

A Day with Mountain Gorillas

By: Dean Jacobs

My days of tracking mountain gorillas in Rwanda, Africa began with a walk up or around the sides of a volcano. Sometimes there was a path to walk along. At other times we cut our way through thick, green vegetation to find them. On this particular day we were also knee deep in dark, thick mud.



Volcanoes National Park

My friend Felix and I joke with each other about whether or not it will rain today. I already know the answer, since we are hiking through a rain forest. A bet is made that it won't rain before we leave the forest. This playful game is repeated each time Felix and I enter the Volcanoes National Park, home to approximately 300 mountain gorillas.



Felix

Felix is a researcher who works at the Karisoke research center. This center was started by Dian Fossey about 40 years ago. Dian was famous for being one of the first people to study mountain gorillas. She learned how to habituat gorillas so they would be used to having people around. It is mainly because of Dian's work that the gorillas have survived to this day.

The staff at the Karisoke center follow eight separate groups of gorillas through the park each day. Only the people who work at the center get to spend time with these 120 gorillas. The rest of the gorillas in the park are followed by the national park workers and are visited by tourists. People spend \$500 for the privilege of spending one hour with the gorillas. I feel very fortunate to be able to spend four hours following and photographing the researchers and their gorilla friends.



We found them!

As we approach a group of gorillas Felix explains that we must announce our arrival so they know we are not a threat. He begins a deep-throated “haaaaummmm” sound. I give it my best shot. It doesn’t sound quite like Felix’s but the gorillas don’t seem to mind. I listen in awe as they respond to us with a similar sound. This is the same sound the gorillas use to let other gorillas know they are friendly.

During the next four hours, Felix and I watch gorillas. He records information about their behavior. He notes things like who sits next to whom and how close or how far they stay from the lead male, called a silverback. He also notes what types of sounds 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 eat 40 to 50 pounds of 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 went away.

The four hours pass quickly and soon we must begin our trek out of the park and head for home. Walking back, Felix explains why they study the mountain gorillas so closely. He says that if we understand how gorillas behave and what they need, we can learn 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.