

A Letter from Rwanda

by Alex Shoumatoff

Part One : A Reunion with the Gorillas

Thirty years ago, my two oldest boys, then 8 and 9, and I sat with a family of mountain gorillas in a bamboo forest on the slopes of Mount Visoke in Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park, then known by its French name, le Parque National des Volcans. The gorillas were eating bamboo shoots and stinging nettle and were completely unphased by our presence. One of them, a young female, sidled up to me and put a corner of my poncho in her mouth. The huge silverback who was the patriarch of the family paced around protectively and looked off into the distance pensively for a while, only a few feet from us, then having eaten his fill for the day, proceeded to sack out. It almost seemed as if we could have started a conversation with our close cousins on the primate family tree— 95.8 percent of our genes are the same—if we had only known what the language was. The experience, realizing that humans are not so exceptional, but that everything we are is on an evolutionary continuum, our intelligence, emotions, morality, music, all come from the animals, and that these massive apes were such generally gentle creatures, was for me life-changing.

Now I have returned with my fourth son Zachary, 20, and his girlfriend Jen to introduce them to the gorillas. It is their first time in Africa, and Zachary is connecting with his Rwandan roots and his mom's ancestral homeland for the first time. We head out for the park at 6:45 from our hotel in Ruhengeri, the La Palme Hotel, where we were able to get

nice reasonably priced rooms arriving after dark for our party of eight. The food at its Spos Resto-Bar is great. But there are fancier lodges, some of them within the park borders, among Volcanoes Virunga Lodge, Sabyingo Lodge, and Volcanoes Safaris Lodge. Or you can contact Thousand Hills Expeditions in Kigali who will arrange everything, transport, permits, and lodging.

The looming silhouettes of the five volcanoes of the Virunga chain which Rwanda shares with Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo are still shrouded in morning mist. Karisimbi, the highest, at 14,787 feet; Visoke, Sabyinyo, Gahinga, Muhavura. It is a magical landscape, like nowhere in the else in the world. I had forgotten how hauntingly, especially beautiful this part of Rwanda is. Here's a picture off the Internet, my snaps not doing them justice :



Over on the Congo side we can see the sheer gray rock sides of Mikeno but not the two other volcanoes, which are still active : Nyiragongo and Nyamulagira. I recall walking up the slopes of Nyiragongo in 1983, a few months after it erupted. The fresh coating of lava was still warm and soft,

and in a cavity in it were the remains of an elephant that had been overtaken by the molten magma spewing down the mountain, and all around the cavity other elephants, its family members, had defecated boles of their dung, which I didn't realize till years later was a ritual demonstration of grief, that elephants grieve for their dead. It was like leaving flowers at a casket.

The streets of Ruhengeri are lined with adobe stores painted in pastel colours and as we reach the edge of town full of people headed out to their shambas, or the shambas of people they are working for, the men with picks and hoes and shovels on their shoulders, and women in colourful wraps with baskets of lunch fixings on their heads.

The brown lava soil is prodigiously fertile. Behind the outlying shambas, now planted mainly with potatoes, the forested foothills and ribs and ridges of Mount Visoke begin to rise. This is where the gorillas are. When I saw them in 1986, it was in April, and they were eating new shoots in the bamboo forest (7200 to 9200 feet), below the *Hagenia-Hypericum* forest (9200 to 1100 feet), where they eat *Galium* vines year round and spend most of the time. There are three belts of vegetation in the Virungas, and seven zones within them. The first zone, I remember, was a rain forest, a thick jungle with tree ferns. The path was steep and slippery and full earthworms a foot or more long and thick as a nickel, the largest worms I had ever seen or have seen since. Not all of the zones are there any more on some of

the volcano's slopes, like Karisimbi, which has only three, do to logging and agriculture eating up its slopes. Sabinyo has all the zones and the greatest biodiversity, according to a recent survey by the Wildlife Conservation Society. The belts are the alpine, subalpine, and montane. The alpine is characterized by giant Senecios and Lobelias, the subalpine by heaths, then you get the *Hagenia-Hypericum* forest, then mixed forest, then bamboo (*Arundaria alpinus*), then disturbed woodland, and finally open grassland and swamp. George Schaller, who did the pioneering field study of the mountain gorillas, first identified the belts in 1963. He had ten zones, but the WCS has only seven.

There are now about 880 mountain gorillas, the most ever since their numbers began to be counted. 480 or so are here and on the Congo and Uganda side of the volcanoes, and the other 400, considered by some to be a separate subspecies (but the scientific work hasn't been done), are in Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable Forest. The 2003 census had estimated the Virunga gorilla population to be 380 individuals; which represented a 17% increase in the total population since 1989 when there were 320 individuals. The population has almost doubled since its nadir in 1981, when a census estimated that only 254 gorillas remained. The 2006 census at Bwindi indicated a population of 340 gorillas, representing a 6% increase in total population size since 2002 and a 12% increase from 320 individuals in 1997.

