



# GORILLAS

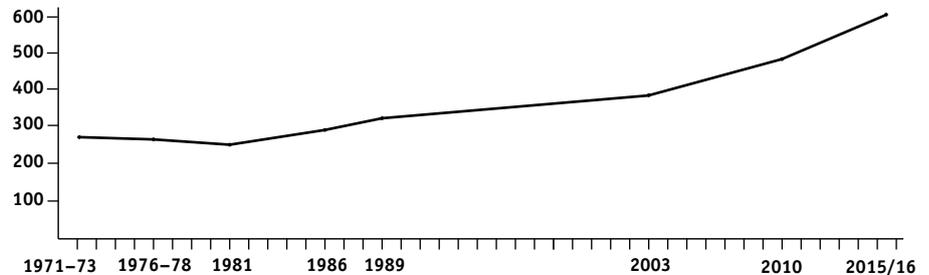
## New Virunga Gorilla Number

A survey in 2015–2016 documented 604 mountain gorillas in the transboundary Virunga Massif, one of the two areas where this gorilla subspecies is found. This is the largest number of Virunga gorillas ever recorded – 124 individuals more than during the previous census (in 2010)! When combined with the published figure of 400 gorillas from Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, Uganda, as of 2011, an estimated 1,004 mountain gorillas existed in the wild as of June 2016.

In the area encompassing the Mike-no Sector of Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda, and Mgahinga Gorilla National Park in Uganda, the 604 gorillas were found in 41 groups and as 14 solitary males. Survey teams walked pre-determined “recces” (reconnaissance trails) ensuring a thorough coverage of all forest areas to sweep the area and search for signs of gorillas, other key mammals, and illegal activities. When fresh gorilla signs were detected, the teams followed the gorilla trail to locate three recent night nest sites. At each of these nest sites, the teams collected fecal samples from nests.

However, during this past census in 2015–2016, the survey effort was doubled by sweeping the Virunga Massif twice; first from October to December 2015 (57 days) and second from March to May 2016 (59 days). A second sweep allows to find gorillas that were undetected during the first sweep and thus provides more reliable numbers of gorillas. Fecal samples were analyzed genetically to determine individual genotypes.

The survey was conducted by the Protected Area Authorities of DRC, Rwanda, and Uganda (l’Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature, the Rwanda Development Board and



*Virunga gorilla census results*

*Drawing: Angela Meder*

the Uganda Wildlife Authority, respectively) under the transboundary framework of the Greater Virunga Transboundary Collaboration, and supported by many partners and various donors.

The increase in mountain gorillas inhabiting the Virunga Massif is attributed to the effectiveness of conservation policies, strategies, notably regulated tourism, daily protection and veterinary interventions, intensive law enforcement, community conservation projects, and transboundary collaboration among government institutions and NGO actors. Further, these results are a testament to the tireless effort of the rangers and trackers who daily protect and monitor mountain gorillas and their habitat, including those that have been killed in the line of duty. It is also important to recognize the role of the communities that live in close proxim-

ity to these national parks who co-exist with mountain gorillas and contribute to conservation efforts.

The two populations of mountain gorillas remain small and vulnerable to a potential rapid decline due to factors such as their limited habitat, climate change, dependency on resources in the park by people, and the risk of disease transmission. The Greater Virunga Transboundary Collaboration calls upon all conservation institutions and organizations and in fact all individuals, to join efforts to conserve mountain gorillas and their habitat for future generations.

*Source: press release of the Greater Virunga Transboundary Collaboration*

## Being a Good Guest – A Guide for Tourists Visiting Gorillas

As with many types of wildlife tourism, viewing gorillas has grown in popularity since the 1980s. Currently tourists can visit more than 20 gorilla groups in the Virunga Massif and another 14 in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, Uganda. Approximately 50,000 tourists visit mountain gorillas each year. Tourists can also visit Grauer’s gorillas in Kahuzi-Biega National Park, Democratic Republic of the Congo as well as see habituated western gorillas at four sites (Bai Hokou in Central African Republic, Mondika and Odzala



*A young Virunga gorilla on the mother's back*

*Photo: Martha Robbins*



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**Tourists with Mukiza, Bwindi Impenetrable National Park**

*Photo: Martha Robbins*

in Republic of Congo, and Loango National Park, Gabon).

