



Silverback gorilla named Sabinyo, now 38 years old

Gentle Giants of Rwanda

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Rwanda is a beautiful country of mountains and mists, and the movie depicting the life of Dian Fossey was aptly titled *Gorillas in the Mist*.

Mountain gorillas are only found in Central Africa, within the mountain rainforests of the Virunga Volcanoes. Most roam the slopes of three of the dormant volcanoes: Karisimbi, Mikeno, and Visoke. The area is divided by three countries and includes portions of three national parks. The Rwandan Volcanoes National Park lies on the Rwandan side of the mountain range that straddles the borders of Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda. Adjacent parks in Congo and Uganda are both known as Virunga National Parks. In addition, Uganda also has the

Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. These parks are home to the world's entire mountain gorilla population of approximately 700 gorillas. This ecoregion is one of Africa's most diverse, and the mountain gorilla is one of its many endemic plant and animal species.

Mountain gorillas are diurnal, and they are most active between 6:00 AM and 6:00 PM. Nearly half of these hours are spent eating, as large quantities of food are needed to sustain their massive bulk. The majority of their diet is composed of the leaves, stems, and pith of 62 plant species, mainly Galium vines, thistles, celery and nettles. Most of their remaining hours are spent resting. During an average day, the apes



Sabinyo feeding on vines. He decides where and when the group will feed

forage in the early morning; rest during the late morning; and then forage again in the afternoon; before resting at night.

They usually sleep on the ground, and each gorilla builds a nest from surrounding vegetation to sleep in, constructing a new nest every evening. Each group, which can vary from 2 to 40, is led by a protective male Silverback whose average weight is about 350 lbs., and who decides when and where the group will forage, rest and sleep. Their long, thick black hair insulates them from the cold temperatures of their high elevation habitat and makes them the hairiest of all gorillas.

The first day of visiting the gorillas in the Volcanoes National Park was an easy 50-minute trek. Unfortunately, the gorillas were in deep forest and the shooting was almost impossible with black subjects in deep shadow, and resulted in using ISOs from 800 to 3200! Two cameras were carried: a Canon 20D and a Canon 5D, with 100-400mm IS lens on the 20D, and a 28-300 IS lens on the other. No flash or tripods are allowed, which adds to the difficulty of shooting. The 100-400mm was found to be redundant, and was left in the room on the second day, which lightened the load considerably. A monopod was used with the 5D.

Rangers accompany each group (ranging from

our 7 to a maximum of 12) and they insure that the group does not approach closer than 20 feet to the Gorillas. Porters are available to carry backpacks,

Sabinyo's favorite female. Females usually weigh about 200 lbs.—half the weight of males gorillas





Sabinyo will choose the sleeping area for the group on the forest floor, where a new bed is made each night

but one must leave everything except cameras when you cross the actual entrance to the park.

The second day appeared to be the same routine, but to view a different gorilla group named Sabinyo. The group trekked easily for about an hour to where the gorillas were supposed to be, but they weren't. They had moved! The group kept trekking and the gorillas kept moving up the mountain.

Trekking was becoming increasingly more difficult since the greenery was waist high and the bottom ground was wet and muddy. Finally a point was reached where there were no more pathways. Despite the mild protests of others in the group who had had to leave walking sticks behind with backpacks, a monopod was permitted, as the explanation, "it was part of my camera" saved the day! As a result, the monopod became a "walking stick," which was much needed at this point!

To the right was a straight drop over the side of the mountain, and to the left was a wall of green straight up. Asking the guide (thankfully there were 2 guides and several porters) if the gorillas would ever be seen and what now, he replied, "Oh, yes, we will find them!" Asking how was that possible from our seeming dead end, he replied, "We go up there!"

When I said, "That is impossible!!" He said, "No, we go!" He smiled, grabbed my camera, grabbed my hand and up we went!

After 2½ hours of tough trekking, the team finally emerged out in the open after having gone straight up! Being so excited at finally seeing the Gorillas, I stepped forward to get a better shot and the deceptively high grass had no bottom! About to tumble down on top of two Gorillas, the guide grabbed my belt and pulled me back.



Eleanore Avery, APSA



Mother and child from a different group



Female from Sabinyo's group. Youngsters brushed by us to reach her

The reward was great: the largest Silverback in all of the Virunga Mountains—weighing over 450 lbs.—was feeding less than 20 feet away and out in the open sunshine! Falling to my knees with my camera on a shortened monopod, ISO was set to 400 and I kept shooting, and shooting. It is never known when the gorillas are going to disappear into the bush, and when feeding, they never fail to have some greenery hiding their faces or they turn their back. Alas, one is restricted to just 1 hour with the gorillas, and despite much pleading after such a long trek, the rangers said “No more,” with a big smile. Of course they were right, and one was glad to see that they really enforced this rule, which protects the gorillas from stress from human presence.

Yes, it is absolutely true when they say it is “harder to go DOWN the mountain than it is to go UP”! It took another tortuous 2½ hours to go down. The porters took us by our arms and handed us through impossible muddy, slippery, very steep areas. Without help, the group could never have made it.

This trip was physically difficult and demanding, but the reward was worth it. When these huge, gentle animals look right at you, it is an experience difficult to describe, but it goes straight to your heart. They are fantastic, grand, awe-inspiring, magnificent animals that need our protection. Look at them, and you are able to realize why Dian Fossey gave her life for them. I shall challenge my grandchildren to trek where grandmother has! ■

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PSA Journal • August 2009



Sabinyo disappeared into the forest and emerged in this stance meant to show us his strength and that he is in charge



This youngster is about 3 years old. Baby gorillas weigh approximately 5 lbs at birth and nurse for 2 years—staying in the mother's nest until they turn 3