

Gorillas – a Survey

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This survey of the status of the three gorilla races was made in 1974. Part One, below, covers the western lowland race, and Part Two, to be published in the next *Oryx*, will discuss eastern lowland and volcano gorillas.

All gorillas are decreasing in the wild, and the volcano (or mountain) gorilla *Gorilla gorilla beringei* is undoubtedly the rarest great ape in the world. Most primatologists now accept that there are three gorilla subspecies – the two lowland forms and the one volcano race. The type subspecies, the western lowland gorilla *G. g. gorilla*, was first described in 1847 but, due probably to its shyness and difficult habitat, is less well known and documented than the volcano subspecies (discovered 55 years later); the sole substantial field study was completed only in 1968. The eastern lowland gorilla was first described by Matschie in 1914, from 16 specimens collected by Rudolph Grauer in 1908 and 1910 in the mountains west of Lake Tanganyika, and named *G. g. graueri*. For years it was lumped with the volcano gorilla under the general but misleading name of mountain gorilla, but in 1967, after a scientific study of skulls in a number of major museums, it was pronounced a distinct subspecies. The western lowland gorilla occurs in seven countries covering a vast area of West Equatorial Africa, although the populations occur only in patchy, localised areas, and vary greatly in size.

Nigeria

It is doubtful if there are any resident populations left in south-eastern Nigeria, the northernmost extent of the range – although until recently they certainly occurred around Ikom and Ogoja. But as early as 1930, before many Europeans had ever seen one, they were described as being in danger of extinction, and it is now almost certain that they have gone. The Obudu population, driven from the 6000ft plateau by the establishment of Major Wally Cranfield's cattle ranch, made their way into the eastern tip of the Boshi Forest Reserve, where in 1955 and 1956 E. W. March thought that they were not uncommon, although he never actually saw any, and that they were being hunted by local people; he was offered gorilla skulls in various villages surrounding the reserve. He estimated 200 in the reserve, and noted that they sometimes crossed the border into the Takamanda Reserve in Cameroon. It is this migration that could be the last hope for Nigeria's gorillas, for since March's observations Nigeria has gone through very troubled times.

Cameroon

Gorillas are still to be found in small numbers on the north-eastern part of the Takamanda Forest Reserve in West Cameroon. In 1966/67 Dr Thomas T. Struhsaker found fresh gorilla nests on the steep slopes between the Obudu plateau and the lower forest of Takamanda, and in January–April 1968 William R. Critchley estimated that there were at least 25 gorillas in this reserve but probably not more than 45 or 50. Cameroon authorities believe that the total is about 60 in the Takamanda and the Obudu plateau combined.

At the end of 1976 Julie Webb began a survey of the reserve. Other possible gorilla areas are Korup in N'dian, Mboko in Manyu, and Bakossi and Korup in Neme, but these still have to be investigated.

These West Cameroon gorillas are separated by several hundred miles from their kin in Eastern Cameroon (former French Cameroons). In this region of over 183,000 sq miles, with an estimated human population of only 5,562,000, gorillas are confined to the south where the rain forests form a relatively small part of the country. Even here they have vanished from many parts of their former range, including the low coastal forests around Kribi, and more recently the low, humpy, forest-covered hills around Yaounde, the capital. Even as far south as Mbalmayo they have been hunted to extinction, together with chimpanzees; in the south-west, around Ebolowa-Mbam-Sangmelina, the survivors are greatly disturbed and extensively hunted, and the young captured. In this area two faunal reserves, Dja (526,000 ha, only one guard) and Campo (330,000 ha, one guard) contain gorillas but offer little in the way of sanctuary. In early 1974 Dr Alan Dixson saw five young gorillas in the hands of an animal dealer at Campo, some of which must have come from the reserve.

The best gorilla areas in Eastern Cameroon are in the remote forests of the south-east, around Yokadouma, Lomie, Abong-Mbang and Djaposten, but no population figures are available, or likely to be. To gain an even reasonably accurate estimate would require much time, manpower and money. The late F. G. Merfield, who described the frequent hunting of gorillas with poisoned darts by the primitive Mendjim Mey tribe, observed that gorillas were not evenly distributed throughout this densely forested region. In 1975 Julie Webb had to abandon her field study in the Dja Reserve because there were too few.

Gabon

Gabon, south of Cameroon, is the classic home of the western lowland gorilla. With little more than half a million people in 103,346 sq miles, population pressures present no danger to the gorillas. But Gabon is rich in timber and minerals, and already there are plans to open up forest industries in the interior after the coastal strip has been denuded, and a wide-gauge railway track is planned to run from Libreville, the capital, to Booue in the hinterland. However, Gabon forests still contain many gorillas and chimpanzees. In the northern forests gorillas are to be found around Oyem and Bitam on the Woleu-N'Tem Plateau, 6000 feet above sea level, and further north around Minvoul, near the Cameroon-Gabon border, and they appear to be particularly well-established in the north-east corner, in the triangle formed by Makokou, Belinga and Mekambo. At Belinga the American Bethlehem Steel Company is mining iron ore. In the Makokou region is the recently created Ipassa Reserve, covering 15,540 ha; and in Makokou the French have established a primate centre, Laboratoire de Primatologie et d'Ecologie Equatoriale. But although gorillas are to be found only 45–60 miles to the east and north-east, no field studies are planned as the Director, Dr A. Brosset, considers the terrain unfavourable for observation. In the Makokou region it is an offence to kill gorillas, and there have already been several prosecutions. But sanctions are difficult to enforce in remote villages and among nomadic groups like the pygmies, who live in symbiosis with the forest fauna.

