

Talking with Anna Mertz

by Dale Morris (Africa Geographic) 2013

Ever since being forced up a tree by a black rhino in 2009 I have subscribed to the conviction that these seemingly enigmatic creatures can sometimes be a bit irritable. In my capacity as a wildlife photographer, I have met more than a few wildlife researchers, game wardens and safari guides, and most of them have corroborated this theory with tales of near escapes, flattened clients and bruised ribcages.

So, it's not surprising that I was more than a little nervous when in 2012 I found myself in northern Kenya's Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, standing a mere 10 metres from Elvis, a hand-reared but wild-living black rhinoceros. He was a magnificent creature, a study in bulk and muscle. But strangely, he displayed no particular interest in the small cluster of tourists with whom I stood. I eyed each tree nearby, mentally calculating which one would best hold my weight. I also assessed the likely sprinting prowess of my companions, who were all, by the grace of God, in their 70s.

'Don't you worry, Dale,' said Anna Merz as she approached the animal and gave him a quick scratch behind the ear. 'He's quite tame, you know. Not because we

raised him ourselves but because black rhinos are highly intelligent, gentle beasts that are terribly misunderstood, that's all.'

I half expected to see this charismatic old lady of 80 go cartwheeling through the air, but Elvis merely grunted at her touch and continued with his task of defoliating an acacia tree.

'That's his mother Mawingo over there, dear old thing,' Anna went on as an even bigger behemoth emerged from a nearby bush. 'She's as blind as a bat. That's why we have to intercede and raise her babies for her. She loses them, you see. They get eaten by hyaenas or fall into holes and she's powerless to help them, poor thing,' she explained.

Mawingo and her off-spring tend to hang out at Lewa Conservancy's administration area, where they feel safe from predators. They often amble about on the lawns in front of the main office and when it rains they have been known to seek shelter under the eaves of the buildings.

'I have such a funny story to tell you about Elvis,' Anna exclaimed. 'He once wandered through the front door of one of the staff houses and got himself locked in. His minder was ever so worried because he hadn't seen Elvis for hours, but eventually he was discovered playing music on a frying pan on a bed, which of course was smashed to smithereens.' She began to laugh, shaking her head with the memory of it.

I laughed too, perhaps a little too loudly, and found myself backing away as two very alert rhinos swivelled their ears in my direction and stood to attention, seemingly ready to go on the rampage. I subtly positioned myself behind a darling pair of elderly tourists.

Anna Merz, with her bridge-club fashion sense and schoolmistress spectacles, is one of the unsung heroes of African conservation. She was to rhinos what Joy Adamson was to lions and Dian Fossey to gorillas: a passionate protector who dedicated her life to the survival of a species. She even had a rhino living in her house at one point, which apparently did not sit well with her husband.

I say *was* because sadly Anna passed away in April, but she didn't go without leaving her mark. It is through her ceaseless campaigning, politicking and her lovable nature that her legacy includes one of Kenya's largest protected rhino populations and a successful conservancy.

In the early 1980s, Anna had a very productive chat over a cup of coffee on a Kenyan cattle farm named Lewa Downs with the owners, David Craig and his son Ian. She was searching for somewhere to go from 20 000 animals to just a few hundred. To her delight, David agreed to have the sanctuary on the farm, and 5 000 hectares were fenced off. As the years passed, the size of the sanctuary grew until, by 1991, it had become a wildlife conservancy of some 25 000 hectares.

And that was just the start of things. Farming was scaled down, then phased out completely to make way for wildlife and tourism, which Anna and the Craigs believed would generate sufficient income to cover a percentage of the running costs of such a place. And those costs included trained and armed game rangers. Of course, it wasn't enough. Protecting wildlife with a skilled, well-equipped private army is not cheap. It was down to Anna's charisma and kindly ways that many donors were convinced to get involved, including members of the British royal family. Piece by piece, the project grew in stature and success.