With little doubt, tourism has been beneficial for gorilla conservation. The permit fees provide millions of dollars in revenue for the park services and associated tourism businesses. Routine monitoring of the habituated groups provides increased protection of those gorillas and enables veterinarians to treat habituated gorillas. This greater protection of habituated gorillas is believed to be partially responsible for the large increase in the number of mountain gorillas in the Virunga Massif since the mid-1980s (Robbins et al. 2011). However, tourism can also be a threat to the gorillas if not properly managed.

Seeing gorillas in the wild is a dream of many people and is an unforgettable wildlife experience. It is very different from observing wildlife from a vehicle on a game drive, because there is nothing except some forest vegetation between the gorillas and us. This makes it an incredible event but also brings in different challenges. We are

able to get a close view into the lives of some gorillas because they have been habituated. Habituation, or when the gorillas grow accustomed to humans being in close proximity, is a form of trust between the gorillas and us. They learn to expect us to act in a certain way and in return, they will permit us to be nearby.

Therefore, in the excitement of a unique encounter with habituated gorillas, we should also not forget that like most things in life there are guidelines to be followed. The rules for gorilla tourism are in place essentially as a means to maintain the trust of the gorillas as well as protect them from too much disturbance. These rules exist not only to ensure the safety of visitors but also to attain the main goal of gorilla tourism: the conservation of the gorillas.

There is something very special about being embedded with a gorilla group. Even after studying gorillas for nearly 30 years, I still enjoy the privilege of watching the day-to-day ac-

tivities of a gorilla family. I also enjoy talking with tourists about their experiences and sharing the world of gorillas with them. I view being with the gorillas the same way as being a guest in someone's house, or in this case, forest. As a guest, I treat the hosts with respect and behave in a polite manner. If guests behave in an inappropriate way, they are likely to offend the hosts, cause them stress, or in the worst case threaten their safety.

What are the "house rules" for visiting gorillas and why do these rules exist? When conservationists developed gorilla tourism in Rwanda in the 1980s, they realized that if it were to succeed as a conservation strategy, it would need to be regulated (Weber & Vedder 2001). The rules are in place primarily to minimize disturbance to the gorillas, reduce the risk of disease transmission from humans to the gorillas, and provide a safe, high quality experience for tourists (Macfie & Williamson 2010). People visiting the gorillas will hear these rules a few times and the majority of visitors are interested in protecting the gorillas. Nonetheless, it is valuable to spend some time thinking about the justification for the rules. Furthermore, putting yourself in the "shoes" of the gorillas – our hosts – may help you remember what the rules are and provide a more meaningful experience. The guidelines have changed little over the years:

- 1) *A maximum of 8 visitors to each group of mountain gorillas (or 4 for most western gorilla sites).* This is in place to minimize the amount of disturbance to the gorillas and to ensure that all tourists can get a good view of the gorillas. We all know the difference between having a few friends visit versus hosting a party. When visiting the gorillas, it should be an intimate visit, not a large party. The gorillas are aware that there are different visitors every



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day, but the more people they need to keep track of, the more stress and disturbance it is for them.

- 2) *One tourist visit per group of gorillas per day.* Studies have shown that gorillas may feed or rest less during the hour that tourists are visiting. To maintain as much of the normal daily schedule of the gorillas as possible, only one tourist visit is permitted per day.
- 3) *A maximum of one hour per visit.* This rule is also in place to enable the gorillas to follow as much of their normal daily routine in an undisturbed fashion as possible. Can you imagine what it would be like to have 8 strangers sit in your living room for an hour every day?
- 4) *Visitors must be 15 years old or older.* Children are more likely than adults to harbor various diseases that can be transmitted to the gorillas. Also, small children may have difficulties walking in the forest or find the gorillas very frightening.
- 5) *Maintain a minimum distance of 7m between people and gorillas.* Without a doubt, this rule is the most difficult to abide and is the one most commonly broken. Often it is nearly impossible to see the gorillas when 7m away because of the thick vegetation. The gorillas also do not always follow this rule. It is not uncommon for juveniles to be very curious about humans, when they should be busy playing with their peers. However, this rule is in place to minimize the risk of disease transmission from humans to gorillas. Studies show that particles from a human sneeze can travel this distance. In addition, being too close to gorillas can cause them stress and be threatening to them. Yes, it is amazing that wild gorillas can be so tolerant of humans at a close distance, but that does not mean that it is worth the risk of giving them a respiratory disease. Gorillas may

also become stressed or agitated if humans are too close. The closer humans get to the gorillas, the higher the risks. Humans have unwritten rules about personal space, especially with strangers, so respect the personal space of the gorillas. If the guides are taking you too close to the gorillas or other tourists are asking to be taken closer, do not hesitate to ask them to respect this rule too.

