

Digit, Dian Fossey's favourite gorilla, by Joel Kirk



digit news

saving the world's last gorillas

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the gorilla organization

Gorillas go back to the wild

It's the picture conservationists have been waiting years for: in the forests of Mount Tshiaberimu, wild gorilla Mwengesali cosies up to Mapendo, a gorilla newly released back into the wild from a rehabilitation centre.

The 16-year-old female was one of four eastern lowland gorillas successfully "re-wilded" more than a decade after being rescued from the illegal wildlife trade.

The release in May brought a hugely ambitious project to the best possible end. But this has been a success many years in the making, with the Gorilla Organization having fought against the odds to keep an isolated population of great apes alive, while also safeguarding their precious habitat in the hope of one day bringing Mount T's gorillas back from the brink.

Named after the elusive dark-haired spirit animals the Yira people believed haunted the forests, Mount Tshiaberimu covers an area of 60 square kilometres at an elevation of 3,100 metres. Those elusive creatures are, of course, the critically-endangered eastern lowland (or Grauer's) gorillas. And

so some 20 years ago, the Gorilla Organization established a project here. The grassroots approach was truly ground-breaking. It was also incredibly effective, too. From just 12 gorillas, the population grew to 26 – close to the 30 individuals the famous primatologist George Schaller recorded on his expeditions in the 1950s.

Gorilla Organization Director Jillian Miller remembers those exciting days of being given responsibility for this long-overlooked piece of the Virunga National Park. "We had a small but enormously dedicated team, and immediately recognized poaching to be the main threat facing the gorillas," she says. "When other NGOs were ignoring communities, we worked with them, listening to their needs and jointly finding solutions to their problems. This way, they were able to make a living



Mapendo (right) enjoys her first day as a fully wild lowland gorilla

without poaching, and we saw the gorilla numbers rise and rise." Sadly, however, troubled times soon came to Mount Tshiaberimu.

Ongoing war

For the past 15 years, this impoverished region has been ground down by incessant insecurity and fighting. Though technically part of the National Park, Mount T has regularly come under the control of rebel militia, which meant poaching returned and rangers struggled to keep gorillas safe.

In March 2023, Freddy Mahamba, the first ranger to be employed by the Gorilla Organization here, was shot and killed. Soon after, a study, co-authored by long-time colleague Jean-Claude Kyungu, injected even more urgency into the situation. A viability analysis concluded that, with just two adult females left, the population was at "high risk of extinction".

The study also noted, however, that the chances of extinction would drop below 1% "with the release of at least two or three females". That's why the release of the four females means so much, not least to Ranger Mahamba's friends and colleagues who are determined that his sacrifice need not be in vain. So far, the signs are encouraging. Waiting outside the rescue centre on the day of the release was silverback Mwasa. He had visited them outside the wire, getting accustomed to the new females on his mountain. Now, it looks like he could choose one or more of the females to breed with, bringing some vital genetic diversity and new hope to Mount T.



Eastern lowland gorillas continue to teeter on the edge of extinction

**100 men
versus
1 gorilla:
Who would win?
And why does
it matter...**

See p2

Groundbreaking moments in Mgahinga

The communities living on the edges of the Mgahinga Gorilla National Park in Uganda are looking to the future with extra confidence thanks to the continued success of the Gorilla Organization's Children for Sustainable Conservation project.

In April, the ground was broken at the site of an expanded and renovated primary school for the village. Situated just 200 metres from the main gate of the National Park, home to endangered mountain gorillas, the school is one of the poorest in the whole of Uganda.

Over recent months, however, the lives of its 450 students, as well as those of their extended families have been positively transformed.

Thanks to the incredible efforts of That Gorilla Brand, the children of Nyagakenke will have a modern, secure place to learn, including all about the mountain gorillas they live alongside.

And from primary schools to nurseries: The Gorilla Organization team on the ground have also been busy expanding the reforestation project on the edge of the Mgahinga National Park.



Smiles all round as work on village school gets underway

Over the past few months, the team have been joined by local farmers, community leaders and schoolchildren to plant an incredible 11,000 saplings.

The fast-growing trees will soon be forming a natural green barrier,



keeping humans and their gorilla neighbours apart. The trees will

also provide sustainable timber and help combat climate change.

And the winner is...

For a few days in spring, it was a question that captured the online imagination everywhere: Who would win in a fight between one silverback gorilla and 100 men?

