



MEETINGS OF MINDS

If more mountain gorillas become used to tourists the apes might have a brighter future, but they have to get used to people on their terms. **Sue Watt** reports.



MOUNTAIN GORILLAS HAVE BECOME ONE OF AFRICA'S GREATEST CONSERVATION SUCCESS STORIES.

There's nothing quite like the majesty and sheer dignity of mountain gorillas. The gaze of their soulful brown eyes sends shivers down your spine. Encountering these great apes in their remote rainforest homeland in Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo is perhaps the ultimate wildlife-watching experience.

Kanyonyi, silverback of the Mubare gorilla group in Bwindi National Park, is no exception. Fred Nizeyimana knows him well, describing him as "young and charismatic, but a daring fighter" who frequently raids other gorilla groups for their females. The field vet for the Gorilla Doctors project in Bwindi, Fred has treated this primate Lothario for life-threatening injuries sustained in skirmishes with other silverbacks. It's hard to reconcile Kanyonyi the fighter with the calm, seemingly docile, ape that ambles nonchalantly past me – almost close enough to touch.

BOUNCING BACK

Mountain gorillas have become one of Africa's greatest conservation success stories. In the mid-1980s, renowned primatologist Dian Fossey estimated that only 250 individuals remained, their rapid decline the result of habitat loss and extensive poaching. Today they number around 880 (though are still classed as Critically Endangered). Mountain gorillas, *Gorilla beringei beringei* – one of the eastern gorilla's two subspecies – have an average lifespan of 35 years and live in troops of up to 30 led by a dominant silverback, so-called due to the broad band of hair across their backs denoting sexual maturity.

Kanyonyi's family, the Mubare group, were the first to be habituated to humans in 1993 when mountain

Clockwise from above: mountain gorillas spend a great deal of time in the treetops; babies cling to their mothers for the first four years; field vet Fred Nizeyimana; a sign showing how to prevent germs spreading.



gorilla tourism began in Bwindi, a dense forest spanning 321km² of western Uganda. Around 400 gorillas now roam Bwindi's rainforest, with 12 of its 36 groups fully habituated for tracking. A maximum of eight

tourists visit each group for one precious hour a day. But a new four-hour gorilla experience offers visitors an extraordinary insight into the complexities of familiarising gorillas to people, tracking two semi-habituated groups used to their trackers and rangers, but not to strangers. And this experience, which I'm on, is very different...

First, we track the Mubare. For two hours, we walk swiftly along muddy paths to join trackers who have already located our gorillas. A blissful scene greets us: Kanyonyi looks totally chilled as he munches stalks and stems. Mothers keep a watchful eye on three toddlers

BWINDI: PEOPLE AND PRIMATES

For 4,000 years, Bwindi was home to the Batwa people, often known as 'pygmies', but when the national park was created in 1993, they were evicted without compensation. With no prospects, they were ostracised, leading to homelessness, malnutrition and alcoholism.

In 2000, the Americans Scott and Carol Kellermann concluded that Batwa life expectancy was just 28 years, so they set up a makeshift clinic under a fig tree, treating 500 patients daily. It has become one of Uganda's most respected hospitals, the Bwindi Community Hospital.

The Kellermans also began a development programme to establish income-generating projects such as the Batwa Experience, a 'living museum' offering a fascinating glimpse into this people's former forest life.

Community health also concerned Dr Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka, who in 2000 discovered the first confirmed case of scabies spreading from human to gorilla. A young gorilla died of the disease, which was traced to dirty rags on a scarecrow intended to deter the apes from crop-raiding. Scabies thrives on poverty and poor hygiene. In 2002, Gladys founded

Conservation Through Public Health to help educate local communities and improve the health of people, wildlife and livestock. If the surrounding communities are in good health, gorillas will be too.

playing a game of jungle tag, and even new mum Mitunu shows little concern as we take photos of her gently cuddling her nine-month-old baby.

Beforehand, at our briefing in Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) headquarters in Buhoma, we were given strict instructions: "Keep at least 7m from the gorillas and turn away if you want to cough or sneeze." Gorillas share 98 per cent of our human DNA but none of our immunity to the germs we carry; a common cold could kill them. But as Kanyonyi demonstrated in our close encounter, gorillas are oblivious to the rules.

THE TOURISM EFFECT

Although tourism has been a significant factor in gorilla conservation, it also adds to their vulnerability because of their susceptibility to human infections. In DR Congo, it is mandatory for tourists to wear face masks when they encounter mountain gorillas, but there are no such requirements in Uganda or Rwanda. "Recently, respiratory infections have been frequent in Bwindi," Fred tells me. "We're undertaking research to establish whether they are of human origin."

Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka, UWA's first wildlife vet and founder of an NGO called Conservation Through Public Health, sits on the Mask Task Force, a transboundary initiative between the three countries. "Wearing masks protects gorillas from human diseases," she explains. "Some sides want masks and some don't, because they feel it would put tourists off. I hope that they will be approved eventually."