Gorillas separated from their common ancestor with chimpanzees and human about nine million years ago, and two million years ago they split into what are regarded, since

the latest, 2003 revision, as two species, the western lowland gorilla, *Gorilla gorilla*, and the eastern lowland gorillas, *Gorilla beringei*. About 400,000 years ago a population of *G. beringei* became isolated on the Virunga volcanos and developed into a separate subspecies, *Gorilla beringei berengei*. Recent DNA analysis of this population shows that there has been a lot of inbreeding for a very long time, which has actually helped it by removing many harmful genetic variations.

We arrive at park headquarters where the foreign tourists who have signed up for today's gorillas tour are arriving from their lodges in extended green Land Rovers and Cruisers. Up to 80 tourists a day are taken to the eight groups of habituated gorillas. It is high season and you have to reserve a couple of weeks ahead of time. Each tourist pays \$750 to spend an hour with one of the families. So that's \$60,000 a day, and \$22,000,000 a year. Tourism, mainly gorilla tourism, is Rwanda's biggest source of foreign exchange. Thirty years ago, it was the fourth biggest.

I sit in the gazebo where the tourists and their guides are gathering, with a young Swedish couple who have been to the gorillas in Bwindi Impenetrable Forest—the permit in Uganda is \$600—and now are going to see the golden monkeys, which is only \$100. The golden monkey, *Cercopithecus kandti*, is an endangered species endemic to the Virunga volcanoes. It used to be thought to be a subspecies of the blue monkey. Zachary, who has had since he was a boy a special connection with reptiles and amphibians and the ability to find them anywhere in the



world within minutes, find a beautiful little green tree frog on a branch right next to the gazebo.

Everything I'm hearing though is that the best place to see the gorillas is in Volcanoes Park. Most of the gorillas are on the Rwanda side, because they know they are safe here. Sometimes 20 families, sometimes eighteen, when the other two are in Congo. There is only one of the volcanoes families in Uganda, and some the ones in Bwindi are coming into town and scavenging for garbage in people's back yards, and there have been incidents where tourists have been set upon by rebels, the worst in 1999, when eight were killed, although their big leader was recently killed, and Bwindi is said to be safe now. But this is the place to encounter mountain gorillas in their natural habitat, with the most

experienced and expert guides and trackers. It's really well done, and there are no security issues in Rwanda, unlike in Uganda and the other countries that surround it, like Congo and Burundi.

I have requested to visit the family group that can be reached most easily and quickly. A few weeks ago, some of our relatives visited a group that took two and a half hours to get to, and my sister-in-law barely made it because of the altitude, and by the time they got to the gorillas, she was in no shape to appreciate them. So we are going to see Agashya's group, which has 22 members and can be reached in 45 minutes. The biggest family has 33 members. Our guides are Edward Mbahisi (which means optimistic, he tells us) and Mary (didn't get her last name), a young woman with dreadlocks and a big smile, who has been taking people to meet Agashya and his family daily for several years, and knows every one of them intimately and feels like she's the luckiest person in the world to have the job she does. "Every day is different," she tells me. "I learn something new." She has photographs of each of them. Gorillas are told apart by their noses, the wrinkle patterns around their huge nostrils. They don't have a protruding proboscis, a bridge like us. Their noses are flat, but "each nose is distinctive," Mary explains.

An Indian family of four completes our group. The dad is the c.e.o. of the biggest bank in Singapore and an avid birder, and his wife, and their two children, one from Chicago and the other from Boston, both in the financial world, too. They are a family with a great love of the natural world. They have come from four days on the Serengeti, and this is their second day of visiting the gorillas. Yesterday they went out to a different group which the wife says was quite a hike. They

are a lovely, loving family— perfect people to visit gorillas with. How great that they would choose to have an Africa wildlife safari for their family reunion. And that they would choose to come here, out of all the fabulous places in Africa, shows that they have done their homework and know that this is special, worldclass, the most accessible interspecies experience anywhere.

After some traditional Rwandan dancing to the beating of big tall drums with sticks by a local troupe to welcome us to the park, including the famous Intore dance where the men wear blonde wigs of grass which they shake while prancing around and brandishing spears, we all take off in our



separate vehicles for the group we are going to visit.

After maybe twenty minutes our Rover parks in a potato field on the edge of the park and we walk for ten minutes to the eight-foot-high wall of piled brown lava rock that forms its border. The wall is 75 miles long and took three years to build, starting in 2002. It is patrolled by rangers with AK 47s. One passes as we give our bags to some local men who will be our porters and who provide us with beautifully carved walking sticks that have a mountain gorilla on top, above the grip for your hand. Poaching in the park, mainly of duikers, the tasty little forest antelope, is down 90%, because the penalties for being caught are very severe. The gorillas are closely guarded because they are so precious, in fact Rwanda's greatest resource at the moment.

