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## Conservation update

### FEATURE: MOUNTAIN GORILLA - *Gorilla gorilla beringei*

Gorillas are one of the most feared animals in the world, thanks to movies like *King Kong* and *Congo*. While it is true that they are large, powerful creatures, they are also gentle and affectionate. Mountain gorillas are easygoing vegetarians who lead a peaceful, playful life. Large males patiently allow young gorillas to climb all over them without a murmur of protest, and they are not aggressive toward humans unless they are threatened.

As primates, humans and gorillas share a common ancestor. Humans did not evolve from gorillas; rather, humans and gorillas simply took separate evolutionary paths about 10 million years ago. We seem to have a special affinity for these animals despite our differences. As George Schaller, one of the world's leading gorilla researchers, has written:

*"No one who looks into a gorilla's eyes – intelligent, gentle, vulnerable – can remain unchanged, for the gap between ape and human vanishes; we know that the gorilla still lives within us. Do gorillas also recognise this ancient connection?"*

Mountain gorillas are one of the most endangered animals in the world. Scientists estimate that there are about 700 individuals, living in 2 populations separated by about 20 miles. Their entire world consists of 285 square miles of high-elevation rain forest in east-central Africa.

Gorillas face threats from hunting for the pet and bush-meat trades, and habitat loss caused by logging, mining and human encroachment. As gorillas have a similar genetic makeup as human beings, but have not developed the same immunities that humans have, they are also potentially susceptible to disease if in close contact with human beings. However, the greatest threat to the long-term survival of gorillas remains habitat encroachment. The human population explosion in Africa continues to create a need for more land to grow food and house people. Gorillas have no place else to go. They can adapt to no new way of life. Tourism has contributed greatly to saving gorillas, but the future is not at all certain.

These majestic great apes vary in population and distribution across their range states, yet share a common need: Each of the four subspecies requires active conservation measures and commitment to ensure their future survival in the wild.

### **OBSERVE THE WILDLIFE CODE AND DO YOUR PART TOWARDS HELPING US CONSERVE WILDLIFE...**

- Respect the privacy of animals – minimum viewing distance is 20 metres.
- Remember that animals are wild and can be dangerous.
- Do not disturb the animals with sudden movements or loud noises.
- It is an offence to feed wild animals.
- Stay in your vehicle except at designated places.
- Respect the speed limit of 40 kilometres per hour in parks.
- Never drive off road as it degrades habitat.
- Do not leave litter or discard lighted cigarettes.
- Respect the culture of the people – never take photographs of local people without their permission.
- It is illegal to collect any living or dead item from a protected area.



# Mountain Gorilla Facts

MOUNTAIN GORILLA – *Gorilla gorilla beringei*

STATUS: Endangered

DESCRIPTION: Of the three subspecies of gorilla, the mountain gorilla is the largest and one of the rarest. Remarkably strong, the mountain gorilla has a short trunk and a broad chest and shoulders. Males develop a streak of silver hair on their backs when they mature and are called "silverbacks."

SIZE: Male mountain gorillas reach an average of 5 feet 6 inches tall (when standing upright) and weigh 135 to 200 kg, making them the largest of the great apes (chimpanzees, orangutans, and gorillas). Females are smaller, standing an average of 4 to 5 feet tall and weighing 70 to 115 kg.

POPULATION: Approximately 700 mountain gorillas survive today in two geographically isolated populations. Around 380 gorillas inhabit the Virunga volcanoes region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Uganda, while the remaining number inhabits Uganda's Bwindi National Park.

LIFESPAN: Mountain gorillas live up to about 50 years in captivity and 35 years in the wild. (Like most animals, they live longer in captivity.)

RANGE: Mountain gorillas can be found only in the forest ecosystems of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Uganda.

HABITAT: The dense, forest ecosystems of the mountains of east-central Africa are the last remaining habitat of the mountain gorilla.

FOOD: Mountain gorillas eat large amounts of vegetation and spend about 30 percent of each day foraging for food. They consume roots, leaves, stems of herbs, vines, bark from trees, shrub-sized plants, and bamboo shoots. An adult male consumes approximately 20 kg of food a day.

