



# digit news

saving the world's last gorillas

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the gorilla organization

## A million trees offer hope to save the gorillas' home

The Gorilla Organization has helped villagers in the Congo to plant more than a million trees to protect gorilla habitats and prevent devastating floods.

The initiative was driven by Gorilla Organization programme manager Henry Cirhuza, who brought the World Food Programme (WFP) on board to continue a tree-planting project protecting the delicate ecosystem of Kahuzi-Biega National Park.

The WFP provided more than 269,000 tonnes of 'Food for Work' for the project's beneficiaries who then plant out the saplings to reforest land at the edge of the park.

"This should mean people have less reason to go into or even destroy the forest, which is excellent news for the gorillas", says Cirhuza.

The area is not only one of the most biodiverse places on the planet — home in particular to a small population of critically-endangered gorillas — it is also a hugely-important water catchment area with an intricate



**Beneficiaries receive training from Gorilla Organization staff**

network of streams that prevent flooding during the rainy seasons.

Over recent years, this delicate system has come under threat, with forest destroyed for subsistence farming. This provides a short-term solution to the community's abject poverty, but it has terrible long-term consequences.

**The project protects gorilla habitat**

In 2014, Léontine Muduha witnessed first-hand the unforeseen consequences of destroying the forest. When the heavy rains came, the River Nyalunkumbo was unable to cope and 200 people died in severe floods.

Léontine's house in Rambira, where she lived with her seven children, and the land she had been farming were flooded and destroyed. Through the project, Léontine has learned how to protect herself and her land from flooding, and the community understands the importance of respecting the forest.

The tree-planting project provides short term food supplies, creates much-needed jobs and delivers long-term security both for the communities and the endangered gorillas.



**More than a million saplings have been grown in 10 tree nurseries**



### Letter from the Virungas



This year's 50th anniversary of Dian Fossey's arrival in Africa reminds us how far we have come in the fight to save gorillas from extinction.

In the 1980s there were just 250 mountain gorillas in the world and it was a daily fight to protect them. Today they are rising back towards a thousand, and we are working with communities across central Africa to halt the decline of the three other gorilla subspecies.

But there is still a gorilla-sized mountain to climb! Grauer's (eastern lowland) gorilla numbers have gone from 17,000 in 1995 to just 3,800 today. Western lowland gorillas have gone from 150,000 to a few tens of thousands, and there may be only 300 of the Cross River gorillas.

While some gorillas can retreat high into the mountains, others are stranded in the very midst of conflict and other threats. It's not just gorillas paying the price: another ranger protecting gorillas in Kahuzi-Biega National Park was recently killed. Dian Fossey, of course, gave her life to protect the gorillas.

Fifty years on from her arrival in Africa, we can cheer for our mountain gorilla cousins, not because they are saved, but because we know that working with local communities can save all the gorillas — with the continued help of wonderful supporters like you.

*TUVER WUNAI*

Goma, DR Congo

# Epic marathon team beat £50k

The Gorilla Organization's team fundraising at the 2017 Virgin Money London Marathon has raced over the £50,000 barrier.

Gorilla supporters Tom Harrison, Rob Cumming, Jenny Parker and Simon Cane have raised more than £52,500 since taking part in the marathon on April 23rd.

Tom — aka Mr Gorilla — crawled and knuckle-walked the marathon route in his gorilla costume, finishing the challenge on

the following Saturday. His six-day odyssey was catapulted into the public eye, and Mr Gorilla appeared on This Morning, BBC Breakfast, ITN and even German TV news.

Tom's JustGiving page has raised more than £48,500, and we're still counting the additional donations which kept our banana phones ringing all week.

Completing a full 26.5-mile marathon in a gorilla suit is no easy challenge on its own, so we

are delighted that Rob 'the Gorilla' Cumming and his partner, Jenny Parker, raised more than £3,000 together, while Simon Cole has delivered more than £1,500.

Jillian Miller, executive director at The Gorilla Organization, said: "We are grateful to all of our dedicated London Marathon runners for their incredible hard work and wonderful achievements."

"All of the money they have raised will go towards preventing the

extinction of critically endangered gorillas in Africa."

Mr Gorilla plans to follow his marathon achievement with a two-wheeled challenge when he joins the the Prudential Ride London in July, and he'll be at the Great Gorilla Run on September 16th. You can join in at [greatgorillarun.org](http://greatgorillarun.org).

**Below: Rob 'the Gorilla' Cumming makes his way in the London Marathon**

## Gorillas on the web

From the Summer of 2017, [www.gorillas.org](http://www.gorillas.org) will have a new look. You will not only be able to find all the latest news from our projects, you'll be able to learn everything you need to know about gorillas in the wild, including the ongoing threats to their existence.