Not only was Anna a true lover of animals, she was also a humanitarian who cared deeply for people, and for African women in particular. Her vision included combining conservation with local development, and the communities that surround Lewa have as a result progressed beyond poverty thanks to money raised via the conservancy, with functioning schools, running water, sustainable farming practices, micro businesses and medical surgeries at their disposal. As Anna showed me around the reserve, I met hundreds of staff members and their families, all of whom greeted her with obvious affection, calling her 'Mama'.

But this lady of the rhinos wasn't a softie. Far from it. Her caring and gentle nature did not extend to those whom she felt were endangering Africa's wildlife, and woe betide any poacher who messed with Lewa's animals. To track down the latter, a pack remained were those that were fortunate enough to have somebody looking out for them?

Anna and I sat in an open-sided safari vehicle, watching a white rhino mother and calf stroll across a field of golden grasses. 'We do everything we can to protect our wildlife,' she said. 'But there is a bigger story to look at, one of distribution. What sort of world would we be living in if the only rhinos that [Anna] even had a rhino living in her house at one point, which did not sit well with her husband.

Behind us, beneath a line of trees, a black rhino twitched its ears and farted. Like most of its cousins I had seen in Lewa, it was neither concerned nor intimidated by our presence, unlike the skittish, scared and dangerous rhinos I had previously encountered.

'They are quite used to having nice people around them,' Anna commented when I pointed this out.

'There will be some nearby,' she told me, and I looked around to see a second vehicle approaching us, bristling with men and guns. Anna leaned over and exchanged some gentle words with the soldiers, who all smiled at her warmly. 'Yes Mama,' said the unit's leader. 'Mother and baby are doing very well indeed.'

Braveheart

Anna Merz was a fearless woman. Born Florence Ann Hepburn Fawell near London in November 1931, she first trained as a lawyer before giving in to her passion for adventure and setting off for Ghana. There she met her first husband, Ernest Kuhn, the Swiss owner of an industrial workshop. Anna ran the business, trained racing ponies and worked as an honorary warden for the Ghana Department of Game and Wildlife, surveying sites for wildlife reserves and managing an animal orphanage.

After her divorce from Kuhn, Anna married Karl Merz, and together they explored Uganda and Kenya, where they settled in 1976. It was there that she started her campaign to protect the country's rhinos. She retired to South Africa, where she continued to be involved with the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy as a member of its board of directors and as a fundraiser, went horseriding regularly and enjoyed her eight beloved dogs.

Her courage in the face of danger was astonishing: in Ghana she killed a Gaboon viper with her father's cavalry sabre; in Kenya she killed a cobra with a rake, though not before it had spat a jet of poison at her; and in South Africa she shot dead two pythons that she had found trying to devour her dogs.

For her work with rhinos, Anna Merz was awarded the Global 500 Award from the UN Environment Programme. She died in South Africa on 4 April 2013.

Lewa's investment in protection for its wildlife is clear, but the support of local communities is vital to keep the poachers at bay. Fortunately, the people of Lewa often assist in anti-poaching efforts.

'We have a network of ears and eyes,' Anna explained. 'In fact, people on our neighbouring conservancies were so impressed with the work we do and the opportunities we bring for employment and community care that many of them requested to become involved as well.'

The result is the Northern Rangelands Trust, which has thus far linked 19 separate community-owned conservancies into a wildlife sanctuary area totalling around 20 000 square kilometres. Lodges and tourism ventures are popping up all over the place, and a special under-pass has been built beneath a highway to link two previously separated populations of elephants.

Earlier this year, Lewa and the neighbouring Ngare Ndare Natural Forest were awarded UNESCO World Heritage Status, which will hopefully attract more tourists, donors and much-needed investment. The future is looking good for conservation in northern Kenya, and it all started with an old lady who loved rhinos, a farmer turned conservationist and their shared desire to see these magnificent animals saved from extinction.

Before I headed home to South Africa, Anna took me to see Elvis one last time. He stood as before, munching away on a branch. Sadly, that was the last time either Elvis or I saw Anna Merz. But her spirit lives on in every rhino, in every tree and in the hearts of all the people who loved her.

Now that's a legacy to be proud of.