BEHAVIOUR: Mountain gorillas are shy, retiring animals. They live in social groups of 2 to 35 individuals. An adult male silverback is the leader and protector of his band, which consists of females and offspring. Gorillas are not aggressive animals. When an intruder disturbs them, they may make a lot of noise, but they rarely confront another animal. Grooming one another (cleaning the hair of another gorilla) is a major occupation among gorillas in a band. Female gorillas groom their offspring, one another, and the silverback; the silverback does not groom others. Each evening, gorillas construct a "nest" for the night in which they will curl up and sleep. These bowl-shaped nests are made out of leaves and other plant material. Nests are only shared by a mother and her nursing offspring. Scientists who study gorillas can easily estimate a local gorilla population by counting the number of "nests."

OFFSPRING: Females reach breeding age at about 10 years old. They typically bear young every four to five years, giving birth after a gestation period of eight to nine months. Newborn gorillas weigh only 1.4-1.8 kg at birth (about half the weight of a newborn human). Young gorillas cling to their mother's chests until they are old enough to ride on her back. A young gorilla remains with its mother until 5 years of age.

THREATS: Habitat destruction and poaching pose serious threats to the future of this species.

PROTECTION: \*CITES, Appendix I, Endangered Species Act.

*\*Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, an international treaty with more than 144 member countries. Appendix I listed species cannot be traded commercially. Appendix II listed species can be traded commercially only if trade does not harm their survival.*

## DIFFERENT SUBSPECIES OF GORILLA...

There are four subspecies of gorilla - two categorised as eastern gorillas and two as western gorillas - all of which are found only in Africa and all threatened with extinction in the wild. The separate subspecies of gorilla differ slightly in appearance: Eastern gorillas have adapted to higher altitudes and have longer body hair, higher foreheads, longer palates, larger nostrils, broader chests, shorter arms, shorter, wider hands and feet. They also tend to be darker in color than their western gorilla relatives.

### EASTERN GORILLAS

#### **Mountain Gorilla – *Gorilla gorilla beringei***

Mountain gorillas, with a current population of just more than 700, have been intensely monitored since the 1950s. This subspecies of the eastern gorilla is perhaps the most well-known gorilla, thanks to Dian Fossey's study of them in the 1960s and '70s. They are separated into two populations: one ranges across the Virunga range of volcanic mountains on the borders of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Uganda and the second lives in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Uganda. Mountain gorillas first became known to science in October 1902, and since then have had to endure uncontrolled hunting, war, disease, destruction of forest habitat and capture for the illegal pet trade. These threats led to a dramatic decline in population numbers, and fear for their survival initiated dedicated conservation efforts that are now paying off. Constant vigilance is needed to protect these primates from poachers' snares and human encroachment into protected areas. These efforts have resulted in signs of slight population increases since the late 1980s. Considered critically endangered, there are no mountain gorillas in captivity.

**Population:** No less than 700

**Distribution:** Virunga range of volcanoes on Uganda-Rwanda-DRC border and Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Uganda

#### **Grauer's Gorilla – *Gorilla gorilla graueri***

Grauer's gorillas, found only in the lowland and Albertine Rift montane forests of Democratic Republic of Congo, have been long-time victims of poaching in a historically war-torn area. A subspecies of eastern gorilla, it now inhabits just 13 percent of its historic range. The Grauer's gorilla population is estimated to be 16,000 and is located approximately 600 miles from the nearest population of western lowland gorillas.

**Population:** 16,000

**Distribution:** Democratic Republic of Congo

### WESTERN GORILLAS

#### **Western Lowland Gorilla – *Gorilla gorilla gorilla***

Of the four subspecies, the western lowland gorilla is the most numerous and widespread, with a population of approximately 94,000, but recent surveys indicate a decline of up to 56 percent across their range, due to poaching and disease. In areas hard hit by the Ebola virus, over 90 percent of great apes have been killed.

These gorillas are a subspecies of the western gorilla and range from southern Cameroon, the southwest corner of the Central African Republic, west Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and southwards towards the Cabinda enclave of Angola. The forests of Gabon are currently considered to harbor the majority of the population, but it is possible that unsurveyed areas of Congo may contain similar numbers. Due to the nature of their habitat (thick rainforests) it is difficult to obtain an accurate count of lowland gorillas, requiring a reliance on estimates. All gorillas found in zoos are lowland gorillas.