Visitors to the site will also be able to follow all the latest developments from out of Africa in our blog from the field, plus an enhanced section on volunteering and events will teach you how you can get involved and play your part in saving gorillas from extinction.



**Tom 'Mr Gorilla' Harrison crosses the finishing line with Bill Oddie**



**John Daniel, the Uley gorilla, was kept as a pet by villagers 100 years ago**

## Uley ape memories

The Gloucestershire village which became home to a live gorilla in 1917 is marking its unusual centenary by helping gorillas in the wild through fundraising activities for The Gorilla Organization.

John Daniel was the Uley gorilla, stolen from his family in Gabon as an infant and sold to his adoptive family by a London department store. He lived among the villagers as a very curious and much-loved

pet until the 1920s, when he was sent to America. Present-day Uley resident Vicki Coffey and friends have already raised more than £500 and they're planning many more events, including a presentation by Ian Redmond and their own version of the Great Gorilla Run on September 16th. The villagers also hope to build a statue of John Daniel as a permanent memorial.

## Sip sip hooray!

As studies have shown, silverbacks in the wild enjoy the occasional tippie, gorging on fermenting fruit and getting merry in the forests. So they would no doubt



raise a glass to Gorilla Spirits, a small batch distillery currently making waves for their tasty gin. Owner Andy Daniels recently dropped by the London office to present a cheque of £820 to The Gorilla Organization and has pledged to continue donating £1 for every bottle sold. Cheers!



**Andy Daniels toasts a new friendship at Gorilla HQ**

# Dian Fossey, the woman who saved the mountain gorillas

**Fifty years ago an American occupational therapist from Kentucky hiked into the home of the mountain gorilla and decided she had found her calling. Her name was Dian Fossey and she was to change the course of history for this endangered ape and its dwindling habitat. Our chairman, Ian Redmond OBE, remembers his friend and mentor.**

Dian set out to build on the groundbreaking work of George Schaller, described in his bestseller *The Year of the Gorilla*. Few would have predicted that, having no training as a zoologist and a fear of heights, she would go on to make the subject her own!

By the time she wrote her own best-selling book, *Gorillas in the Mist*, the world had come to love rather than fear these distant hairy cousins of ours. Half a century on from her first hesitant contacts with wild gorillas, described vividly in her monthly reports to the National Geographic Society, we now have a much better understanding of their complex society and their importance to the local ecology.

The threats to the gorillas in the 1960s and 70s were mainly poaching, destruction of habitat for agriculture and illegal cattle-grazing — and Dian tackled them head on. In 1976, I joined Dian's team and experienced first-hand the delights of being accepted into a gorilla family as well as the horrors of poaching. Finding the speared, decapitated, handless body of Digit, the young silverback after whom this newsletter is named, changed our lives. I had known him for just over a year and considered him a

friend; Dian had watched him grow from infancy and thought of him almost as family.

Digit's death galvanised Dian and her supporters to establish the Digit Fund, which became the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund and in the UK evolved into The Gorilla Organization. With the governments of Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, they successfully began to improve protection of the gorillas and their forest, educate the public and develop a carefully controlled system of gorilla tourism, despite political turmoil in the region.

Today, the combined efforts of governments, NGOs and local communities have reduced the historical threats; the habitat is secure, cattle no longer enter the park, and many traditional hunters have given up poaching to find alternative legal livelihoods, helped by The Gorilla Organization and other groups. But the gorillas face new threats, such as changes in rainfall patterns due to climate change, and the risk of new diseases from humans.

Poaching still occurs, mainly setting snares for antelope, but now when curious young gorillas are accidentally caught, specialist vets are on hand to save them.



**Few primatologists would be able to get this close to gorillas today. 2017 sees the 50th anniversary of Dian Fossey's pioneering work**

As a result of these activities, the mountain gorilla became the only kind of ape known to be increasing in numbers, and whilst there is no room for complacency, it is held up as one of the few conservation success stories, and The Gorilla Organization hopes to repeat this story with Grauer's, western lowland and Cross River gorillas.

Dr Dian Fossey was a remarkable woman. Determined, stubborn, passionate, sometimes funny (she had a wicked sense of humour) sometimes controversial, she will always be remembered as the woman who showed us how to win the trust of wild mountain gorillas, and by so doing, saved them from extinction.

## Our census reveals Walikale gorilla numbers



**Rangers collect gorilla stool samples in Walikale**

How do you count gorillas when they won't stay still? That was the challenge when The Gorilla Organization's rangers made the first ever survey of Grauer's gorillas in Walikale, Democratic Republic of Congo.

Walikale is an area of 70,000 hectares of dense rainforest, where The Gorilla Organization has been working with local communities since 2002 to protect the gorillas, also known as eastern lowland gorillas, which were listed as Critically Endangered by the IUCN in 2016.