Tropical field biologist, conservationist and gorilla expert Ian Redmond believes the jury is still out. "We must minimise the risk of droplet infection to an immunologically naive population," he tells me. "But ▶



Batwa people no longer live as nomadic hunter-gatherers.

Clockwise from top left: Robert Haasman/Ardea, Andrey Gudkov/Alamy, Pictures Ltd/Corbis/Getty, Mark Cardwardine/NPL, Molly Feltner/Gorilla Doctors



Gorillas have a mainly vegetarian diet, including stems, bamboo shoots and fruit. Right: newborns weigh about 1.8 kg at birth.



Above: a tourist group and their trackers wear masks to observe a silverback gorilla in Virunga National Park, Democratic Republic of the Congo.

keeping them that way also presents a risk, because one day a flu virus will get through and the impact might just be greater. Any non-lethal exposure to novel pathogens actually strengthens the immune system.”

It’s a complex issue. “Fiddling with a mask detracts slightly from the sometimes very moving experience of meeting gorillas in their natural habitat for the first time,” Ian admits. “For years, some ape-viewing sites have required mask use and others have not. It seems logical to compare incidences of suspected disease transmission in both sites to establish whether mask-wearing actually makes a difference and keeps the apes safer.”

Bwindi’s new experience tracking the two semi-habituated groups is limited to only four visitors, and involves a lesser risk of close proximity to the gorillas. Yet, it affords a deeper, more immersive and edgier encounter with our closest cousins. Pontious Ezuma, UWA’s Conservation Area Manager, explains the thinking behind it. “Normally, trackers have already found the gorillas and tourists just have their hour and leave,” he says. “We

realised that visitors were missing out on preliminaries such as gorilla behaviour, what their nests look like, how we find their trail. All this was being lost...”

HABITUATING GORILLAS

It takes about three years to fully habituate a troop of gorillas. Having identified a suitable group, usually of 10–20, trackers follow them every day. At first, they just ‘talk’ to the gorillas, vocalising their 12 main sounds, but stay out of sight: wild gorillas can be particularly aggressive and will charge if they feel threatened. Gradually, the trackers let the gorillas see them and over time, get closer, staying longer in their company until they’re eventually accepted. Then, it’s time to introduce different people – and this is where visitors play their part.

At 7am we set off from Rushaga in Bwindi’s southern sector to track the Bikingi group, which is about 18 months into the habituation process. Together with our all-important trackers, we walk past *shambas* (plots) of crops and banana plants, through pine trees and eucalyptus

with Rwanda’s Virunga Volcanoes in the distance. As we enter the park, the habitat changes dramatically. “Now you see why they used to call it impenetrable,” our guide Augustine Muhangi laughs as we battle through dense jungle, nettles and brambles, with roots and vines seemingly grabbing at our ankles.

We walk to where they left the Bikingi group the previous day and, from there, our four-hour countdown starts. Learning all about tracking, we look for bent vegetation and broken plants, piles of leaves and stalks, knuckle prints and droppings, following our gorillas’ trail until a pungent smell of urine pervades the forest. Mounds of leaves and branches are perched on top of shrubs: we’ve reached their nests.

TRACKERS FOLLOW EVERY DAY BUT STAY OUT OF SIGHT. WILD GORILLAS CAN BE AGGRESSIVE AND CHARGE IF THEY FEEL THREATENED.

“Every adult makes a new nest every night,”

Geoffrey Twinomuhangi, Bwindi’s Assistant Warden, tells me. “We learn so much from them, like how many individuals we’re following, who they are and whether they’re healthy. The silverback and blackback can be identified from hairs on the nest; babies always sleep with their mums. And we check their poo for signs of ill-health.”

RECORDING THE EVIDENCE

Samples of hair and faeces are collected for analysis, bagged and recorded on data sheets. “This is probably Rushenya, our silverback,” Augustine says, pointing to a giant turd. Seemingly, most silverbacks’ droppings measure 5–7cm in diameter. This one measures an eye-watering 8cm. “He’s a big boy!” Augustine smiles, proud of the 26-year-old that he personally named. Rushenya means ‘destroyer’, so-called because of his immense size and the fact that he breaks everything around him.

“They probably left the nests around an hour ago,” he comments as we follow the gorillas’ fresh morning trails. We listen for their vocalising, smell

SPOT THE SIGNS TRACKING MOUNTAIN GORILLAS



VOCALISATIONS

It can be tricky to see gorillas in the rainforest so it’s essential to listen out for their sounds. Gorillas communicate in a series of grunts, screams and rumbles, and even through singing and laughter. Some are piercing and loud, others deep, soft and barely audible.



DROPPINGS

Droppings will indicate the gorillas’ trail, but their size will also tell you whether the ape you’re following is a silverback or a smaller gorilla. If they’re still warm your gorillas will be close by, of course. Gorillas’ urine also has a distinctive, strong smell.



Gorillas can be found in dense rainforest if you know the signs to look for.



LEAVES AND STICKS

Gorillas are voracious eaters and mainly vegetarian. They often skim leaves from a branch or peel a stem to get at the juicy insides, leaving piles of plant debris on their route. Vegetation will also be bent, broken or flattened, revealing their direction of travel.



