

CHAPTER 6

THE RHINO AND ITS HELPER BIRD

Luke 16: 10 – Jesus said, “Whoever is faithful in small matters will be faithful in large ones.”

As they prepared to set off again a snake slithered across the dusty road in front of the Land Rover. The sun was high in the sky now. The shade of the trees at the hippo pool had been a pleasant relief.

“Just two more hours and we’ll be at the camping area.” said Dad. “It’s quite safe there. The electric fence keeps out the animals. You’ll be able to get out and stretch your legs, and we’ll stay in one of the little grass huts overnight.”

As they joined the main road again, impalas, zebras and giraffe moved across the plains. Then they saw a herd of buffalo. These animals were plentiful. But the children were wondering when they would see the king of the beasts – the lion.

“Lions are often hard to spot,” explained Dad. “They like to stay far away from the road. They sleep during the day, and get more active at night. That’s the best hunting time for them.”

They continued on for another hour, with still no sign of a lion, but suddenly Samson gave a shout.

“Look! Over there! A rhinoceros!”

“It’s a white rhino,” explained Dad, “even though its actual colour is grey. There are more white rhinos than black rhinos. The black rhinos were almost extinct because of poaching, but in the safety of our game park they have a good chance of increasing in numbers. Even the white rhinos are in danger. Poachers get big money for their horns. The horns are sold to make medicine in China, although it’s proven that the horns do not help sick people at all. It’s just a superstition.”

“So terrible for God’s wonderful creatures,” said Mum sadly. “God tells us in the Bible that we are to be caretakers of His creation. Every animal in the animal kingdom has its place. On the African plain the animals all help one another to survive. We’ve seen how giraffes warn the zebras of danger. But even the cats have their place. They catch the slower animals that might be old or sick. That keeps the herds stronger and healthier.”

Dad drove along very slowly so that they could all get a good look at the rhino. Then Serena noticed something.

“Look at those little birds on the rhino’s back,” she said. “They just stay there all the time and don’t fly off. They must get a good ride.”

“Yes,” said Dad. “And they have a special job to do. As well as getting a free ride, they get a free meal. These are the tick birds. They help the rhino by eating the ticks on his back and in his ears. A tick is a nasty little biting insect that can cause sores on the skin, so the rhino lets the birds ride on his back as much as they want to. The tick birds are the little helpers of the animal kingdom. They’re like servants. Serving the rhino is their special job, and they love doing it. Many people in God’s kingdom are like that. God puts within people the desire to help others. And they are so happy when they are doing it.”

“We have many helpers in our country,” said Mum. “There are many needs in our country and other parts of Africa. I’m so glad God has sent His special helpers from other parts of the world to serve here in Africa. Often people think that the greatest job they can do for God is to be a teacher or a leader, but being faithful in helping others is one of the greatest jobs anyone can do.”

They were almost there now and the children were feeling rather tired.

“It doesn’t look as if we’ll see our lions today,” said Dad, “but you will certainly hear them tonight. They are very noisy at night as they prowl around making all kinds of noises. But don’t worry. We’ll be perfectly safe. They can’t get into the camping area.”

The thought of lions made the children alert again, and they carefully scanned the horizon for any signs of cats. But there were none to be seen.

RHINOCEROS FACTS

- Rhinos are herbivores, meaning that they eat plants.
- Rhinos are short sighted but have a good sense of smell.
- Rhinos charge when they are angry or frightened. They can run up to 50 km. per hour.
- Male rhinos use their horns when they are fighting. The front horn can grow 1.3 metres long.
- Both male and female rhinos have horns.
- A white rhino weighs up to 2,500 kg. Black rhinos are slightly smaller.
- A white rhino has a wide mouth with square lips. A black rhino has pointed, hooked lips like a parrot's beak.
- A white rhino is not white. It is grey. A black rhino is not black. It is a darker grey than the white rhino.
- Male rhinos mark their territories with piles of dung. Male rhinos will fight with other male rhinos that come into their territory.
- Rhinos need a large area of land to find enough food to eat. Their habitat is being taken over by humans for farmland.
- Droughts have meant the drying up of waterholes. In desert areas rhinos have to travel a long distance to find water and might not survive.
- Rhino skin looks tough but can be damaged by the sun and insect bites. Rhinos keep their skins covered in mud to protect themselves. Rhinos do not have hair except at the ends of their tails and on their eyelids.
- Rhino mothers can have a calf every year.
- The male rhinos do not help to bring up the calves. The babies stay with their mothers for at least two years.
- If a predator such as a crocodile or lion comes near, a mother rhino will stand over her baby to protect it.
- Black rhinos are in danger of becoming extinct. Poachers shoot rhinos and illegally sell their horns. They are sold on the black market in Yemen where they are made into handles of daggers.

There is also a black market in China where the horns are ground down to make medicine. The medicine does not work.



FACTS ABOUT THE HELPER BIRD

- The rhino's helper is called the "tick bird" or the "oxpecker".
- The bird eats ticks it finds on the rhino and noisily warns of danger.
- The birds also eat the insects the rhinos stir up when they graze.

Photo: www.bushwarriors.org

