



# digit saving the world's last gorillas

# news

issue 40 winter 2011

the gorilla organization



Census data suggest mountain gorilla groups sizes are getting bigger

## Rise of gorilla supergroups

How big is a mountain gorilla family? The common perception of the social structure of mountain gorilla groups could be outdated as researchers witness a steady increase in average group size. Data collected from successive censuses in the Virunga Massif show that the mean group size now stands at almost 13, compared with the figure of eight recorded in the 1970s, when Dian Fossey was carrying out her groundbreaking work.

At the same time, researchers have also been noting the emergence of gorilla 'supergroups'; the group led by silverback Pablo, for instance, has been seen to reach 65 individuals in size, while Beetsme's group, led by Titus, peaked at 45 before splitting in two. Taken together, these statistics point to what Gorilla Organization trustee Ian Redmond calls a "fascinating" shift in gorilla demographics.

"The maximum size of the largest group of gorillas in the

Virungas has gone up beyond anything we imagined in the 70s," he says. "The pattern of male emigration and the transfer of females between different groups, as described by Dian, no longer applies to what we're seeing in these cases."

Most striking is the fact that several groups in the Virungas appear to be functioning perfectly well with two, three or even six silverbacks present. Meanwhile, the bachelor groups observed in the 80s and 90s appear to have disappeared altogether. Dr Cyril Gruter of the Max Plank Institute in Leipzig, who has observed the gorillas in the Karisoke research area, explains: "Males have two options when they mature. They can either leave and go solitary and try to find females that way, or they can stay and 'queue up' for a dominant position in their group. Now it appears that young males are staying in their original groups for longer than was previously the case."

Why this is happening is

the subject of much debate and speculation among conservationists. One potential explanation is that, as conservation efforts help push mountain gorillas back from the brink of extinction, population density in the Virungas is increasing. Quite simply, there are more gorillas sharing the same amount of space. With the Virungas essentially one rich 'salad bowl', capable of supporting larger groups – unlike the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest where such a development has not yet been observed – it may simply be a natural consequence of rising numbers.

However, there is also the feeling among some conservationists that other factors could be at play here. For instance, some argue that with the current generation of gorillas having spent their formative years unnerved by the sound of gunshots and mortar fire, many could be scared of venturing away from the security of the group. "Today's young silverback would have been born 15 years ago, when Rwanda's civil war was raging, so it could be a conscious decision based on safety reasons," says Ian.

Just as the causes are open to debate, so too are researchers only beginning to explore what effect this trend might have on both the behaviour and the wellbeing of the Virungas' mountain gorillas. "Have these larger groups had an impact on levels of competition for food?" asks Dr Gruter. "We also need to see if gorillas are travelling further for food or if rates of aggression have gone up, as you might expect." Further studies may also show whether or not instances of infanticide are lower in larger mountain gorilla groups.

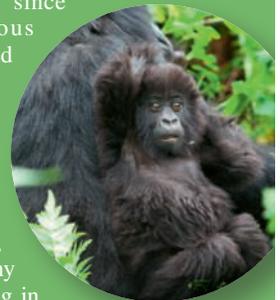
Only with further research will scientists be able to determine whether the gorilla supergroup is here to stay, or if this is simply a short-term phenomenon. It seems there is still much to learn of the complex social lives of this critically-endangered species.



the  
gorilla  
organization

### Letter from the Virungas

Earlier this year, conservationists were given cause to cheer. The latest census showed that the number of mountain gorillas living across the Virunga Massif had risen by around 100 since the previous count, carried out back in 2003. This means there are now some 480 individuals living here, including many of those living in what scientists are now referring to as 'supergroups'.



Sadly, however, more recent developments show we were right to only be cautiously optimistic about the future of our endangered cousins.

Over the summer three men were caught smuggling a live mountain gorilla infant into DR Congo, having taken her from her family across the border in Rwanda. Thankfully, the youngster was found safe and sound and is now being well looked after. However, with poaching also rearing its ugly head again in Uganda, it shows that not everyone is working hard to ensure that these magnificent creatures are able to live in peace in their natural habitat.

Indeed, despite the numerous victories achieved by ongoing conservation efforts, in the fight to guarantee the long-term survival of gorillas in the wild, there really can be no room for complacency.

TOVER - WUNDA

Goma, DR Congo

[www.gorillas.org](http://www.gorillas.org)

## The summer of gorilla love

From Centre Court to centre stage, the Gorilla Organization's fundraising and events team once again had a busy and productive summer, enjoying what little sun there was to spread the word of gorilla conservation up and down the country.

