

LESSON 6

I. Gorillas

The past few lessons, we've talked about primates and places where you can find primates in Uganda. Today, we're focusing on the animal Uganda is most known for—Mountain Gorillas! As we mentioned in the past, Bwindi Impenetrable National Park is home to 340 Mountain Gorillas, which is more than half of the world's population, meaning that there are less than 720 Mountain Gorillas left in the world.

The reasons Mountain Gorillas are so endangered are similar to the threats many other species we have discussed. Mountain Gorillas are threatened by poaching, loss of habitat, and disease.

- **Poaching:** Mountain Gorillas are not usually hunted for bushmeat, but they are frequently maimed or killed by traps and snares intended for other animals. They have been killed for their heads, hands, and feet, which are sold to collectors. Infants are sold to zoos (where they will surely die), researchers, and people who want them as pets. The abduction of infants generally involves the loss of at least one adult, as members of a group will fight to the death to protect their young.
- **Habitat loss:** The forests where Mountain Gorillas live are surrounded by rapidly increasing human settlement. The humans' need for land, food, and timber encroaches on the gorillas' habitat. The resulting deforestation confines the gorillas to isolated forest islands. Some groups may raid crops for food, creating further *animosity* and *retaliation*. As land continues to become a scarce resource, human-wildlife conflicts are a major concern.
- **Disease:** We mentioned last time that there are strict rules for human-gorilla interactions at Bwindi because of the potential for humans to spread diseases to the gorillas. Since we are so similar to gorillas, they are vulnerable to many of the same diseases. However, gorillas have not developed the *immunities* to resist human diseases, and infections could severely impact the population. Habituated groups that are visited by tourists have the greatest risk.
- **War and civil unrest:** Civil wars and weak governments in central Africa, and in particular in the Congo, put conservation efforts at risk from local militias and government corruption.

The Mountain Gorilla is highly social, and lives in relatively stable groups held together by long-term bonds between adult males and females. Relationships among females are relatively weak. These groups are non-territorial; the silverback generally defends his group rather than his territory. A silverback is an adult male gorilla, typically more than 12 years of age and named for the distinctive patch of silver hair on his back. Silverbacks are the strong, dominant troop leaders. Each typically leads a troop (group size ranges from 5 to 30) and is in the center of the troop's attention, making all the decisions, mediating conflicts, determining the movements of the group, leading the others to feeding sites and taking responsibility for the safety and well-being of the troop.

It is believed that Mountain Gorilla families have only one silverback in the group. The truth is that only one silverback holds leadership rights, but there are usually several silverbacks in the group. Having more than one silverback in a group is an advantage because it means that there is

more security provided in case of an attack by enemies, such as solitary males looking for females to start their own groups or other gorilla families that stray into a gorilla's home range.

When the dominant silverback dies or is killed by disease, accident, or poachers, the family group may be severely disrupted. Unless he leaves behind a male descendant capable of taking over his position, the group will either split up or be taken over in its entirety by an unrelated male. When a new silverback takes control of a family group, he may kill all of the infants of the dead silverback. This practice of *infanticide* is an effective reproductive strategy, in that the newly acquired females are then able to conceive the new male's offspring. Infanticide has not been observed in stable groups.

It is very hard to tell a pregnant female by looking at her as all mountain gorillas are pot-bellied. Even the young ones. It is only when she's about to bring forth the child that one can tell a female's pregnancy from her lethargic movements. If a mother dies or leaves the group, the silverback is usually the one who looks after his abandoned offspring, even allowing them to sleep in his nest.

Infant gorillas spend most of their days in their mother's arms but once they graduate to being juveniles they hardly ever seek her company. The various gorilla groups tend to band together, with a more responsible sub-adult gorilla or interested blackback (junior gorilla) keeping a watchful eye on the juveniles to ensure that they don't stray too far from the family during play and to referee the little ones' wrestling matches when required.

Mountain Gorillas have some funny characteristics that show how similar they are to us. Despite their size and power, research has shown that Mountain Gorillas appear to be naturally cautious around certain reptiles. Infants, whose natural behavior is to chase anything that moves, will go out of their way to avoid chameleons and caterpillars. They are also afraid of water and will only cross streams over fallen logs. They each have an individual personality. Like us, gorillas become smaller in old age. Also like us, mountain gorillas have unique fingerprints; but as it is highly unlikely to saunter up to a gorilla, even a habituated one, and kindly ask him to oblige with his thumb print for identification purposes, nose prints are used to identify mountain gorillas.

Handout: Ideas for becoming "Wildlife Ambassadors."

