

WHITE RHINOCEROS

Ceratotherium simum



Location: The white rhinoceros is primarily found in the country of South Africa; small populations occur in Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe. Its distribution was once much wider than it is now. Cave paintings depicting rhinos have been found in northern and central Sahara, Tanzania, and in the Kalahari Desert. The white rhino prefers to live on open grasslands and savannas.

Diet: The white rhinoceros feeds on grasses, grazing with its broad, square upper lip. It uses its horns to dig for roots and bulbs when the grass is too short to graze.

Life Cycle: These animals are sociable, living in herds (known as laagers), consisting of cows (females) and young. The bulls (males) are usually solitary. Males tour their territory daily, marking boundaries with dung heaps, urine and horn marks in conspicuous places. Females spray urine to announce their condition to nearby males.

Males engage in combat during the mating season. Each bull's chance of breeding is increased by insuring dominance over other males. The horns are the primary weapon in territorial disputes but rhinos try to bluff the opponent before making actual contact.

Typically, mating occurs between October and December. The gestation period of the white rhinoceros is between 419-550 days (about 14-18 months). Females generally give birth every 2-4 years. Usually a single calf, ranging from 55-176 pounds, is born. Females normally give birth in secluded areas and remain hidden for several weeks.

Calves are able to walk within minutes of birth, but are wobbly and vulnerable to predators. There is a small visible place for the front horn at birth but the actual horn does not begin to grow until the calf is about 5 weeks old. Calves may begin to forage several weeks after birth but they are not fully weaned until about 2 years of age. After weaning, calves stay with their mothers until the next calf is born. When a calf leaves its mother, it typically finds a childless female, referred to as an aunt. These females may acquire as many as 5 young.

Rhinos reach sexual maturity in about 7-10 years. Adults weigh between 3,600-4,600 pounds (roughly 1.8-2.3 tons). Their life span is normally 40-50 years.

Remarks: White rhinoceroses have 2 horns made of dense layers of keratin (the material fingernails are made of) that range from 3-5.5 feet, the front horn is usually longer. There is no bone in the center of the horns. Unlike other mammals with horns, rhino horns have no connection with the skull. The horns can be regrown if broken off.

Rhinoceroses were once considered pachyderms or thick-skinned animals. They do not sweat; instead, rhinos wallow in mud to cool the body as well as to protect it from flies, ticks and lice.

Although rhinoceroses normally move slowly, they can gallop approximately 25-35 miles per hour for short distances. Rhinos have 3 toes, which leaves a characteristic ace-of-clubs footprint. Rhinos are digitigrade animals, meaning they walk on the tips of their toes with their heels elevated.

Rhinoceroses have good hearing; their ears are large and able to swivel to locate the direction of sound. The sense of smell is the rhino's most acute sense; the volumes of nasal passages are greater than the size of its brain. This keen sense affords the animal an important mechanism for defense and communication. Rhinoceroses can probably detect movement by sight but their vision is similar to a human squint.