VACATED NESTS

Nests are vacated every morning and it helps to start tracking early so that the gorillas won’t have wandered too far. They tell you how many gorillas are in the group, who they are and how healthy they are. Dung near each nest will also tell you who slept there.

Clockwise from top left: Paul Souders/Danita Delimont/Alamy; Christophe Courteau/NPL; LuAnne Cadd; Eric Baccage/ANPL; Susanna Benmet/Alamy; WorldFoto/Alamy; Eric Baccage/NPL; WorldFoto/Alamy



Rushenya, the massive silverback of the semi-habituated Bikingi group.

HOW TO SEE UGANDA'S MOUNTAIN GORILLAS

WHEN TO GO

It's possible to track mountain gorillas all year round. Permits for regular tracking, allowing an hour with the gorillas, cost US\$600. Permits for the four-hour 'Gorilla Habituation Experience' cost US\$1,500; it's likely to continue in 2018.

TOUR OPERATORS

UK tour operators offering the Gorilla Habituation Experience are Steppes Travel (www.steppestravel.co.uk) and Natural World Safaris (www.naturalworldsafaris.com). Travel Local (www.travellocal.com) offers gorilla encounters accompanied by Gorilla Doctors' vet Fred Nizeyimana.

WHERE TO STAY

For access to the Gorilla Habituation Experience, stay in Nkuringo. There are two lodges here: Clouds Mountain Gorilla Lodge (www.wildplacesafrica.com) and Nkuringo Bwindi Gorilla Lodge (www.mountaingorillalodge.com). Upmarket lodges in Buhoma, near the Uganda Wildlife Authority, include Volcanoes Safaris Bwindi Lodge (www.volcanoessafaris.com), Mahogany Springs (www.mahoganysprings.com) and Sanctuary Gorilla Forest Camp (www.sanctuaryretreats.com).

the air for fresh faeces and look all around us until we see our first gorilla high up in a tree. She rushes down, disappearing into the undergrowth. Following the sounds of breaking branches, we soon find her and her tiny baby with Rushenya about 15m away from us, sitting on a narrow path and basking in the sun.

I'm stunned by Rushenya's size. Even for a silverback, he's huge, weighing in at around 250kg, while most are 200–220kg. I'm stunned, too, by his quiet composure – he doesn't seem remotely bothered by our presence. "That's because they could see us coming," Augustine explains.

TALKING TO THE ANIMALS

I start vocalising to our group in quiet coughs that signify contentment, hoping they'll accept us. It feels utterly surreal to hear Rushenya reply in similar guttural rumbles. To our right, a more high-pitched "mmm mmm" noise emanates from a female gorilla. Augustine translates. "That means she's appreciating her food, telling the others it's good there."

On average, gorillas, predominantly vegetarians, eat up to 25kg a day in between taking naps and wandering a distance of about 1km from their previous night's nest to their new abode. Daily movements depend on the availability of food and their safety: if other gorilla groups or forest elephants are around, they move on fast.

As Rushenya takes his mid-morning nap, two toddlers crawl onto his back and a mum curls up next to him for protection, her baby's tiny fingers just visible on her shoulder. With 24 members in the entire Bikingi group and a feeding range of dense forest, it's proving quite a challenge to habituate. Every individual has to be relaxed with strangers at a distance of 7m and babies are normally the first to relax, getting curious and moving closer to trackers: this hasn't yet happened with Bikingi.

When Rushenya awakes refreshed and hungry, he moves rapidly, grabbing at tree fungus, leaves and stems. The point of habituation is to stay in constant sight of the

DAILY MOVEMENTS DEPEND ON THE AVAILABILITY OF FOOD AND SAFETY: IF OTHER GORILLA GROUPS ARE AROUND THEY MOVE ON FAST.

gorillas and gradually move closer so that they become comfortable with people. Following him as if our lives depend on it, we slowly inch nearer until we achieve our objective: he is just 7m away.

After two and a half magical hours with the Bikingi group, our time is almost up. They stop in a clearing and all seems calm. Suddenly, the female with the baby appears, tumbling downhill between Rushenya and me. He rushes towards me as I crouch down, terrified but averting my eyes as I'd been briefed. His reactions still unpredictable, he stops, shouts "uh uh" loudly, and waits – then slowly moves away. "He's just warning us to stay away from the baby," Augustine reassures me.

Exhausted but exhilarated, we reluctantly head back to Rushaga, learning on the way that Bwindi has been experiencing a baby boom, with 29 having been born in habituated groups alone in the past two years.

Africa's greatest conservation success story continues to go from strength to strength. 🐼

➕ FIND OUT MORE

Learn about the work of Gorilla Doctors at www.gorilladoctors.org



SUE WATT is a travel writer. She travelled with Steppes Travel (www.steppestravel.co.uk). With thanks to Visit Uganda (www.visituganda.com) and Uganda Wildlife Authority (www.ugandawildlife.org).