

## *Meeting a Gorilla\**

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The gorillas were not the animals we had come to Zaire to look for. It is very hard, however, to come all the way to Zaire and not go to see them. I was going to say that this is because they are our closest living relatives, but I'm not sure that's an appropriate reason. Generally, in my experience, when you visit a country in which you have any relatives living there's a tendency to want to lie low and hope they don't find out you're in town. At least with the gorillas you know that there's no danger of having to go out to dinner with them and catch up on several million years of family history, so you can visit them with impunity. They are, of course, only collateral relatives - with cousins, *n* times removed. We are both descended from a common ancestor, who is, sadly, no longer with us, and who has, since Darwin's day, been the subject of endless speculation as to what manner of creature he/she was.

The section of the primate family of which we are members (rich, successful members of the family, the ones who made good and who should, by any standards, be looking after the other, less-well-off members of the family) are the great apes — we are great apes.

The other great apes are the gorillas (of which there are three subspecies: mountain, eastern lowland and western lowland), two species of chimpanzee and the orang-utans of Borneo and Sumatra. Of these, the most closely related are the gorillas, the chimps and us. We and the gorillas separated on the evolutionary tree more recently than our common ancestor separated from the orang-utans, so the gorillas are more closely related to us than they are to the orang-utans. We are very, very close relatives indeed - as close to each other as the Indian elephant and the African elephant, which also share a common, extinct ancestor.

The Virunga volcanoes, where the mountain gorillas live, straddle the border of Zaire, Rwanda and Uganda. There are about 280 gorillas there, roughly two-thirds of which live in Zaire, and the other third in Rwanda. I say roughly, because the gorillas are not yet sufficiently advanced in evolutionary terms to have discovered the benefits of passports, currency declaration forms and official bribery, and therefore tend to wander backwards and forwards across the border as and when their beastly, primitive whim takes them. A few stragglers even pop over into Uganda from time to time, but there are no gorillas actually living there as permanent residents because the Ugandan part of the Virungas only covers about twenty-five square kilometres, is unprotected and is full of people whom the gorillas, given the choice, would rather steer clear of.

Now, the business of tourism is obviously a vexed one. I had wanted to visit the gorillas for years, but had been deterred by the worry that tourism must be disturbing to the gorillas' habitat and way of life. There is also the risk of exposing the gorillas to disease to which they have no immunity. It is well known that the famous and extraordinary pioneer of gorilla conservation, Dian Fossey, was for most of her life passionately opposed to tourism and wished to keep the world away from the gorillas. However, she did, reluctantly, change her mind towards the end of her life, and the prevalent view now is that tourism, if it's carefully controlled and monitored, is the one thing that can guarantee the gorillas' future survival. The sad but unavoidable fact is that it comes down to simple economics. Without tourists it's only a question of which will happen first - either the gorillas' forest habitat will be entirely destroyed for crop farming and firewood, or the gorillas will be hunted to extinction by poachers. Put at its crudest, the gorillas are now worth more to the locals (and the government) alive than dead.

The restrictions, which are tightly enforced, are these. Each gorilla family can only be visited

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\* In PAOLA CAVALIERI & PETER SINGER (eds.), *The Great Ape Project* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1993), pp. 19-23.

once a day, usually for about an hour, by a party of a maximum of six people, each of whom are paying US\$ 100 for the privilege. And maybe they won't even get to see the gorillas.

We were lucky; we did. We were keeping very quiet and looking very carefully around us. There was nothing we could see near us, nothing in the trees above us, nothing peering furtively from the bushes. It was a moment or two before we saw anything at all, but then at last a slight movement caught our eyes. About thirty yards away down the track we were following, standing in plain view, was something so big that we hadn't even noticed it. It was a mountain gorilla, or perhaps I should say a gorilla mountain, standing propped up on its front knuckles so that it assumed the shape of a large and muscular sloping ridge tent.

You will have heard it said before that these creatures are awesome beasts, and I would like to add my own particular perception to this: these creatures are awesome beasts. It is hard to know how better to put it. A kind of humming mental paralysis grips you when you first encounter a creature such as this in the wild, and indeed there is no creature such as this. All sorts of wild and vertiginous feelings well up into your brain, that you seem to have no connection with and no name for, perhaps because it is thousands of millions of years since such feelings were last aroused.

The gorilla noticed us and stalked off into the undergrowth. We set off to follow him but he was in his own element and we were not. We were not even able to tell whereabouts in his own element he was and after a while we gave up and started to explore the area more generally again.