In 1964 Dr P. H. J. van Bree, of the Amsterdam Zoological Museum, found

that gorillas in the Makokou area frequently emerged on to the open forest roads but would then retreat into the forest only to circle back to peer at him through the foliage. The local hunters made use of this natural curiosity, waiting for the gorillas and then attacking them. In 1965–67 a Peace Corps worker, Craig Kinzelman, based in the small village of Ekata, about three miles from the border of the north-east Gabon and the Congo (Brazzaville), travelled widely with local hunters but only saw live gorillas twice, although he often came upon traces of where they had fed or nested. For the Bengum and Mahongwe hunters gorilla was a good kill, but Mr Kinzelman could verify the deaths of only six to eight during his two years' stay. More recent field workers at the Primate Centre agree that gorillas are still hunted, and one, Pierre Jouventin, believes that in 10 years they will be extinct in Gabon. But in the coastal area around Sette-Cama, and especially in the forest behind, gorillas appear to be numerous, according to another field worker, Bob Swinehart. These experiences appear to support Dr Brosset's view that although gorillas are killed in the Makokou region, they are, thanks to low human population, in no immediate danger of extinction here. Moreover, the government actively suppresses illegal trafficking in young gorillas; in January 1974, eleven were confiscated. Confiscated animals are handed over to the primate centre on the understanding that none will be exported.

In south Gabon gorillas are no doubt still to be found in the forests around Lambaréné and further east, around Booue. In his early years at Lambaréné Dr Albert Schweitzer treated a number of victims of 'gorilla attacks', but his successor, 'Papa Lee' Ellerbrock, has informed me that little is now heard about gorillas and none of the hospital residents has ever seen one. South of the Ogooue river there are probably more, but there are still large tracts of uninhabited forest. The Okanda National Park (190,000 ha), created in 1946, has no tourist facilities, and the contiguous Ofoue Strict Natural Reserve (150,000 ha) to the south, also established in 1946, is mainly unexplored and uninhabited and covered in dense humid forest, although some mining operations are reported. The so-called Region of the Bees west of the Ofoue reserve, bounded by the Ogooue, N'Gounie and Ikoy rivers and uninhabited until recently is true primary forest. In 1954 Tom Stacey travelled for fifteen days there on a semi-circular route, using elephant tracks, from Belleville on the N'Gounie to Rie on the Ikoy, and found gorillas to be fairly plentiful. But recent reports indicate that tree-felling is going on for Okoume hardwoods.

In the M'bigou region further south gorillas are reported to be decreasing due to frequent hunting by the Bachangui, while it is fairly certain that they still exist in the upper Ogooue region of the northern Okondja district, where they are hunted by the Samayes. They also survive in the low coastal forest strip between Port Gentil and Mayumba, a network of waterways, lagoons, and swamps where crocodiles are abundant. Charley B. Greer Jr, who captured an infant gorilla in the Port Gentil area in 1951, found gorillas quite plentiful. It was in this region that Richard Garner, at the turn of the century, set himself up in a steel cage to observe gorillas and chimpanzees. Two national parks in which gorillas may survive are the Petit Loango and the Moukalaba, near Tchibanga. They may also survive in the Lope-Okanda Game Reserve (150,000 ha), created in 1946. Visiting sportsmen can get a special gorilla licence from the Minister of the Interior, costing about £250.

There is considerable interest in the western lowland gorilla, and Dr Stephen Gartlan is responsible for co-ordinating studies in several countries, including Cameroon, Gabon and Congo. In December 1974 the owner of the Coucy-les-Eppes Zoological Park, in France, founded the Association for the Survival of the Gorilla, aimed at establishing an international gorilla reserve and the creation of artificial islands for gorillas.