Gorilla Organization supporters and staff got into the swing of summer when they served up a treat to the crowds queuing for tickets to the Wimbledon Championships. Donning whites over thick black fur, the gorillas played a few sets, posed for photos and, most importantly, raised awareness of the plight of their cousins in Africa, much to the delight of hundreds of tennis fans.

'Team Gorilla' then hit the road for a summer of music festivals. In all, gorillas were present at seven of the season's biggest events, including Glastonbury, Hop Farm, Latitude and Reading and Leeds. As well as making thousands of pounds for frontline conservation and development projects, the



Monkey tennis? Not quite: Team Gorilla head to Wimbledon

Gorilla Organization's volunteers also made something of a reputation for themselves on the festival circuit thanks the effort they put in and the

fun they had both during and after their shifts. In fact, the waiting list for spots on Team Gorilla 2012 is already filling up...

## Los Mariachi Gorillas de London

Thanks to the continued success of the Great Gorilla Run, gorillas are a relatively common sight on the streets of London these days. Few, however, are likely to have such a fascinating tale to tell as Los Mariachi Gorillas de London. The story goes that the trio broke out of a zoo in Guadalajara, Mexico, though how they got to British shores remains a mystery.

Whatever their background, what is known about these tequila-swiggling silverbacks is that they have recorded a song – 'We are Gorillas!: A Mariachi Lament' – aimed at highlighting the plight of their cousins in Africa. All the money raised through the sales of the single is to be generously donated to the Gorilla Organization to support its ongoing conservation and development work. Check them out at [www.mariachigorillas.com](http://www.mariachigorillas.com)

## School twinning programme helps Ugandan students get online

Children attending the Mutolere School in Uganda will soon be able to access the internet, many of them for the first time, thanks to the fundraising efforts of their counterparts in the UK.

Wickford Junior School in Essex has been involved in the

Gorilla Organization's school twinning programme since its inception almost four years ago. Through the scheme, youngsters at the Essex school exchange letters with those attending the Ugandan junior school, enabling them to learn all about the issues facing children in

this part of the world, as well as about the plight of the gorillas.

Inspired by the letters they received out of Africa, staff and pupils worked together to raise £2,500, which will be used to install an internet connection, a satellite dish, a computer and a printer at Mutolere where teachers and parents have also been working tirelessly to raise the money needed to connect the school to the electrical grid.

This new equipment will give students the chance to email their friends in England and to become part of a global online movement aimed at securing the long-term survival of the gorillas.

"We're thrilled that the money will be put to such good use," says Wickford headmaster Terry Flitman.



A Mexican lament for the gorillas

"The children here love to get letters from Uganda, so hopefully the new equipment will make communication easier and help us bring lessons to life with tales from a completely different part of the world."



## Carving a better future for gorillas

Great apes fan and woodcarving teacher Paul Bignell combined his two passions in life when he set his class at Bognor Regis

College the task of making a gorilla from a single block of wood.

Prompted by his wife, fellow Gorilla Organization supporter Patricia, he then carved a larger version of his silverback, which was raffled off, raising £210 for gorilla conservation. Paul's design has also

been published in Woodcarving Magazine, allowing crafts fans across the country to create their very own piece of gorilla art.

Also getting crafty to support the Gorilla Organization, Tim Spooner planted an imposing poly-resin primate in the front

garden of his father-in-law, Terry Court, in The Lizard, Cornwall. Sitting alongside the silverback statue is a Gorilla Organization collection tin, into which delighted neighbours and tourists have so far donated a total of £235.

# Counting the cost of brutal death in Bwindi

What price the life of a mountain gorilla? That's the question conservationists have been asking as they struggle to come to terms with the killing of an adolescent male in the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, Uganda, a crime for which three men received fines of between just \$20 and \$40.

The body of Mizano, a blackback belonging to the Habinyanja family, was found within the borders of the national park on June 17. It is believed he was killed with a spear when he started fighting with the dogs of poachers who had entered the protected area to hunt duiker. To add to the anguish of conservationists, a post-mortem carried out by Ugandan NGO Conservation through Public Health (CTPH) revealed that the young gorilla is likely to have died a long and excruciating death, with the spear having entered through the shoulder and pierced a lung, causing him to suffocate.

Working with local police, the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) was able to track down and arrest the alleged perpetrators, while machetes and blood-stained spears were also found in their homes. However,

when the case was brought before a magistrate, the charges related to the killing of Mizano were dropped. Not only had the prosecution failed to present DNA evidence showing the weapons found had been used to kill the gorilla but the men were also not found at the scene of the crime, the court argued.