**Population:** 94,000 (although estimate is being revised)

**Distribution:** Cameroon, Republic of Congo, CAR, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Angola

#### **Cross River Gorilla – *Gorilla gorilla diehli***

The Cross River gorilla, which differs from the western lowland gorilla in skull and tooth dimensions, is restricted to the forested hills on the Nigerian-Cameroon border. A subspecies of the western gorilla, the remaining 200 individuals are divided into eight small isolated populations separated by densely settled farmlands. They are considered critically endangered.

**Population:** 200

**Distribution:** Eight small isolated populations; hilly region along Nigeria and Cameroon border

## **MOUNTAIN GORILLA FACTS...**

- The first recorded gorilla sighting (by western civilization) was in the 5th century B.C. by a Roman explorer.
- Gorillas have a very large head with a bulging forehead, a crest on top (it is called the sagittal crest, and is larger on male gorillas), tiny ears, and small, dark-brown eyes. Gorillas have no tail. Adult gorillas have 32 teeth, with large molars (flat teeth used for chewing food) and large canines (pointy teeth used for biting), which are especially large in the male gorillas.
- Gorillas' hands are very much like ours; they have five fingers, including an opposable thumb. Their feet have five toes, including an opposable big toe. Gorillas can grasp things with both their hands and their feet.
- Gorillas have senses very similar to ours, including hearing, sight (they seem to be slightly nearsighted and to have color vision), smell, taste, and touch.
- Gorillas knuckle-walk using both their legs and their long arms (putting pressure on their knuckles, with the fingers rolled into the hand). Gorillas rarely walk using only their legs. They can climb trees, but do not do so very often. Gorillas cannot swim.
- Gorillas recognise each other by their faces and body shapes. Each gorilla has a unique nose print.
- Gorillas are generally quiet animals. They communicate with each other using many complicated sounds and gestures. Gorillas use at least 25 recognized vocalizations, including grunts, roars, growls, whines, chuckles, hooting, etc. Communication is used to teach the young the many skills that they need to survive, and for other gorillas to communicate about food, social relationships, distress, mating, etc.
- Some gorilla gestures include chest-beating, high-pitched barks, lunging, throwing objects, staring, lip-tucking, sticking out the tongue, sideways running, slapping and rising to a two-legged stance.
- Some gorillas have been taught sign language by people; these gorillas learned how to form simple sentences and communicate with people.
- Gorillas have never been observed using tools in the wild, although they have been taught to use them in captivity.
- They are vegetarian forest dwellers and are under seige by poachers and fighting.
- Mountain gorillas have been listed as an endangered species since 1970.

## **MOUNTAIN GORILLAS MAKING A COMEBACK...**

### **WWF-funded census shows population on the rise:**

A census of mountain gorillas in the Virunga montane forests, led by the WWF-funded International Gorilla Conservation Program (IGCP), has recorded an impressive 17 percent increase in the population of this highly endangered great ape. The total of 380 mountain gorillas recorded, up from the 324 counted more than a decade ago, is an indication of the remarkable results achieved through the dedicated effort and sound conservation initiatives of groups like WWF and the IGCP.

The current count, conducted in the Virunga Mountains bordering the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda, together with the findings of a 2002 census of the only other mountain gorilla population, in Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable Forest National Park, puts the total number of mountain gorillas in the world at no less than 700. This gradual, but promising rise in population signifies that, just years after standing at the brink of extinction, mountain gorillas are making a comeback in the wild. These results are a positive indication of how effective conservation can be accomplished in difficult conditions by closely engaging local people and park authorities in day to day activities such as monitoring gorillas and their habitats.

Funded by WWF, IGCP has established a ranger-based monitoring system, whereby parks and rangers team up to continuously collect and analyze data on the gorillas and their habitat. The information is fed to park authorities in DRC, Rwanda, and Uganda for their management decisions and plans.

*“Take nothing but photographs & leave nothing but footprints.”*

*Global Interlink Conservation Update compiled by: MOHIT K. ADVANI*

Credits: Defenders Of Wildlife [www.defenders.org](http://www.defenders.org); World Wildlife Fund [www.worldwildlife.org](http://www.worldwildlife.org); Koko.org – the gorilla foundation [www.koko.org](http://www.koko.org); Enchanted Learning [www.enchantedlearning.com](http://www.enchantedlearning.com); National Geographic, Vol. 188, No. 4