II. Vocabulary:

- Preservation: *The act of maintaining something in its original or existing condition*
- Silverback: *A mature male mountain gorilla.*
- Destination: *The place to which someone or something is going or being sent.*
- Descendent: *A blood relative*
- Offspring: *A child or children; An animal's young.*
- Ancestor: *A person from whom a person is descended; An early type of animal or plant from which others have evolved.*
- Survival: *Continuing to live or exist, usually in spite of an accident or difficult circumstances.*
- Individual: *Single; separate.*
- Cautious: *Attentive to potential problems or dangers.*

- Population: *A particular section, group, or type of people or animals living in an area or country.*
- Fingerprint: *A mark made on a surface by a person's fingertip. Many primates have fingerprints, including gorillas. Chimpanzees do not have fingerprints.*
- Non-territorial: *An animal that does not defend an area as its own.*

III. Multiple Choice

1. TRUE or FALSE: Each gorilla troop has only one silverback.
2. Some of the threats to mountain gorillas are:
 - a. Poaching
 - b. Habitat loss
 - c. Civil unrest
 - d. All of the above
3. Like humans, gorillas have unique:
 - a. Eye color
 - b. Fingerprints
 - c. Favorite foods
 - d. Hair styles
4. Mountain gorillas have been found to have a fear of what?
 - a. Spiders
 - b. Birds
 - c. Reptiles
 - d. Trees
5. A silverback's responsibilities include:
 - a. Making all the decisions
 - b. Mediating conflicts
 - c. Safety and well-being of the troop
 - d. All of the above
6. TRUE or FALSE: Humans can easily pass disease to mountain gorillas.
7. Mountain gorillas are:
 - a. Small
 - b. Highly social
 - c. Found in the United States
 - d. Solitary animals
8. TRUE or FALSE: When a new silverback comes into power, he will always kill all infants of the old silverback.
9. Humans need for what encroaches on gorillas' habitat
 - a. Land
 - b. Timber
 - c. Food
 - d. All of the above
10. TRUE or FALSE: Gorillas are severely endangered and need our help.

IV. Activity

Go over two other stories of habituated groups at Bwindi. Using the short write-ups of the Mubare and Nshongi families, you can set the scene for the next activity to get students involved in Friend-a-Gorilla.

Nshongi Family

This family is unique in that it has over 34 individuals in the group with the silverbacks and blackbacks living in relative harmony. Most gorilla families are usually comprised of about twenty individuals, with the oldest male silverback leading the group. In the case of this silverback dying, the group will usually split up between the eldest silverback (or the most dominant silverback) as was the case in the Habinyanja family.

There are some cases where an older silverback can be ‘overthrown’ by a younger, stronger silverback as happened in the Rushegura and Kyaguriro families.

It is therefore a distinctive feature of this family to have three silverbacks in the group and seven blackbacks. Even more astonishing is the fact that the dominant silverback – Nshongi is not the oldest silverback in the group. Several ‘conspiracy’ theories surround his leadership role. One being that he has inherited his father, Mishaya’s, dominant position before the patriarch dies.

Peace and harmony currently prevail, but for how long? Nshongi’s unrivalled dominance could be under threat from Busasi, the aggressive young blackback who may soon contend for dominance. This is even more likely with the unsettling presence of the adult female Bwiruka, who is a favourite of Nshongi’s, and has also been known to have secret trysts with Bweza.

Mubare family

This family was the first of the Uganda mountain gorillas to be habituated in 1998. It was first sighted by trackers around the Mubare hills that are to be found deep in Bwindi Impenetrable forest.

The dominant silverback in the group has always been Ruhondeza and back then he ruled a family with over 18 gorillas.

Over the years, his family has shrunk in number (as Ruhondeza has shrunk in size). This is because the now aging monarch has not groomed a successor. He’s the jealous type it seems. The UWA trackers have long suspected that he kills off any upcoming blackbacks who may be tempted to usurp his position.

2009 has been a particularly hard year for this family with a loss of three of its members. Early in the year one of the adult females died of a fracture to the skull. She left behind a wee infant of six months, who the group tried to raise. The baby was found dead on Ruhondeza’s bed by

trackers one morning. As the little mite had not been weaned and couldn't eat the tender shoots that the other family members tried to feed it, its fate was inevitable.

In mid-July one of the older females also lost her baby.

This gorilla family has had some bad luck in 2009. Let's hope this year is better!

V. Activity

Discuss what students can do to get involved in Friend-a-Gorilla:

Now that you've learned about Uganda and the Mountain Gorillas, what are you going to do to save them? If no one knows about the gorillas, then no one will work to protect them from poachers. Your class has been saving up coins lately, right? That money is going to help pay the salaries of the Gorilla Trekkers in Uganda. The Gorilla Trekkers work very hard everyday, checking up on the gorillas and chasing the poachers away.

What else can your class do to help the gorillas? One way to help them is to tell other people, your family, friends and classmates, everything you've learned about gorillas. Take some time, as a class, to think up a way to explain the problems that face the Mountain Gorillas.

Here are some ideas: you can put on a play, write a "Letter to the Editor" in your local newspaper, give a presentation to another class, or come up with your own project!

Game: Key Club members lead students in a brainstorming session.