As we head for the wall Jen asks Mary how long a mother gorilla carries her baby before she gives birth to it, and Mary says, "Same as us, nine months. The first six months the mother is always with the baby. 30% die. A female has 4-6 babies over her lifetime. Only three females in Volcanoes Park have had twins." I am scribbling furiously in my notebook, trying to keep up with her. Once the babies are juveniles, they can do everything on their own. At six to eight they become subadults. The males are all black and known as blackbacks till the age of eleven or twelve, then they become silverbacks, with a sheen of white silver extending from their massive shoulders to compact rump, and they grow long canines. The new silverbacks leave their families and travel in all-male groups. "We had a case where a silverback male left his group and got four females pregnant, each one from a different group, and they all gave birth at the same time." They're also waiting for the dominant silverbacks to become old and weak so they have access to their fertile females. The dominant silverback's job is to

determine the movements of the group, to mediate conflicts, and protect it from external threats. The average duration of his dominance is 4.7 years. He lives to be about 35.

Agashya is about 30. Agashya has a harem of four females and is the father of all the children. If the dominant silverback dies, the subordinate silverback, if there is one, or the interloping silverback kills all his children, and he becomes the father of all the children from then on, until he dies or is killed. When a female reaches maturity she also leaves her family to avoid inbreeding and joins another one.

61% of the groups have only one adult male, the others have a subordinate silverback.

There used to be a subordinate silverback in this group. His name was One Eye. But Agashya killed him last year. According to the Wikipedia entry on mountain gorilla, put up by someone who sounds like he knows what he is talking about, "Although strong and powerful, gorillas are generally gentle and shy. Severe aggression is rare in stable groups, but when two mountain gorilla groups meet, the two silverbacks can sometimes engage in a fight to the death, using their canines to cause deep, gaping injuries. The entire sequence has nine steps: (1) progressively quickening hooting, (2) symbolic feeding, (3) rising bipedally, (4) throwing vegetation, (5) chest-beating with cupped hands, (6) one leg kick, (7) sideways running, two-legged to four-legged, (8) slapping and tearing vegetation, and (9) thumping the ground with palms to end display. Jill Donisthorpe [a mountain gorilla-ophile who has visited them many times] stated that a male charged at her twice. In both cases the gorilla turned away, when she stood her ground."

Mary assures us, "Nothing is going to happen, Agashya's family is completely habituated and sees humans every day,

but if one comes at you, don't drop to your knees or put your head down, just stay still and standing and not threatening. Grunts are friendly but open mouth cough is not. If you have a cold, sneeze into your arm. One of the other groups has a bad cough which they got from one of the tourists.” She tells us to keep a distance of seven meters from the gorillas at all times.

We all climb over the wall and enter the park. Edmund is in touch with the trackers by walkie-talkie. They have been here for several hours and have located Agashya and his family. They are not far away. In fact only ten minutes through a forest of *Neuptonia* trees. The disturbed montane zone below the bamboo forest. The lowest zone that is still here. The lower slopes of Visoke were already being deforested thirty years ago and planted with pyrethrum, a plant in the composite family that was then showing commercial promise as a biodegradable insecticide, which it didn't end up living up to, so the rain forest with tree ferns zone was wiped out for nothing. It isn't here any more. And the gorillas at the moment are in the *Neuptonia* zone, at the very bottom of the mountain. Some, Edmund, says, are sneaking over the wall at night at raiding people's crops.

The understory is full of stinging nettle, one of the 200 species of plants the gorillas eat, and which we of course avoid. Our guides have provided us with gloves and leggings and plastic jackets to those who don't have them. Edmund picks up one of the gigantic worms, known as *umuhovu* in Rwandese.



We find the huge fresh footprints of a forest elephant, and in a marsh of cespitose (clump-forming) sedges, a flame lily,



We climb up from the forest to a little spine of the volcano, from which there is a view of nothing but impenetrable jungle. Right below us a female gorilla is pulling down a *Sinecia* bush, in the lobelia family, related to the giant lobelias in the subalpine zone above the *Wagenia/ Hypericum* forest and below the volcano, whose cone is full of water. Another female comes down from above us and walks past us only feet away. "This is the dominant female," Edmund whispers, and seeing that some of us are scared, he adds. "Don't worry. They're so friendly." He looks at his watch and says, "It's 9:27. We will finish at 10:27."

We follow the dominant female and other members of the family who are materializing all around us down to a little thicket below the ridge where a huge silverback is sitting on his haunches with his back straight, stone still and inscrutable, looking like he is deep in meditation, like a statue of the Buddha, the portrait of El Supremo. He is facing us at a slight angle and doesn't seem to be acknowledging our existence, but he is taking each of us in,



drinking in our smell, sussing out our vibe.

