

## **“That Lonely Thorn Tree”**

by Lin Barrie

Tuesday 11th November, 2008.

*Sometimes the hardest stories to write are the very ones that need desperately to be told, no matter the difficulties of trying to balance emotion and fact...*

Ice, the five year old daughter of Natalia, was gunned down in broad daylight yesterday.

Her mother was shot to death last year....

No, these are not family members of ours, although they are as important– these are two of the many precious black and white rhinos we have lost in the Save Valley Conservancy in Zimbabwe over the last few years.

At nine thirty am on Monday the 10th, automatic rifle fire was heard by the pump house attendant on Arda Ranch, neighbouring Senuko Ranch in the Conservancy.

George Hulme and his scouts mobilized a field search to discover what they could, as did the Senuko scouts. Hours of tracking and backtracking led them onto at least six different sets of recent spoor–all illegal poachers and itinerants on Arda. They came across a freshly butchered impala in a snare and picked up numerous wire snares in their ongoing search.....

Clive, after having had no choice but to spend an infuriating morning in his office trying to manage pressing money, staff and administrative issues, all the while with his heart out there in the bush with the scouts and his distracted mind running through all the possible terrible scenarios, eventually managed to escape paperwork and meetings and traversed the Arda area in the afternoon.

Before running out of light, he found himself standing over a young buffalo, newly strangled in a snare. Probably one of the very large, tame herd of over 200 animals that we are privileged to have drinking at our water hole nightly...

Nothing conclusive was found regarding the rifle shots that day.

A total of two zebra, two buffalo and three impala, all dead in wire snares, were found by the search team.

Clive came home with a murderous look in his eye...

Frustrated and deeply pessimistic about what he would find, Clive went out again early today, Tuesday, and began to systematically work out where the shots were heard from and triangulate back to areas where he knew the habitat was suitable for Black rhino...

Knowing that Sarah, a mature female who was the first Black rhino born on the Conservancy, had been seen in this area with a young calf, his dread was that he would find her, the "flagship rhino" of the Conservancy, poached and her calf dead, abandoned or mutilated....

Joined by his son Glenn and the Senuko scouts, shortly before midday they had discovered spoor of a running rhino, overlaid with blood spots and yet again overlaid by human tracks.

Within 800 metres they came upon the grisly murder scene, (see drawing next page)

the female rhino crumpled onto her chest near a lone thorn tree, legs buckled under her and her face obliterated by the hacking cuts of the poachers who had removed her horns after mowing her down with automatic fire.



No sign of a calf.....and the poachers long gone on the next leg of their journey to pass the horn on to couriers who would then spirit it across the border.

Was this Sarah? She looked to be a young animal and Clive took note of her ear notches, of which Graham Connear, the Conservator, has records, enabling identification of each individual rhino.

Coming home saddened and distraught, Clive rested himself for half an hour and then we drove to meet Mark Brightman and Graham Connear on the boundary road between Senuko, Hammond and Arda, together with details of Support Unit and Chiredzi police whom Mark had picked up.

Graham confirmed that, from the ear notch data, this was not Sarah who was killed but Ice, a young female, who had not yet been known to have a calf.

Small consolation-this was not beloved Sarah, and I could see that register in Clive's eyes, but this was still an irreplaceable loss-a young female who could have borne many babies in her lifetime. She was the daughter of Natalia, who herself was killed by poachers last year.

We drove into thorn scrub and when we reached the clearing with the one lone tree, where her body lay, I subdued my emotions, clambering out of the vehicle with heavy heart to take photographs, to sketch and to try to understand the process of what had happened in this lonely space under a thorn tree; the last breaths of a rare and special animal, the triumphant antics of the killers who had chopped out the object of their greedy desire, her horn.

Her open, staring eyes and intact ears were all that was left of her face, the rest a gaping hole of tattered flesh and busy flies. Apart from the carnage of her face, her body had been attacked... the horn poachers, or perhaps some others who had followed, had flayed sheets of skin off her forequarters and rump and buttocks to harvest meat in large quantities, leaving exposed, sun-darkened flesh, and her pathetic tail hanging intact. She lay chest down, legs crumpled beneath her, one eye hardened and sun scorched, the other eye unglazed, still seeming almost aware, protected as it was in the shade of her head.