Equatorial Guinea

North of Libreville, and close to the Cameroon–Gabon border on the Atlantic coast, is the former Spanish colony of Rio Muni, now the independent Republic of Equatorial Guinea covering a mere 80 miles by 125. Here Dr Clyde Jones, formerly of Tulane University's Delta Regional Primate Research Centre, and Jorge Sabater Pi, formerly Curator of the Ikunde Acclimatisation Centre, near Bata, made extensive field studies on the western lowland gorilla in 1966–68. Sabater Pi had already studied various aspects of gorilla biology and ecology in Rio Muni, and in 1964 estimated numbers at about 5000 (later reduced to 2000) in four major population groups: Mbia-Campo, the Mobumom-Monte Mitra, the Mokula, and the Nkin. All were seriously threatened in several ways. Rio Muni gorillas were found to utilise all kinds of forest, frequently raiding plantations for which they were ruthlessly hunted. The Fang people's folklore is rich in stories of gorillas, which they eat regularly. In 1953 the Resena del Parque Territorial del Monte de las Raices reserve (26,000 ha) was established north of Bata, to protect gorilla and forest elephant *Loxodonta africana cyclotis*, but recent reports suggest that there are no gorillas there. The Mt Alen Partial Reserve is listed as a gorilla sanctuary, but the planned Parque de Monte del Frio in the south-east never materialised. The fate of the gorillas in Equatorial Guinea hangs very much in the balance.

Cabinda

The southernmost point of the western lowland gorilla's range is Cabinda, a tiny enclave (2794 sq miles) separated from Angola by the Zaire estuary, and with a population of 50,000. Gorillas appear to be rare and found only in the north of the colony, around Belize in the Buco Zau region, whence they migrate across the Cabinda–Congo (Brazzaville) border. In November 1972, at a meeting at Sa da Bandeiro, Angola (before independence), delegates from Angola, Mozambique and Portugal agreed that a special reserve for gorillas and chimpanzees should be set up.

Congo (Brazzaville)

In the People's Republic of the Congo the gorilla's range extends to the former Middle Congo. In this country of 130,000 square miles, with an estimated human population of only 870,000, gorillas are reported to be still plentiful.

West of Brazzaville gorillas are to be found around Sibiti, Komono, Dolisie and M'Vouti. Dr Adriaan Kortlandt, mapping chimpanzee populations in the Dolisie–Kibangou road area in 1965, found that gorillas were rare in the forests west of the main road but still abundant in the continuous forest area to the east.

North-west of Brazzaville gorillas are reported at Zanaga, and 200–300 miles to the north in the riverine forests. Here they are reported to be plentiful

around Ewo, Kelle and Makoua, where they are still hunted by the M'Betis tribe in a centuries-old feud. Most of the M'Betis hunter's waking life is spent tracking, surrounding and killing gorillas in organised communal hunts, preceded and ended by a ritual dance in which gorilla skulls are beaten with sticks to drive out the evil spirits. Fortunately, weapons are primitive and usually some gorillas escape. In 1942 the late Armand Denis lived with one of these tribes for eight months; four years later he found that the gorilla population was still well in evidence. Further north gorillas are reported at Quesso, home of the Babinga and Babenzele pygmies, at Impfondo and Dongou, and about 88 miles south-west of Quesso in the almost inaccessible Odzala National Park (110,000 ha), mainly secondary forest largely uninhabited except perhaps by pygmies.

Central African Republic

In the Central African Republic (234,000 sq miles, population 2,256,000) gorillas have long been known to exist around Nola, Aboghi and Gounguru in the south, and even as far north-west as Bambio, where some very large males have been taken. But the situation today is grim. Some may survive around Nola, but there is no protection at all and none of the existing reserves contains gorillas. Dr Kortlandt believes that remnant populations are confined to west of the Sangha river and that some reports refer to chimpanzees. One theory is that the gorilla population was once continuous from West to Central Africa, when the climate was wetter and the rain forest more extensive. In 1908 Lemarinel discovered three skulls, all of western lowland gorillas, at Bondo, in the Uele valley, roughly midway between the existing western and eastern populations.

Conservation for the Working Man

The views of Jack Munday, the Australian trade union leader and moving force behind the conservation-motivated strikes—'green bans'—are quoted in *Town and Country Planning*:

'What the hell use is a thirty-hour week to you if you have to spend the other 138, along with your wife and kids, in a dirty slum in an inner-city area with lousy schools and no proper hospitals, while ten million square feet of office space stands around useless in Sydney alone? Work and home conditions should not be so divided—who wants to live in an environment devoid of a single green tree? The myth that the environment movement is the preserve of the do-gooding middle class must be exploded. It is, in fact, the workers who are most affected by the deterioration of the environment and it is, therefore, up to the trade union movement to give a higher priority to fighting to improve it.'

Wildlife Haven in Ethiopia

'Ethiopia's richest and finest remaining wildlife country in both variety and number of species' is J. G. Stephenson's report on the proposed Mago National Park area covering the eastern rift valley depression, which he visited with a biologist from the Wildlife Conservation Organisation (WLCO). The area being inaccessible by road, they had to land by plane in a clearing in the centre and make sorties. The wildlife includes up to 3000 buffalo, over 500 elephants, 2–3000 lelwel hartebeest, and greater and lesser kudu; giraffes and crocodiles were 'common'. 'The buffalo encountered on foot were quite unafraid of humans; one herd of 300 came running up to within 60 yards to satisfy their curiosity'. Tsetse fly has protected the area from development.