

Gorillas in the midst

At Bwindi Impenetrable National Park

by Dave Gibson

Bwindi Impenetrable Forest in southwestern Uganda harbors one of the last two remaining mountain gorilla populations on earth. Made a national park in 1991, in 1993 it was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site. When the movie "Gorillas in the Mist" premiered in 1987, based on Dian Fossey's research in Volcanoes National Park, Rwanda, (the other stronghold of mountain gorillas), it brought international attention to the gorillas' dismal plight. At that time, five hundred mountain goril-

las remained. Today, there are approximately nine hundred.

Sustenance farmers comprise ninety percent of the population that engirds Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. They are among the poorest and most densely packed rural Ugandans in the country. If the park hadn't been set aside for the gorillas, judging from the looks of the countryside, the mountains would have been denuded of trees by now with terraced tea plantations having taken their place. The gorillas wouldn't have had anywhere else to go, effectively eliminating half of the world's total.

The path to ecotourism, that ultimately benefited the gorillas, hasn't always been a smooth one. During the Rwandan Civil War in 1992, Volcanoes National Park

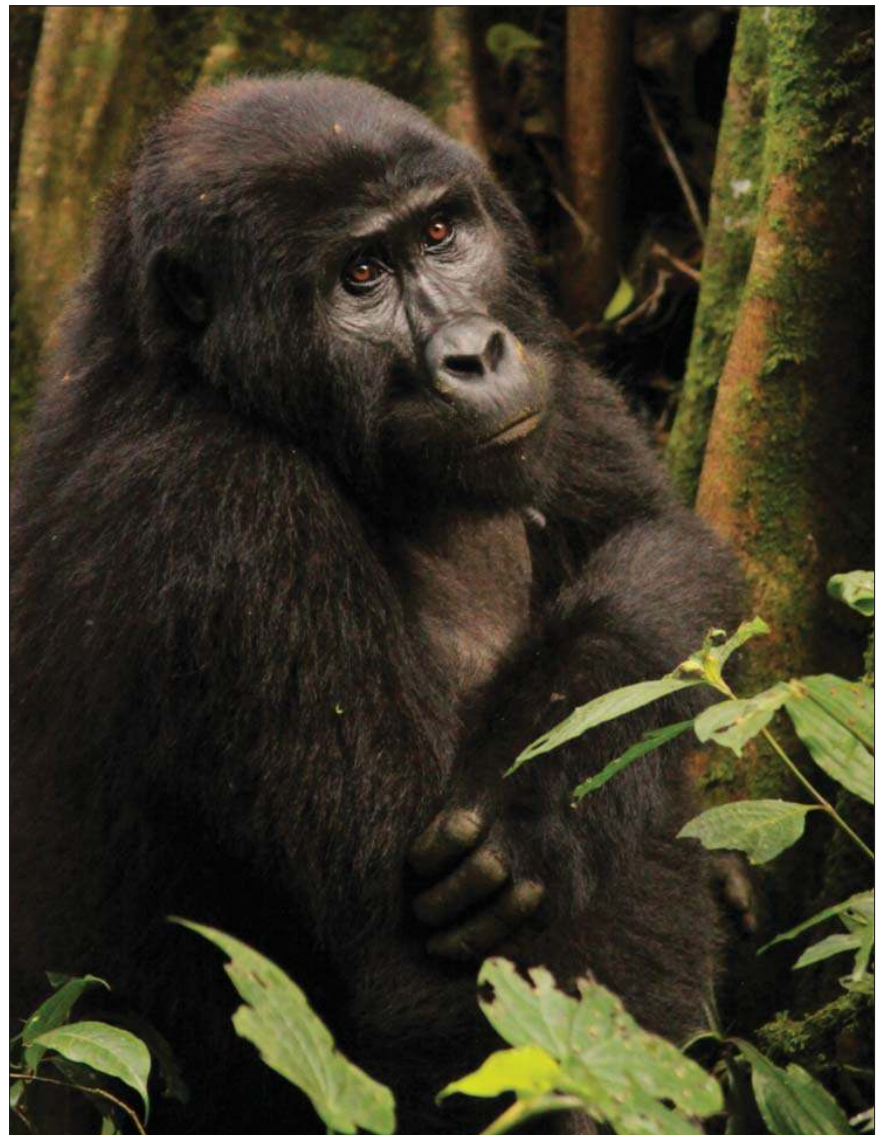
Headquarters was attacked by the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF). Ensuing battles between the RPF and the Rwandan Army raged until 1993. All tourism ceased and didn't resume until seven years later. One hundred fifty Rwandan Interahamwe guerillas crossed over from the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1999 and kidnapped 14 foreign tourists and a Ugandan guide at Bwindi. Six of them were released and eight were murdered with clubs and machetes. The guide was set on fire. Both locations are currently safe, albeit escorted by an armed ranger.



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There are thirty-six mountain gorilla families in Bwindi National Park, and of those, eleven have been habituated to human presence. Numbering nine members at the time, the first troop of gorillas to undergo habituation is known as the Mubare group. They are named after the hills where trackers first spotted them. At times during the first six months of the process, the silverback would assault the rangers and have to be beaten off with sticks. A silverback called Ruhondeza, (meaning "sleepy fellow" in local Rukinga dialect), ruled at the family's peak of eighteen members. Ruhondeza's jealous nature caused him to chase away "blackbacks" (male gorillas ages eight to twelve years old) of the group, leaving the family's defenses vulnerable to other gorilla troops. Females being stolen and fights with other groups reduced their count to only five by 2009. Early in 2012 the Mubare family was attacked by an un-habituated silverback and Ruhondeza was forced out. He spent the next four months living with people outside the park at Rubona Village until dying peacefully in his nest. Ruhondeza is buried at Buhoma Bwindi Park Headquarters.

As Ruhondeza's successor, Kanyonyi is king of the Mubare family now. Presiding over the original four including a "black-back," and absconded females, they now number nine. In November of 2012, deep lacerations were noticed on Kanyonyi's wrists. The result of defending his family, the flesh around the wounds was swollen and smelled



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infected. Unable to put weight on his hands to forage for food, he had stopped eating. That is when the Mountain Gorilla Veterinary Project decided to intervene. With the gorilla safely sedated, they administered antibiotics, anti-

inflammatory drugs, and painkillers. The next day, Kanyonyi was feeding again. Kanyonyi sired his first offspring with the Mubare family last year.



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