Thankfully, for the sake of everyone's curiosity – and sanity – Gorilla Organization Trustee and renowned naturalist Giles Clarke was on hand to settle the debate once and for all.

"A gorilla would absolutely wreck 100 men," he said, in an interview with Joe.co.uk that got thousands of views. Giles then used the opportunity to get serious.

"The real threat to gorillas isn't a fight. Gorillas are in real danger from human activity. And, right now, war in eastern Congo is threatening gorilla rangers who are risking their lives to protect them."

That's why he urged people



to donate to the Gorilla Organization's essential work equipping those rangers working on the frontline. Without that "thin green line" standing in harm's way, wild gorillas could be lost almost as quickly as it takes a meme to go viral.

A marathon effort!

After seeing gorillas close-up on a visit to East Africa in 2024, Sonam Modhwadia became determined to play her part in efforts to save a species from extinction.

So she put her best foot forward and signed up to be the latest Team Gorilla runner to tackle the London Marathon.

Not only did Sonam complete the whole 26-mile challenge in historic high temperatures, she also managed to smash her fundraising target.

Save wild gorillas

"The Gorilla Organization takes a community-led approach to save wild gorillas from extinction, whilst also transforming the lives of thousands of people, most of them living in some of Africa's poorest communities," she said. More than 60 of her friends, family and colleagues agreed with her choice of charity. In total, Sonam raised £2,200 to support a range of field projects in Africa.



Sonam celebrates her fundraising feat

Team Gorilla has four places in the 2026 London Marathon. To sign up and get fundraising, contact events@gorillas.org

Virunga National Park at 100

Africa's oldest National Park may not be its most famous nor indeed its most-visited. But for mountain gorillas, it has always been the most important.

And now, 100 years after its creation, the Virunga National Park remains at the centre of efforts to keep them from extinction.

In April 1925 King Albert, influenced by a visit to the USA, decided to create a vast natural refuge in what was then the Belgian Congo. The King Albert Park was to be a place for scientific exploration and discovery. Moreover, it was designed to be a refuge for the gorillas that had captured the imagination of imperialist explorers.

Active volcanoes

The redrawing of the boundaries to Lake Edward increased its area from 25,000 to 190,000 hectares, and the inclusion of Mount Nyiragongo and Mount Nyamuragira meant it became home to Africa's two most

active volcanoes. Then, in 1962, the section in DR Congo became the Parc National de Virunga; the smaller Rwandan section Parc National des Volcans.

But while the names and boundaries may have changed, the park has remained a place of unrivalled biodiversity. It's a landscape of wide savannas, marshes and tropical forest. And it's home to half of all the animal species in Africa.

The mountain gorillas living on the slopes of extinct volcanoes in the Mikenko Sector, represent one of the great conservation success stories. The Park is now home to one third of the 1,063 individuals left. Much of this is down to the tireless efforts of the rangers. From their Rumangabo headquarters, they have grown into a professional, motivated force, risking their lives to keep gorillas safe.

Collective success

Gorilla Organization Director Jillian Miller has seen the Park emerge as a conservation stronghold. "This is one of the natural wonders of the world, and the majestic mountain gorillas are its true icons. Our collective success in bringing them back from being lost for good has been remarkable. But the threats they face have not gone away – in fact they are now as bad as ever."

The Virunga National Park is infamous for being as troubled as it is beautiful. Its resources have been fiercely contested and exploited,



From colonial project to vital mountain gorilla refuge

with gorillas caught in the middle. In the 1990s, war in Rwanda triggered a humanitarian crisis that continues to this day. One million displaced people are now camped outside the Park's boundaries, with 600 tons of trees cut down each year for fuel. Gangs fight for control of the illegal charcoal trade, as well as mineral resources.

More recently, the taking of Goma city by the M23 group has led to even more uncertainty. The Park is now a UNESCO Heritage Site in danger, its gorillas perhaps more vulnerable than ever. But if 100 years of history have shown anything, it's that a strong ranger force to confront immediate dangers and community conservation work to address the underlying causes of those threats, is the only way to protect this precious habitat and ensure its gorillas are around for another century and more.



