

Sumatran Rhino: A Strange Pet

By Brandy Woldstad

“Honey, it’s only temporary.” My words haunt me every day as I trek down the stairs to our walkout basement where my latest pet, a Sumatran rhino, has taken residence. He pounds his foot on the floor in excitement when he sees me. I cringe. Butch is small for a rhino. From the tip of his head to his scraggly tail, he measures 4’6” and weighs just over 1,000 pounds. With his usual greeting, I’m sure it won’t be long before parts of the cement floor look like it met a jackhammer.

His brown skin is thick like heavy leather. Patches of coarse fur cover his sturdy exterior. He looks like he should be soft, but touching him isn’t all that different from petting a scouring pad. It’s a strange feeling and one that is disconcerting to our visitors. I wear leather gloves and stroke his sides much like I would a horse. Butch snorts in contentment.

I love to touch his horns. The one on the tip of his nose is just over a foot long. It’s smooth and looks like stone. His second one is a bump that sits along his nose just below his eyes.

He eats hefty amounts of twigs, fruit, and leaves. As a result, our basement doesn’t smell much different than a barn. A few times a day, I clean up behind him and let him out to play in the pen my husband built for him. Often, Butch rolls in the mud to cool down. I don’t like this habit, but it’s what he would do in the wild. Besides his stay is temporary.

Butch has a sweet temperament and is trainable. I’ve taught him to sit, stay, spin a circle, and tap his hoof to a beat gently. He can move backward, forwards, and sideways on command. I’m hoping before it’s time for us to part ways I’ll have taught him to dance. My husband thinks I’m crazy, but I think the mental stimulation prevents Butch from further destroying our basement.

Three months ago, Butch was just a baby. In eight months, he’ll gain 800 pounds and grow to be nearly eight feet long. My husband gulped. I blurted reassurances that taking care of Butch was the right thing to do.

Temporary was the plan thanks to a zoo fire. Rather than have the zoo pay an astronomical amount of money to transport Butch to a different zoo while repairs were made, I offered our house as a home since we were so close. There were a few things I hadn’t counted on. Funding for the zoo plus committee decisions makes repairs progress slowly. Add that in with my growing attachment to Butch, the only thing temporary could be the statement I made when he arrived.

My family and friends thought having Butch at our house was amazing. They’d bring their friends and gawk at Butch maybe more so than if he had been in the zoo. After the novelty wore off in the first month, visitors rarely come. I think it’s because our house smells. My assurances that they’ll get used to smell isn’t bringing repeat visitors. Which is okay. Butch’s care takes a lot of my attention and I find I don’t have as much time to entertain anyway. I’ll enjoy the mini vacation from playing hostess and play with my temporary rhino.