“You are meeting the silverback,” Edmund tells us. It’s Agashya. He weighs more than 220 kilos and eats 30 kilos of vegetation a day. The silverbacks are twice as heavy as the females and a lot heavier than their lowland adult male counterparts. Lowland gorillas are 4 to 6 feet (1.2 to 1.8 meters) tall and weigh 150 to 400 lbs. (68 to 181 kilograms). Mountain gorillas are about the same height, but weigh 300 to 485 lbs. (135 to 220 kg). They are the largest primates on the planet.

Agashya doesn’t have to do anything but sit there and look imposing, and the others stream out of the impenetrable brambles of bracken and nettle and wild celery with a few little groves of trees, and join him, some of them amble right past us, within a few feet, there is no direct physical contact. It’s as if we don’t exist. I stay back behind the six others and let them have the experience. Jen is absolutely captivated and enchanted and unconsciously making all kinds of loving expressions, like a mother feeding her baby and sympathetically smacking her lips, as she snaps away video and stills. She is a real animal person. The gorillas are picking up on her. As she whispers a few minutes later, “we are down.” I wonder what they make of this young white blonde woman who likes them so much, if they see that she is different from Edmund and Mary, what Africans in this part of Africa call a *mzungu*, a white person in Swahili, or *umuzungu* in Rwandese.

So there we are, three families, two human and one gorillas, en famille. Behind Agashya two babies are climbing and swinging on vines dripping down from a tree which their mother is sitting under. Suddenly, in this picture of domestic tranquility, Agashya lets out the most terrifying, blood-curdling scream and takes off like a shot up to the

ridge faster than I've ever seen an animal that large do on all fours or imagined possible for a 500-pound gorilla. All of us tourists are in a heightened state of fear. Even our guides seem a little taken aback. Mary says he must have heard something threatening, maybe a buffalo. The other gorillas all move slowly, calmly up to the ridge, and we follow, and when we get there, they are all sitting their together, around Agashya, who is completely relaxed. It was nothing. Maybe just a show, for us or his family, a demonstration that he is ready to protect them with the full force of his massive strength and fearsomeness. Or maybe he was sick of all the attention and bolted. Who knows?

Jen photographs some of the moms looking like Easter Island statues in the thicket :



This particular little ridge, or rib of a ridge, of the volcano, ends here, in the thicket where they are sitting. Some of them, including Agashya, head out of the thicket and down into an open meadow frothing bracken and wild celery, which they peel with their teeth, stripping off the bark, and eat. We go down and stand right above them, within a few feet of where they are eating, while others, the rest of the family, appear in the thicket and come down to where we are. We can see down to Ruhengeri, not more than a mile away as the crow flies. Two very different worlds, separated by just a rock wall and some potato fields, a model of peaceful coexistence. Another reason why what's happening here is so important and special.

The gorillas eat for another half an hour, oblivious to our existence, except for one female I meet suckling a baby under a tree on the way down from the thicket. Our eyes meet as I walk past here. She looks at me so searchingly that I stop, and she doesn't take her eyes off me for more than a minute. So we have a moment together, a meeting of the minds in two very different mental and physical worlds, two sentient beings taking each other in and making conclusions based on what we know that are no doubt largely off base, except for the important mutual one that we are well-disposed to each other and glad to meet. But I feel like she has gotten a pretty good picture of who I am.

As the hour ends, the gorillas all proceed down to a larger, shadier thicket, each at their own pace, except for the mothers with babies, some on their backs, others clinging close to them, and they all start to bed down, starting with Agashya. He sets the example, that naptime, an important daily bonding event, has arrived, and it's okay for everyone

to go to sleep for the next couple of hours, until the heat of the day has passed. We exit to the left, and within fifty yards meet the trackers, who are waiting with our backpacks and walking sticks, and we all hike back down to the wall. On the way a white cabbage butterfly is fluttering in a sun-dappled glade. *Ikigunyugugu*, I say. Mary is impressed that I know the word for butterfly. Plural *ibigungyugugu*. Rwandese is such a beautiful language. The word is so onomatopoeic. It sounds just like a butterfly fluttering in a sun-dappled glade.

We drive down to a high-end lodge that has half a dozen arts and crafts shops, really good stuff, some of it from nearby Congo, the real deal, not tourist stuff. But even the tourist stuff is superb, the containers woven of straw dyed in different colors, the walking sticks, which I can see in another 20 years in the museums of African art in Europe. Mary gives us a certificate signed by the director of the park saying that we visited the Agashya family and thanking us for our contribution to the effort to preserve the gorillas and their forest habitat.

On September 2, there is a big naming ceremony for all the gorillas born in the park in the past year. I wish I could be there. But we have reconnected, and I know I will be back.