Mountain gorillas are thriving

Virunga in numbers

10	gorillas killed in 2007 massacre
300	rangers killed in the line of duty since 2000
650	total length of park boundary in kilometres
4m	people living within a day's walk of the park
35%	of park being illegally exploited

An alternative approach to conservation

For many of the indigenous peoples of DR Congo, the Virunga National Park retains its colonial essence. In 1925, thousands were expelled to establish the natural reserve.

And the few hundred who were allowed to remain were regarded as an example of

local wildlife rather than real people. Times have changed. But communities still strongly feel that their lives and futures are being controlled from afar. Decisions on who can enter or control the Park are made by governments in Europe or by NGOs. However, 600km away, the Walikale

Community Gorilla Reserve shows that a different approach to conservation is not only possible, but also much-needed.

In 2016, the Government changed the law to allow locals to take control of forest concessions. And so in Walikale, a small team funded by the Gorilla Organization

works hand-in-hand with local communities to protect 5,000 eastern lowland gorillas and their precious habitat. The communities have an active stake in conservation, laying the foundations for more sustainable long-term success.

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Biodiversity hotspot

Covering an area of more than 10,000 square kilometres, the Maiko National Park is Congo at its wildest. Gazetted in 1970, much of this vast, dense forest still remains untouched and even unexplored by humans.

However, this is known as a biodiversity hotspot, home to three of the country's most emblematic species: the okapi, the Congo peacock and, of course, the eastern lowland gorilla.

For now, the Park is also a relative haven of peace, at least for this part of the world. Some small sections are controlled by armed groups, known as Simba rebels. Illicit mining and the encroachment of permanent agriculture are also ongoing challenges.

However, it's a place where, if they are properly supported, conservationists can carry out valuable research into the

lives of lowland gorillas, while also working directly with local communities to safeguard all of the 'big three'.

That's why the Gorilla Organization's work at Maiko is aimed at long-term collaboration. Community engagement projects are delivering results, getting people on board with efforts to save gorillas.

Here, a thriving ecosystem makes good economic sense, providing jobs and opportunities for sustainable entrepreneurship. What's more, since the Maiko forests are an integral part to the spiritual heritage of the local people, this collaborative



Collective efforts are keeping gorillas safe

approach is winning the Gorilla Organization friends and valuable supporters in this often-forgotten corner of the Congo.

Refined tastes of gorillas revealed



Even after decades of study, gorillas still find ways to surprise us. Recent studies have revealed gorilla group dynamics to be far more complex than previously believed.

And now, it turns out that the diets of gorillas in the wild are far more varied – and sophisticated – than primatologists once thought.

Foraging for truffles

Conservationists working in the Congo have observed gorillas foraging the forest floor for truffles. And it's not just the taste or even the nutrition they are after. According to the researchers from Lincoln Park Zoo, the behaviour may be a way of strengthening social bonds, especially with incoming members of gorilla groups.

Gorilla Organization Chairman Ian Redmond is,

Award keeps loving legacy alive

The 2024 Ymke Warren Memorial Conservation Award has gone to Enokenwa Allen Tabi in recognition of his innovative community-based conservation work in Southwest Cameroon.

The Award was established in memory of Dr Ymke Warren, a much loved colleague of The Gorilla Organization who was murdered in Cameroon in 2010.

Fifteen years later, it continues to support early-career African researchers working to protect gorillas and other endangered wildlife.

Engaging local communities

Allen's project focuses on engaging local communities around the Tofala Hill Wildlife

Sanctuary in monitoring two of Africa's most threatened primates: the Cross River gorilla and the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee. Both face increasing threats from poaching, logging, and farmland encroachment.

To tackle these challenges, Allen's project will train local community rangers in the use of camera traps to monitor great ape populations.

Community members will be



Award winner Allen (r) in action in the forest

involved in choosing camera locations, setting up equipment, and gathering crucial data.

The information collected will help sanctuary managers make informed decisions and develop strategies to ensure that people and wildlife can thrive side by side.

Great motivation

Allen says: "This award is of tremendous importance to me. It gives me great motivation to continue the work on the protection of gorillas and other species in Cameroon. Our efforts create a huge impact for humans to live in harmony with nature."

however, not so surprised. "When you watch gorillas up close for long periods, it becomes clear just how varied their diet and their dining habits really are," he says.

"From staples like bamboo shoots and fruits to protein-heavy termites and now, it seems, truffles too, our cousins in the forest also like to mix things up and seek out new flavours."

A gorilla expands his culinary horizons