A little while later we came across a silverback lying on his side beneath a bush, with his long arm folded up over his head scratching his opposite ear while he watched a couple of leaves doing not very much. ('Silverback' simply means that the gorilla's back was silver, or grey-haired. Only the backs of males turn silver, and it happens after the male has reached maturity.) It was instantly clear what he was doing. He was mooching. It was quite obvious. Or rather, the temptation to find it quite obvious was absolutely overwhelming.

They look like humans, they move like humans, they hold things in their fingers like humans, the expressions which play across their faces and in their intensely human-looking eyes are expressions which we instinctively feel we recognise as human expressions. We look them in the face and we think, 'We know what they're like', but we don't. Or rather we actually block off any possible glimmering of understanding of what they may be like by making easy and tempting assumptions.

I crept closer to the silverback, slowly and quietly on my hands and knees, till I was about eighteen inches away from him. He glanced round at me unconcernedly, as if I was just someone who had walked into the room, and continued his contemplations. I guessed that the animal was probably about the same height as me - almost two metres - but I would think about twice as heavy. Mostly muscle, with soft grey-black skin hanging quite loosely on his front, covered in coarse black hair.

As I moved again, he shifted himself away from me, just about six inches, as if I had sat slightly too close to him on a sofa and he was grumpily making a bit more room. Then he lay on his front with his chin on his fist, idly scratching his cheek with his other hand. I sat as quiet and still as I could, despite discovering that I was being bitten to death by ants. He looked from one to another of us without any great concern, and then his attention dropped to his own hands as he idly scratched some flecks of dirt off one of his fingers with his thumb. I had the impression that we were of as much interest to him as a boring Sunday afternoon in front of the television. He yawned.

It's so bloody hard not to anthropomorphise. But these impressions keep on crowding in on you

because they spark so much instant recognition, however illusory that recognition may be. It's the only way of conveying what it was *like*.

After a quiet interval had passed I carefully pulled the pink writing paper out of my bag and started to make the notes that I'm writing from at the moment. This seemed to interest him a little more. I suppose he had simply never seen pink writing paper before. His eyes followed as my hand squiggled across the paper and after a while he reached out and touched first the paper and then the top of my biro – not to take it away from me, or even to interrupt me, just to see what it was and what it felt like. I felt very moved by this, and had a foolish impulse to show him my camera as well.

He retreated a little and lay down again about four feet from me, with his fist once more propped under his chin. I loved the extraordinary thoughtfulness of his expression, and the way his lips were bunched together by the upward pressure of his fist. The most disconcerting intelligence seemed to be apparent from the sudden sidelong glances he would give me, prompted not by any particular move I had made but apparently by a thought that had struck him.

I began to feel how patronising it was of us to presume to judge their intelligence, as if ours was any kind of standard by which to measure. I tried to imagine instead how he saw us, but of course that's almost impossible to do, because the assumptions you end up making as you try to bridge the imaginative gap are, of course, your own, and the most misleading assumptions are the ones you don't even know you're making. I pictured him lying there easily in his own world, tolerating my presence in it, but, I think, possibly sending me signals to which I did not know how to respond. And then I pictured myself beside him, festooned with the apparatus of my intelligence – my Gore-Tex cagoule, my pen and paper, my autofocus matrix-metering Nikon F4, and my inability to comprehend any of the life we had left behind us in the forest. But somewhere in the genetic history that we each carry with us in every cell of our body was a deep connection with this creature, as inaccessible to us now as last year's dreams, but, like last year's dreams, always invisibly and unfathomably present.

It put me in mind of what I think must be a vague memory of a movie, in which a New Yorker, the son of East European immigrants, goes to find the village that his family originally came from. He is rich and successful and expects to be greeted with excitement, admiration and wonder.

Instead, he is not exactly rejected, not exactly dismissed, but is welcomed in ways which he is unable to understand. He is disturbed by their lack of reaction to his presence until he realises that their stillness in the face of him is not rejection, but merely a peace that he is welcome to join but not to disturb. The gifts he has brought with him from civilisation turn to dust in his hands as he realises that everything he has is merely the shadow cast by what he has lost.

I watched the gorilla's eyes again, wise and knowing eyes, and wondered about this business of trying to teach apes language. Our language. Why? There are many members of our own species who live in and with the forest and know it and understand it. We don't listen to them. What is there to suggest we would listen to anything an ape could tell us? Or that he would be able to tell us of his life in a language that hasn't been born of that life? I thought, maybe it is not that they have yet to gain a language, it is that we have lost one.

The silverback seemed at last to tire of our presence. He hauled himself to his feet and lumbered easily off into another part of his home.