On the back of the verdict, UWA joined both local and international conservation groups in expressing its "shock and dismay" at the outcome of the case, which, for Gorilla Organization Executive Director Jillian Miller, highlights the need for more energy to be placed on the detection and prevention of crimes against wildlife in Uganda.

"Gorilla rangers and trackers have neither the training nor the resources to do the work of the police," she says. "In this case the magistrate was right not to convict the men since no evidence was brought against them."

As Dr Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka, CTPH director and Gorilla Organization trustee, notes, this was not just a matter of a single death. Rather, Mizano had looked set to take over the leadership of the Habinyanja group but instead,



The death of a single blackback caused anguish in Uganda

his death could leave this group of 16 critically-endangered mountain gorillas without a strong silverback at some point in the near future.

Far more encouraging, however, is the amount of anger and distress both the crime and the court ruling provoked, and not just among conservationists. Mindful of the value of gorilla tourism to the Ugandan economy, those living on the edge of the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest were among the most vocal in expressing their dismay at the developments, recognising that their fate and that of the nation's mountain gorillas are, to some degree, intertwined.

Interestingly, CTPH points out that the three men arrested for Mizano's killing were from a community in the Mpungu Parish where conservation education programmes are still relatively uncommon. Outreach programmes such as the Gorilla Organization-supported Wildlife Clubs or pedal-powered cinemas which encourage people to get involved in efforts to protect the gorillas and their natural habitat could arguably prove just as effective as tougher laws would in helping to prevent another senseless death in Bwindi.

## Research shows benefits of community-led conservation

The value of community-led conservation has once again been highlighted, with new research suggesting forests managed by local communities tend to have lower deforestation rates than those designated as strictly protected areas.

According to the Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), protected areas such as

national parks lose an average of 1.47% of forest cover per year. In comparison, the average annual deforestation rate for community-managed forests was seen to stand at just 0.24%, suggesting there are a number of benefits to be gained in letting local communities take charge of conservation.

"When done properly, the

benefits of community-based management can be seen over the long-term, leading to greater conservation participation, reduced poverty, increased economic productivity and the protection of many forest species," says CIFOR's Dr Manuel Guariguata.

Certainly, this would appear to be true in the case of the Walikale Community Reserve, in eastern DR Congo. It's here the Gorilla Organization is working alongside local communities to implement the Walikale Community Gorilla and Forest Conservation Project.

To support increased awareness of conservation issues, a radio transmitter was installed in the region to facilitate ecological radio broadcasts across the town of Pinga and screenings of an environmental documentary began in January to educate communities on the causes and consequences of deforestation. These radio and film shows have had a great impact, the former reaching an estimated 10,000 people, and have already proven to be a great advocacy

tool, ensuring that those living alongside the Walikale Reserve are informed about conservation issues and encouraged to join in with efforts to safeguard the native eastern lowland gorilla population.

Making local communities stakeholders in the future of the forest is, the Gorilla Organization's DR Congo programmes manager Henry Cirhuza believes, crucial if the gorilla's natural habitat is to be protected for generations to come.

"The national parks were originally created by governments, without local communities ever being consulted," he explains. "In some cases, people who once lived within the park's boundaries and relied on the park's natural resources have been ruthlessly persecuted."

"In comparison, community forests like Walikale were created by local people keen to have a say in their own future. Now these communities have an incentive to safeguard the forest and to ensure that the boundaries separating them from the gorillas are well-respected."



Walikale Community Reserve: Community conservation in action

**The Gorilla Organization**  
**110 Gloucester Avenue**  
 London NW1 8HX  
 Tel: 020 7916 4974  
 info@gorillas.org  
 www.gorillas.org  
 Reg. Charity No. 1117131

**Trustees:**

Stanley Johnson, *Chairman*  
 Mike Bird FCA, *Treasurer*  
 Sandra Bakker  
 Paul Baldwin  
 Dr J.E. Clarke  
 David Field  
 Jon Hobbs  
 Dr Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka  
 Ian Redmond OBE

**Executive Director:** Jillian Miller

**Patrons:**

Richard Adams, Michael Backes,  
 Prof. Richard Dawkins FRS,  
 Leonardo DiCaprio, Daryl Hannah,  
 Dr Nathan Myhrvold, The Hon. Mrs  
 Claire Ward

