefrom has increased very considerably.

In Uganda the White Rhinoceros is now restricted to the Madi, West Madi, and Aringa counties of the West Nile District, where, despite protection and the ceaseless vigilance of the Game Department Officers, its numbers have decreased alarmingly in the last half-dozen years, so that to-day probably not more than 80 animals remain in a strip of terrain some 70 miles long by 20 to 30 miles wide and one which, until now, offered this species ideal living conditions.



WEST NILE DISTRICT OF UGANDA. WHITE RHINOCEROS NUMBERS AND DISTRIBUTION, 1962.

The accompanying sketch map of the West Nile District of Uganda shows its counties and certain of its townships, of which Rhino Camp is perhaps the most well known. Some 50 years ago it was the aptly chosen and rewarding headquarters of Theodore Roosevelt when collecting *Ceratotherium* material on behalf of the Smithsonian African Expedition. It was here also that, 30 years ago, Captain Pitman could encounter 30 to 40 animals (often in groups of 7 or 8 or more) within a day's walk and could approach to within 7 or 8 feet of individuals, so unafrighted were they, because unharried by hunters and poachers.

Brooks (1962) estimated that in 1928 the number of animals in the West Nile District was 130. By 1939 this number had increased to 220, but thereafter no specimen was ever seen south of Pakwach. By 1948 numbers had dropped to 190, and the animals had finally left the vicinity of Rhino Camp because of the invasion of their terrain by increasing native settlement. By 1951 the total White Rhinoceros population of the West Nile District was estimated to be 300 or so animals and, in 1955, to be some 350 animals. In 1958 Heppes estimated that 335 White Rhinoceros survived in the Aringa and West Madi counties of the West Nile District. Thus 5 or 6 years ago the total Uganda White Rhinoceros population stood at some 350 animals. To-day (1962-63) probably no more than 80 individuals remain (Captain Pitman puts their number at 70-75).

The alarming decline in numbers is more clearly set out thus :—

Year.	Estimated Total Uganda White Rhinoceros Population.		
1928	.	.	130 animals
1939	.	.	220 "
1948	.	.	190 "
1951	.	.	300+ "
1955	.	.	350 "
1958	.	.	335 "
1962	.	.	80 "

This surviving White Rhinoceros population is disposed as indicated in the sketch map : about 25-30 animals inhabit Aringa and West Madi counties and not more than 50 inhabit Madi county about Inde.

Apart from the customary daily and seasonal movements of the species (governed mainly by considerations of feeding and watering) the present animals would appear to move about their district to a greater degree than formerly and to have become increasingly wary and difficult to approach. In the long grass season they incline to frequent rocky ridges, which may be due to food requirements or to insecurity in the flat land.

The West Madi and Aringa population is loosely composed of two groups, one centred around Lomunga Game Camp, the second around Laufori. The first group occupies the black cotton soil areas with thorn thickets between the Obongi-Itula road and the Nile : the second group comprises a very few animals (2-3) to the north of the Moyo-Arua road and the remainder (10-15) scattered rather widely to the south thereof. Poaching in this territory has been so heavy as to decimate the White Rhinoceros population. When Messrs. Randall and O'Connell were catching rhino in this area in March, 1961, for transportation into the Murchison National

Park, they encountered more than forty skeletons of animals which had been killed within a twelvemonth or so. In the same year Mr. Peter Hay (1962) came across, in the area between the Koich and Nyawa Rivers, no less than five skeletons in the grass during the course of a walk of less than one hour. Such findings are some indication of the persistent and illegal slaughter which has taken place.

In Madi County not more than fifty White Rhinoceros still survive. They are centred roughly upon Inde and the swampy land along the west bank of the Nile. They are, perhaps, under closer supervision than is possible in the more northerly districts, but they offer the same attraction to the poacher. They, too, appear to have grown increasingly wary, whereas formerly they allowed approach to within a few yards.

The shyness of the surviving animals, their persistent numerical reduction, and the number of skeletons to be encountered in the bush, are plain indications that the present protection afforded the White Rhinoceros is ineffective, despite unremitting watch and labour on the part of devoted Game Department Officers. It is frequently stated that one aim of White Rhinoceros conservation is the detection and apprehension of the Asians who are the prime instigators of the native poaching: yet one never hears of the identification and arrest of any of these, without whose relentless demands the Uganda White Rhinoceros might stand some chance of survival, inasmuch as the native African does not hunt this species for either meat or horn. Even, however, were the poaching threat removed, as by the draconic measures employed by the Sudan Government in its territory across the border, the gradual industrialization of the West Nile District, the opening of roads (and now of the Gulu-Pakwach railway), and the increased native settlement of hitherto uncultivated land must, sooner or later, so restrict the natural feeding grounds of the species that its extinction in Uganda would seem to lie in the foreseeable future.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writer is indebted to Sir Eric Pridie, K.C.M.G., D.S.O., Captain C. R. S. Pitman, C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C., Dr. E. H. Williams, M.B.E. (Kuluva Mission, Arua), Mr. T. S. Jones, O.B.E., and Mr. Peter Hay (Uganda Agricultural Department), Mr. A. C. Brooks, Col. C. D. Trimmer, D.S.O., Mr. J. H. Blower, and Mr. Douglas Jones (Uganda Game Department), without whose generous co-operation this assessment of the present White Rhinoceros population in Uganda could not have been undertaken.

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* The World Wildlife Fund has devoted a large sum, through the East African Wild Life Society, to a scheme for the preservation of the White Rhinoceros in Uganda.—Ed.