- 6) *Do not go to the gorillas if you are sick with a cold, flu, or intestinal problem.* One of the biggest risks to gorillas is the transmission of human disease to the gorillas (Spelman et al. 2013). Cases of gorillas being ill with human respiratory disease have been documented. Colds and flu may put us out of work for a few days, but they can be lethal for gorillas. Would you visit friends if you were sick?
- 7) *All visitors must wear a surgical mask (only in the Congolese portion of the Virungas and Loango National Park, Gabon).* This rule is in place to minimize the risk of disease transmission. The gorillas are not disturbed by people wearing masks and it provides one additional boundary to prevent human germs getting to the gorillas. Wearing masks does not diminish the importance of the 7m distance rule.
- 8) *Do not eat, drink, or smoke when with the gorillas. Do not litter in the forest.* Any food or water particles dropped in the forest may have human germs on it. We do not want the gorillas ingesting human food.
- 9) *Do not use flash photography.* Nobody likes having bright lights in their faces, including gorillas.
- 10) *Speak quietly and do not make any sudden movements. Do not run if a gorilla charges.* The gorillas are accustomed to humans moving slowly and quietly. Therefore, do not do anything that may disturb them.

If a gorilla screams or charges at visitors, it is because the humans did something to provoke it. Maybe the visitors approached too closely or made a rapid movement that frightened the gorilla. If gorillas scream or charge, they are trying to protect themselves and the rest of their family. Occasionally I hear tourists say that "it was so cool to be charged by a gorilla", which upsets me because it means that the visitors caused that gorilla too much stress. Who would brag about being shouted at by the host of a get-together?

- 11) *Follow the advice of the guides.* The guides are experienced in telling people where and when to move when with the gorillas, with the goal of minimizing disturbance to them.

If your guide is not following the rules, say something to him and/or to the park managers at the office. We live in an age where you can voice your opinion and rate the quality of anything online (TripAdvisor etc.), which includes gorilla tourism. Sometimes guides may bend the rules in hopes of getting a larger tip from tourists, which is shortsighted on the part of both the guide and the tourists. Everyone – the park staff, tourists, tour operators, conservationists, and researchers – must work together to maintain the rules for the long-term benefit of the gorillas. It may be easy to think "oh, I'm only seeing the gorillas once, so it is okay if I sit one meter away from this infant gorilla if the guide allows me", but please remember you are one of thousands of people visiting these critically endangered animals and it only takes one person to transfer a cold. Do you want to be the person that gives the gorillas a cold virus? Do you want to be causing stress to the mother and father of that infant gorilla?

Lastly, while it is not an official rule, I suggest that when visiting gorillas you



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put your camera down for at least five minutes of the hour. Photos are a great way to document your experience, but rather than spending the full hour taking many, many photos, take some time and simply watch the gorillas. Why are you visiting the gorillas in the first place? Is it simply to get a photo or is it for the overall experience? After all, you would take photos the entire time you were visiting friends?

*Martha M. Robbins*

## References

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## Certified Gorilla Friendly™ – Safeguarding Gorilla Tourism as a Conservation Tool

The International Gorilla Conservation Programme has been operating for more than 25 years, and has provided financial and technical support for the introduction and development

of tourism as a conservation tool for mountain gorillas within their three range States. While IGCP does not manage mountain gorilla tourism – that is left strictly to the Protected Area Authorities – we strongly advocate for the continued pursuit of best practice approaches by all involved, from authority, to manager, to guide, to private operators, to tracker, to tourist.

What underlines best practice approaches is the precautionary principle—utilize as few gorilla groups as needed, take as few people as possible, and stay no more than one hour of viewing at a safe distance. It is even better to wear a mask or at a minimum at least a barrier (even a cloth bandana) to cover your nose and mouth in proximity to go-



*During a tourist visit of the Umubano group, Parc National des Volcans*

*Photo: Karin Linke*