Rangers lead by Congo programme manager Henry Cirhuza called on their friends in MONUSCO

(the UN mission in the DRC) to help them reach the study area and stayed in the field for several weeks, tracking families of gorillas and removing snares left by poachers.

They built a picture of gorillas in the area using signs left behind by gorillas as they moved: 'night nests' of tree branches and leaves that they build to sleep in; faeces which will be analysed in a laboratory to learn about the gorillas' health; and their impact on food sources such as bamboo and galium.

The census was welcomed by conservationists at Tusk Trust who have supported Walikale financially over many years.

# A taste of tea turns away hungry gorillas

Chimps may be renowned for their love of tea, but gorillas don't like it at all - and it could be the secret to reducing conflict between hungry gorillas and struggling farmers.

Gorillas typically chomp through several kilos of wild bamboo or celery every day to sustain their huge bulks, with an occasional snack of bark, flowers, or pieces of fruit and even small insects. But few gorillas can resist a treat like the sweet potatoes, corn and maize grown in the fields bordering their protected forest homes.

Sadly, the snacking gorillas cause problems for the impoverished communities whose fields they stray into for their foodie fixes, and the problem has only got worse as internal migration, driven by war and poverty, pushes the population of central Africa steadily higher.

Farmland now pushes at the borders of the Congo's Virunga National Park and the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest National Park in Uganda, and many villagers are angered when the gorillas enter their land.

"Here, life is hard, and many people struggle to feed themselves and their families," said Henry Cirhuza, The Gorilla Organization's programme manager in DR Congo. "So, when they see their crops being raided, even by gorillas — who most people know are endangered, protected and can be a valuable source of income through tourism — they react with anger. All too sadly, this means gorillas have stones thrown at them or are hit with sticks."

New research suggests tea plants could help The Gorilla Organization's efforts to restore the natural barrier separating protected



forest and agricultural land by planting more than a million trees alongside the gorilla habitat in the Congo. Published in the journal *Animal Conservation*, it reveals that not only do gorillas dislike the taste of tea, they are wary of crossing tea plantations. No-one knows why, but this could prevent them from ever discovering the tastier crops which lie beyond.

"Gorillas continue to be a mystery to us, and that is part of what makes

them so fascinating," Henry said. "While some will be bold enough to invade crop fields, others will never leave the forest, and we still don't know why this is the case.

"Once we get to the bottom of this, and once we have a better understanding of how we can keep wildlife off farmland in a safe and sustainable way, we will be a big step closer towards seeing humans and gorillas living alongside one another in harmony."

## Bwindi mourns fallen silverback

Rangers working to protect mountain gorillas of Bwindi Impenetrable Forest in Uganda are in mourning following the sudden death of adult male silverback gorilla Ndahura in a freak and tragic accident.

The gorilla guardians came across the stricken silverback while on their early morning patrol. He was in obvious pain after falling from a tree he had climbed to feast on *Chrysophyllum*. Sadly, due to the size of the fall — up to 50 metres — and the sheer weight of his body, Ndahura died shortly afterwards.

Despite their size — they are the largest and heaviest of all the great apes — gorillas are surprisingly adept climbers. "Not only do they have strong grasping hands, but they have binocular vision, meaning they can accurately judge distances between different branches," explains primatologist, Karolina Simanaityte.

"So, though they might be heavy, gorillas are certainly not clumsy — and even if inexperienced young gorillas take a tumble or fall from a tree, the thick vegetation of their home habitat usually ensures they enjoy a soft landing."

As such, Ndahura's death was very unusual, but it could have significant implications for the

Bitukura mountain gorilla family. Despite not being the oldest male in the group, Ndahura ousted ageing Karamuzi in a peaceful coup two years ago, around the time the family became habituated to tourists.

His untimely death at just 28 means that two younger adult males, Rukumu and Rukara, will now either compete to assume the role of lead silverback, or the group could split up into new families which would need many years to grow into separate groups.



**Silverback Ndahura was the leader of the Bitukura gorillas**

## Gorilla Organization board welcomes new trustees

The Gorilla Organization has welcomed Danielle Porteous, Bishu Chakraborty and Professor Stuart Semple to its board of trustees, guiding the charity's mission to save the gorillas.

Danielle is head of philanthropy at UnLtd, and has more than 15 years' experience in working with individuals, businesses and charitable foundations. A senior commercial executive,

Bishu is the former MD of Lord Andrew Lloyd Webber's Really Useful Theatres Group and has huge experience in the finance and operations of multinational businesses. Professor Semple is a leading primatologist based at the University of Roehampton, London, with a particular interest in primate communication. Many of Stuart's former students began their careers in conservation at The Gorilla Organization.

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