

Black Rhino

Scientific Name: *Diceros bicornis*

Home: Forests and thorn scrub across predominantly Eastern and Southern Africa.

Description: Colour is brown, a short tail and a large barrel shaped body. Head has two horns, the front one being the largest.



Figure 1 - Black Rhino at Lewa Downs , Kenya.

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Black Rhino facts

Black rhinos are very difficult to find. They browse on low trees and shrubs, avoiding open grassland and dense cover in favour of the edges of small wooded areas.

They are loners and do not socialise with other rhinos a great deal except when they are looking for a mate. Their horns have been their downfall over the years resulting in heavy poaching which has decimated the rhino population around the world.

Why? Largely because of people who are the only threat to adult rhinos, although the larger cats--lions and tigers--can take babies. Powdered rhino horn has been in demand for many centuries as a medicine. The horn is also carved into dagger handles, primarily in Yemen.

Here are some other interesting facts about black rhinos:

- The black rhino browse rather than graze. They have a pointed top lip to help them eat sharp thorn shrubs and branches from trees.
- Since it cannot sweat, a part of its day is spent wallowing in mud and standing in open water to lower its body temperature and to keep down skin pests.
- The estimated life span of a black rhino is 50 to 60 years.
- A female's pregnancy lasts 15 months – a baby rhino weighs between 55 and 85 pounds at birth!
- A fully grown black rhino weighs 4,500 pounds, just over two tons – more than a family car!
- Black rhinos have terrible eyesight but a very strong sense of smell and hearing.

Did you know...?

Rhino's horns are made of keratin which is like human hair and grows if you cut it.

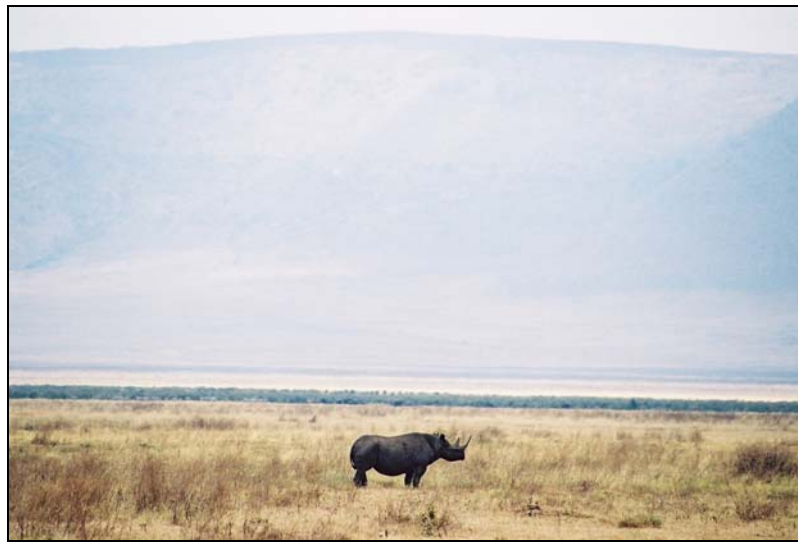


Figure 2 Black Rhino in Ngorongoro Crater

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My Black Rhino adventures

Being so elusive I would not write an extensive adventure story about near escapes that included black rhinos! Nevertheless, I have had some very exciting times working with teams in the Masai Mara, Kenya, identifying black rhinos.

They are very obscure animals, preferring to browse alone and undisturbed. They only come together to mate. If upset they are very aggressive charging before clearly identifying the source of noise. This might be a vehicle, a buffalo or trees blowing in the wind!

As they have a very keen sense of smell, if you are watching a black rhino in a game park and the wind changes direction, a few things happen rather quickly.

The animal will stop browsing and use its nose to pick up the new scent blown in its direction. It will then turn and face the new scent, perhaps a vehicle full of people watching the animal eating.

And at this stage, your drivers will probably retreat by reversing his vehicle quickly before the rhino decides to charge...asking questions later!

In the Masai Mara during the 1990's we were aware of some 30 black rhino living within the area. Each rhino had different characteristics that helped identify them. It might have been a scar from a courting battle, or a nick in an ear caused by a thorn bush.

These marks helped us keep a record of each rhino; where and when it was sighted, its general health and a rough idea of where its home range boundaries were.

Sadly, we did lose some black rhinos to poaching. The horn has made these animals a highly endangered species. But other black rhinos moved across the border to the large Serengeti National Park in Tanzania.