

A Day with Mountain Gorillas

By: Dean Jacobs

It wasn't that long ago when I was walking down red cobblestone streets back home in Nebraska. Those days seem like a distant past as I scramble up the sides of dense green covered volcanoes through dark thick mud that sometimes goes up to my calf. This is how the days of tracking mountain gorillas in Rwanda, Africa often begin.



Volcanoes National Park

“Do you think it will rain today?” I ask Felix Ndagijimana, deputy director at the Karisoke Research Center.

I already know the answer, given the fact we are hiking through a rain forest. A wager is made that it won't rain before we leave the forest.

“How do you define rain?” Felix asks with a smile as a drop of water falls from the sky.

Determined not to make it too easy, I reply, “If you have to put on a jacket to stay dry, it's rain.”

This playful game is repeated each time Felix and I enter the Volcanoes National Park, home to approximately 300 mountain gorillas in Rwanda.



Felix Ndagijimana

Karisoke is the research center that supports and studies the mountain gorillas of Rwanda. It was named by Dian Fossey, who started studying the endangered mountain gorillas 40 years ago. She combined the names of two volcanoes that sit on each side of the research site: Karisimbi and Bisoke. It is largely due to Dian's work that the gorillas have survived to this day.

Just as impressive is the staff that continues Fossey's work today for the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International at Karisoke. These researchers follow eight separate groups of gorillas totaling 120 gorillas through the park each day. Although they are habituated, which means they are used to being around humans, only the Karisoke staff and researchers follow these gorillas. The remaining gorillas in the park are followed by the national park authorities. These mountain gorillas are visited by tourists. People spend \$500 for the privilege of spending an hour with the gorillas.



We found them!

"Time to leave the escort and porters," said Felix as we approach the group of gorillas to be studied today.

"We must announce our arrival to the group, so they know we are not a threat," said Felix as he begins a deep throated "haaaaummmm" sound. I give it my best shot, but it is obvious that we are short of mountain gorillas in Nebraska by the sympathetic smile Felix gives me. I continue to try. If the gorillas don't understand me, at least I can provide some humor for my human companions. I listen in awe as the gorillas respond to us with a similar sound.

"This is a vocalization that indicates we mean no harm. It has the same meaning when they vocalize it to other gorillas," Felix said.

During the next four hours, Felix and I watch gorillas. He records information about the various behaviors of the gorillas. He notes things like who sits next to whom, how close or how far they stay from the dominant silverback and what types of vocalizations they give to each other. Felix understands each movement or sound. He explains things about the gorillas as if each was his own family member. He has spent hundreds of hours with the gorillas and knows them well.



Lunch time!

Each day a mountain gorilla will consume 40 to 50 pounds of organic materials, including leaves, roots, vines and stems of more than 200 different types of plants in the Park. A particular favorite is nettles; the gorilla strips the leaves off the stem, stuffs them in its hands and chumps away. I tend to regret the days we find gorillas in the nettles and have to wade through large green patches. They don't call them stinging nettles for nothing! One day in particular was so bad that I wondered if my arms were about to fall off. It was well into the night before the irritating pain subsided.

The four hours pass quickly and soon we must begin our trek out of the park and head for home. Walking home, Felix explains to me the purpose of studying the gorillas so closely. "If we can understand their behaviors and how changes affect them in the environment, we can predict how to help them survive in the future."



Surviving...

I ponder the importance of this as the clouds open up and a light rain begins to fall. How fortunate for the gorillas that the people of Rwanda recognize the importance of these gentle animals and are willing to help them survive. I may have lost the bet about the rain, but the gorillas are winning their race for survival.