

Rhino patrol!

Can Nat Geo Kids catch a glimpse of a rare black rhinoceros? Join us on a rhino tracking adventure in Liwonde National Park, Malawi...

Hand signals!

Want to go rhino tracking? You'll need to learn some hand signals first! Expert rhino tracker Christopher demonstrates...



We admit it, we're **terrified!** It's 5am and we're about to venture into the wilderness to track down a 1.4 tonne, double-horned tank-like beast. Eek! Our guides, Hungarian rhino specialist **Krisztián Gyöngyi** and expert rhino tracker **Christopher Kanyange**, give us a safety briefing. They belong to an elite team in Liwonde National Park, whose job is to monitor and protect the rhinos, and rescue those that have been trapped in poachers' snares and traps.



Krisztián



Christopher

Christopher has worked for Malawi's **Black Rhino Conservation Programme** since 1993, when the first breeding pair of rhinos was re-introduced here from South Africa. He quickly puts our minds at rest. Kind of. "Rhinos are shy and friendly animals," he says. "But we may encounter threats from other wild animals." Uh oh!

Rhinos have **excellent hearing**, so we're taught how to communicate silently using signals (see right). To get one another's attention, we'll need to make **clicking sounds** with our tongues first!

Shhhh!

A short electrified fence borders the 40km² **Black Rhino Sanctuary**, located deep within the national park. Its main role is to keep the breeding animals within the protected zone.

Most of these rhinos are already fitted with radio transmitters, and so once inside the sanctuary, Krisztián turns on his detection equipment. He soon picks up the signal of a **bull** (male rhino), named **Ntangai**, and we start to trek through the bush in single file, totally silent. The grass beneath our boots is golden and crisp, and we have to be extra careful to avoid snapping dry twigs. Our senses are on **high alert**, straining for signs of wildlife...



Rhino rangers on the move!

On patrol

An hour later, and all we've seen so far are the tracks of **zebras** and **waterbuck!** Krisztián motions for us to gather round while he clammers up an old **termite mound** to scan with his equipment. "We've gone right past him!" he whispers. "The **dominant male** we're following is **patrolling**, seeking signs of females, checking his territory and **re-marking** it with **urine**." The new, stronger, signal points us towards some damper and greener woodland. We walk quickly, pushing past branches to keep up with the patrolling bull.

Sock shake

Every now and then, Krisztián takes an **ash-filled sock** out of his pocket and gives it a shake. The grey dust moves in the breeze. He's checking the **wind direction**, making sure the rhino can't sniff us out with his **amazing sense of smell**. If he senses our presence, he may (out of pure curiosity) come a bit closer to check us out – but if we scare him, he might run off at speeds of up to **40kmph!** Luckily, rhinos have very **poor eyesight** and can only run in a straight line. So, if he runs **towards** us, all we need to do is move to the side, out of his way, and crouch behind a bush. That's the theory, anyway...

Danger!

Suddenly we hear Christopher **clicking furiously!** Krisztián is frantically making the 'danger' sign (see right) and gesturing towards some bushes. We catch up, just in time to see a huge hooded snake slithering off into the undergrowth. "That was a **Mozambique spitting cobra**," whispers Christopher, visibly shaken. "It's a very dangerous animal!" These scary snakes can rear up and **spit venom 3m** towards their target, causing **blindness**. Their bite can cause serious damage, too. "That's one of the largest ones I've ever seen!" exclaims Krisztián. "It was nearly 2m-long, I reckon." Our adrenaline pumping, we trek on. This is wild!



Beware the Mozambique spitting cobra!

Getting close...

We've been tracking this bull in the sweltering heat for over 7km, and he seems to have slowed down. "The signal is intense now," Krisztián whispers. "The rhino is within 80 metres!" Finally, Ntangai is in sight! "Do you see him?" Krisztián asks, pointing to a dense thicket in the distance. We can just make out a **huge grey rump** and a hairy twitching ear as the rhino browses on some shrubs. We crouch down, looking at his big bum for a few seconds, until he disappears into the thick bush. We did it! We saw a **black rhino!** Well, its bottom, at least. Krisztián is over the moon. "Ntangai looks healthy and we didn't spook him. This has been a successful session," he says.

The adventure isn't over...

Driving back to base camp, we ask Christopher if he still gets excited when he sees a rhino. "I love them, even after all this time," he tells us. "The moment we find them, and they are in good condition, we feel happy. We feel it in our heart. Because



this is *our* animal. And a very important animal for the whole world."

And at that moment, just as the jeep turns the corner, we see another rhino! A male, called **Namagogodo**, is simply standing there, in plain view, calmly nibbling on some juicy green leaves. We can't believe it! No tracking, no radio transmitters, no funny hand signals. We just stumbled upon him. As we watch the gentle giant happily munching, we beam from ear to ear. But Christopher's smile is the widest of all!



Namagogodo casually nibbles on a tree

BLACK RHINO RESCUE

Black rhinos have lived on Earth for over **50 million years** – they once roamed across **Britain, North America and Europe!** But sadly, black rhino populations have collapsed – a staggering **96%** were lost to poaching between 1970 and 1995. Entire populations have been wiped out in some African countries because their horns are used to make traditional 'medicine' in Southeast Asia. Other people use rhino horns to make dagger handles or bangles. Today, poaching is still the biggest threat, but rhino numbers are slowly rising thanks to dedicated conservation efforts, **The Black Rhino Conservation Programme** at Liwonde Park in Malawi is one of the projects helping to restore this iconic species.

Find out more about rhinos at malawianrhinos.com

Nat Geo Kids travelled to Malawi courtesy of **Mahlatini Luxury Travel** and **Kenya Airways**. For information about family-friendly tailor-made trips to Malawi, check out Mahlatini.com. Find out more about Malawi at malawitourism.com and trek to cawsmw.com for info about Malawi safaris.