With subdued and sad murmurings the team set to work to photograph her ear notches, locate bullet wounds and check the two microchips implanted at different times, once when she was dehorned\*\*\* last year and before that, when she was ear notched as a very young rhino.

All the while I squatted in front of her and drew her poor sad head, my mind determinedly in numb mode and my fingers moving the pencil automatically to record the tragic mess.

Graham and Mark located and followed bullet tracks with the metal detector, whilst the rest of the team cut, pushed and pulled the body as necessary to enable them to retrieve the bullets-five in all they found-two in her fore quarters and lung and three in her intestines. The team then decided to return to where they had originally picked up her running tracks yesterday and to back track from there until they found the place where the poachers had initially confronted her. They all departed. I remained.

As silence descended I climbed onto the bonnet of the cruiser, parked under the same thorn tree that Ice lay under. As I lay there staring up through the branches into a clouded and bird less sky, I listened to the buzzing of the flies attending to the feast, smelt slow whiffs of her as yet untainted flesh, and began to let myself mourn this tragic waste, this terrible tribute to greed.

After what seemed like hours of weeping slow tears through closed eyes, drifting in and out of stressed sleep, listening to distantly approaching thunder and the twittering of Little bee eaters arriving to hawk flies at the carcass, letting my surroundings absorb me, I eventually opened my lids and stared straight up into gathering grey cumulus clouds.

Vultures had arrived. A wheeling vortex of more than forty circled, the closest, a White backed vulture, soaring at tree height over me and the furthest I could see being nearly invisible, pepper-grain specks against the massed clouds high above. A strange and enlightening sensation- I felt as if I was the object of their intent as the first bird whistled at speed in to perch on a neighbouring thorn tree, and pretended to preen busily eyeing me all the while.

I pursued my depressed thoughts, while the vulture waited and watched...no others came down, staying high aloft-were they awaiting a signal from the first? The wind freshened to a stiff breeze, scattered raindrops fell and the Vulture, buffeted about on a flimsy branch, gave up and flapped silently away. If I had not been there would they have all descended to begin their task of clearing up the remains of Ice? Perhaps the lateness of the afternoon and the threatening lightening also put them off...

European bee eaters arrived en masse, briefly dipping and chirruping above me as they picked flies out of the air and then, as quickly as they had arrived, they were gone again.

I pondered so many things lying there under that lonely tree-

- the inability of our follow ups to secure convictions of known poachers,
- the desperate need for information which could be served by being able to offer a reward to informers and scouts,
- the dearth of effective scout bases and lack of presence on the ground in vulnerable areas,
- the sheer inability of paying and feeding the extra staff needed to mount more intensive patrols and follow ups....

Dusk began to fall under that lonely thorn tree, and voices betrayed the slow steps of the returning trackers. They had found the place in thick scrub where the poachers had discovered Ice dozing peacefully, had sneaked closer, disturbed her so that she panicked and fled a short way, to stand and short-sightedly search the air for the cause of her alarm as is the wont of Black rhinos. While she stood there, undecided, confused and vulnerable, they opened murderous fire on her. Ten cartridge shells were found on that killing ground.

Then, mortally wounded, she ran until she could run no more and, giving up, she collapsed under that lonely tree.....

We have lost over 30% of our breeding female Rhinos to poaching in the Save Valley Conservancy and the statistics of losses country wide are no more encouraging.....

The African Hunting Dog population in the Conservancy has been very badly impacted by snaring as has every other species of game such as Impala, Kudu and

Wildebeests-even Giraffes and Elephants have fallen foul of indiscriminate snaring methods.....Where to from here?

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\*\*\* dehorned; this is a practice in the refuges of Zimbabwe of removing the horn of the Rhino surgically, literally (I've the startling photos) with a chainsaw, thereby saving the rhinos from poachers. The horn grows back. One wonders why poachers don't develop their own herd of rhinos and harvest the horns every year.