**Digit News:**

**Editor:** Jillian Miller

**Deputy Editor:** David Hewitt

**Contributors:** David Hewitt, Aimee  
 Long, Tuver Wundi

**Photographs:** Monica Wells,  
 Tuver Wundi

**DTP:** Column Communications Ltd

**Printing:** Emmerson Press

# Gorilla Organization ruling the airwaves in DR Congo

In eastern Congo, the lack of infrastructure means that for many communities, the radio is their only window to the wider world. The Gorilla Organization's *Radio Cosmos: Notre Monde*, produced and presented by Tuver Wundi, brings the message of conservation to an estimated 500,000 people over an area of 100km<sup>2</sup>. Topics covered in the show include deforestation, the role of women in conservation, climate change and the protection of the gorilla habitat.

Tuver's tireless efforts were recognised this summer when he picked up not one but two awards for his broadcasting work. As well as *Radio Cosmos* being named by the Kivu Business & Tours Agency as the best programme for education, Tuver also scooped the prize for best presenter, testament to his passion for DR Congo's critically endangered gorillas and unswerving commitment to conservation in general.

"This award shows just how well regarded our outreach work is," Tuver says. "The judges recognised



that we're steadily transforming people's attitudes to conservation issues by demonstrating how, by protecting the gorillas and their habitat, they can also improve their own livelihoods."

Similarly harnessing the power of radio in the name of community development and conservation are the Gorilla Organization's team at Mount Tsiaberimu. They've joined forces with several other small

NGOs, including MISSAF Kyondo, to launch a local not-for-profit radio station, broadcasting music and talk to poverty-stricken communities lying on the very edge of the threatened gorilla habitat.

With Tuver's award-winning show now being broadcast four times a month on two different stations, and Radio T having finally gotten off the ground, the Gorilla Organization's education efforts in DR Congo are set to go from strength to strength in the months and years ahead.



## New trustees see brighter future for gorillas



**Mike Bird**



**Paul Baldwin**

In the world of gorilla conservation, good things would appear to come in twos rather than threes. Back in February of this year, a pair of mountain gorilla twins was born to Kabatwa in Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park. Then the Chimunaka Group of eastern lowland gorillas also welcomed a pair of new twins in March. Now, the Gorilla Organization is delighted to announce the appointment of both Paul Baldwin and Mike Bird FCA to its Board of Trustees.

Mike has taken on the role of Treasurer, having previously overseen the finances of numerous not-for-profit organisations and blue chip companies.

"I am honoured to be joining the Gorilla Organization," he says.

"Despite its modest means, it has achieved so many successes thanks to the hard work of its enthusiastic and committed staff and the help of its supporters. I look forward to supporting the team in their efforts to secure a brighter future, both for the gorillas and for the people living alongside them."

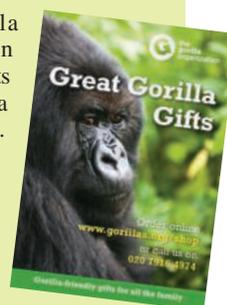
Paul, meanwhile, comes to the Gorilla Organization with a strong background in finance and strategic planning and a passion for African wildlife.

"What a sad indictment it would be if we, *Homo sapiens*, cannot secure the future for one of our closest, and most charismatic cousins!" he says. "I do hope that with my experience, I will be able to make a worthwhile and complementary

contribution to the excellent work the Gorilla Organization carries out in the fields of research, conservation and community development."

### Great Gorilla Gifts

The Gorilla Organization has updated its Great Gorilla Gifts range. As well as organic and stylish T-shirts, the range also includes Ethical Gifts, offering the chance to buy a tree and add to the natural buffer zone protecting gorillas or a fuel-efficient stove to ease the pressure on their natural habitat. Check out the latest catalogue, or browse the online shop at [www.gorillas.org](http://www.gorillas.org).



## THANK YOU

**A big thanks to...** Ape Alliance, Stanley Johnson, Great Apes Film Initiative, CGMK Foundation, Sandra Bakker and Ron Meiger, Simon Gibson Charitable Trust, Paget Trust, Gemini Foundation, Miss M.S. Rickard Animals Charity, Greater Virunga Transboundary Secretariat, European Commission, Jo Beach and Gorilla Boogers, Raileasy, Theme Traders, Explore, 209 Events, Maximuscle, Fyffe, LUSH and Mens Running.

Finally, thank you to all our African staff, wildlife authorities, government departments and trustees for their continued support, and also to all our wonderful volunteers, interns and fundraisers.

