

# My Friend the Gorilla

By Penny Randell

Some years ago, while living in Kampala, Uganda East Africa, I embarked upon one of the most extraordinary and life-changing journeys of my whole life. I registered for a gorilla trek in the mountains of Western Uganda that border the Democratic Republic of Congo. Beginning in Mgahinga National Forest we hoped to locate the gorillas before they made their way to the Congo. Not having visas, we were not allowed to enter into that country. This forest is contiguous with Virunga National Park, and takes up 8% of Virunga Conservation Area, which consists of 168 square miles and home to these precious mountain gorillas.

Indeed, they are precious. Current figures tally just over 1000 individuals surviving today, and about half of that number are in Virunga National Park. The other half can be found in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park there in Uganda. However, at the time of my visit, numbers were closer to 700. Thankfully, conservation efforts were implemented even then and have increased populations over the years. The once bleak forecast for these gorillas has improved despite ongoing civil conflict in the area. Too, poaching for gorilla parts and encroaching human population has taken their toll, shoving the animals higher into the mountains and closer to danger, which includes freezing temperatures.

After a bit of reading about these critters and their proximity to my home in Kampala, Uganda's capital city, I knew I would make every attempt possible to see them in person. Travel to that western side of Uganda was straight-ahead, and I booked a room for the night in Kisoro. My son was at my side, but too young to trek gorillas. Fortunately, I was able to hire a guide and the two of them planned to explore the nearby tunnels and caves while I was off on my quest.

I was poised and ready at the parking lot by 8:00 the next morning. Peyton, my son had been well on his way toward adventure just before that. The day had promise etched into its somewhat cloudy skies and brisk temperature. I had a jacket in tow and a 35mm camera. Moments had passed before Charles, the primary guide appeared and greeted me. Immediately after that I was introduced to the two secondary guides, along with two Ugandan soldiers. That entire mountain area was rife with Congolese insurgents. Because of this, we were to be protected by the guards who were carrying appropriate weapons.

At 8:30 sharp three others joined our team. Those three individuals had been on safari as well and were in top physical condition. They had just climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro in Kenya and were itching to take on these mountains. This is a significant detail, for after we passed 10,000 feet of elevation I was gasping for air. Charles and the three teased me to a fault for being slow. But the forest we were hiking in wasn't called impenetrable for nothing. In some parts it was necessary to slither through the intense bush flat on our tummies. Remarkably, I found a second wind and sped ahead of the group. Ignoring Charles's yelling for me, I kept crawling, for I could actually smell the critters and knew I was upon them.

Just before we hit the 13,000-foot elevation marker I could hear the gorilla troop and their low, guttural moans. Finally, I stopped and sat quietly. The others trekkers caught up and sat next to me

as the gorillas began sitting about in just the one area. We gave them plenty of leeway as they moved on, but we remained close behind. Then the stage was set. We all came upon a ravine that kept the animals a distance away from us and it was necessary to cross to the other side. In that I was first on the scene, Charles commanded me to venture onto the rocks below, holding the tree that was located just above my head for balance. Those rocks under my feet were shifting and it was necessary to maintain a grip for safety.

As I inched carefully forward, a full-grown female gorilla came out onto the overhead log and sat next to my left hand. Charles, not yet out on the rocks, spoke up and reminded me not to look into her eyes. I heard him, but chose to ignore him once again. I simply focused on the black rings that encircled her irises. At that moment she reached out and took my hand, drawing it up to her mouth. She licked it and began to snort under her breath. By the time my hand was soaking wet, my face was full of eye water that wouldn't cease. The tears of exultation were flowing and in no way did I make effort to stop. I was actually holding hands with a gorilla and mentally I had floated outside the universe!

During this time the rest of the gorilla troop had taken respite on the other side of the ravine and were eating the surrounding leaves. There were four females and one male. All males have a mantle of shortened silver hair across their back, hence their "silverback" moniker. The rest of their fur is thick and long, hanging loosely from their arms. While I kept an eye out for the male, he continued to eat and never made a move toward me. I paid particular attention to "my friend's" nose, knowing this was the sole way to identify individuals. In keeping with the literature, the male was huge -- possibly over 500 pounds -- and he was twice as large as the females. Because of their size, mountain gorillas are strictly terrestrial, often walking on all four limbs at a time.

The moments spent holding hands with my friend, the gorilla were beyond magical. Soon after she let go, she returned to the troop and began to eat with the others. Charles, the three trekkers, guards, and extra guides were awestruck and unable to speak. Sadly, no one thought to get a photo of the event and I was left to hold it in my memory alone. Still, I could not have been happier. Never had I experienced such amazement and I knew it was life-changing. Except for a precocious camel at the Anchorage Zoo, I have never communicated so effectively with an untamed animal. It's pretty easy to claim that I was certainly chosen, and that's a fact that will remain forever in my heart.