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In the Kingdom of Gorillas

excerpted from

In the Kingdom of Gorillas: The Quest to Save Rwanda's Mountain Gorillas

by Bill Weber and Amy Vedder

Gorillas are overwhelmingly social beings. This is never more obvious than during their late morning or midday rest period. For some, this is serious siesta time, but even in repose gorillas appear to like nothing better than to form a simian daisy chain, with each member in direct physical contact with as many others as possible. Amy was deeply moved one day when Ziz, a blackback male, rolled over during a siesta and laid his hand against her arm, linking her to part of the family chain.

For those not sleeping, grooming is another way to stay in contact and reinforce personal bonds through the ritualized removal of debris from each other's rich coat of hair. The heavy Virunga rainfall can be of some help, but the cleanliness of the mountain gorilla's coat is largely a function of constant grooming of the four-to-six-inch-length of thick, coal black hair over much of their bodies. The end result is a healthy, glistening sheen day in and day out, regardless of conditions around them—and a tightly knit family.

Group 5's composition also allowed a clear view of the social bonding that is central to the mother-infant relationship. Gorilla infants spend their first three years sleeping with and nursing from their mothers. During their first six months they are almost never out of direct contact, held in their mothers' arms during feeding, lying on their stomachs at rest, and clinging to their chests or backs as they move through thick vegetation. These young infants are also a constant focus of grooming. From six to eighteen months, infants are allowed some limited freedom of movement, but rarely much beyond their mothers' reach or sight. Even at rest they are often constrained



by a discreet, yet forceful, maternal footlock around their ankle or wrist. Roaming distance increases steadily through their third year, and interactions with other infants and older juveniles multiply dramatically during this time. But individual differences also start to appear at that age.

The young infants of two females in Group 5 clearly illustrated the role of personality in gorilla development. Pansy was roughly twelve years old and a first-time mother of Muraha, a sixteen-month-old female. By curious coincidence,

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Pansy's mother, Marchessa, also had a sixteen-month-old infant named Shinda: a smaller male with grizzled brown tufts of hair who was technically Muraha's uncle, though they were born only four days apart. From Amy's earliest observations, there were obvious differences between the two infants. Muraha was far more

outgoing and physical, whereas Shinda appeared shy and retiring. Muraha always beat her age-twin in wrestling matches. Wrestling was an uncommon experience for Shinda, though, because Marchessa was very protective of her son and only rarely allowed him to have any contact with others. Pansy, on the other hand, seemed almost indifferent to the whereabouts of Muraha at that age, letting her move quite freely among the rest of the group and play with older siblings. Perhaps Pansy figured that Marchessa would help to watch over her granddaughter; perhaps Pansy was more inexperienced than indifferent. Most likely Shinda and Muraha and their mothers simply had different personalities, as would dozens of other gorillas we would come to know in the years ahead.

Another aspect of gorilla behavior became obvious as Amy began to follow individuals while they fed. Gorillas in groups are supremely social. On the move, plowing narrow trails through thick ground cover in search of food, they operate in a very different context. They are competing for food resources that, while generally abundant, can be quite limited in terms of both quantity and quality at any one place or time. So when two gorillas covet the same juicy stalk of wild celery, immediate hostilities can erupt. This is unlikely to happen between a young gorilla and an adult, since a cough grunt from the latter is almost certain to settle the matter.

Competition between adults, however, is another story. Nothing in the literature had prepared Amy for the sudden outbreaks of intense, almost maniacal screaming that irregularly punctuated the otherwise placid feeding bouts of Group 5. Generally no more than ten seconds in



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duration, these interactions could make seconds seem like minutes and, in some cases, ended only with a sharp bite from the victor. Beethoven even intervened on rare occasions to settle matters with a bite of his own. More commonly, disputes ended when one individual gave in to the superior vocal or physical display of the other. Mostly, these encounters revealed a generally nonviolent, if spectacularly aggressive, mechanism for dealing with competition.

If the gorillas of Group 5 fell short of pacifist perfection, their lives were nevertheless marked by an exceptional degree of tranquility. And for the young, there was plenty of time for play. Gorilla games are similar to those common to most human cultures around the world. Tag, wrestling, and king of the mountain all have their Virunga variations.

Play was most common during group rest periods, when two or more young gorillas would start to chase each other through the surrounding underbrush and then engage in a freestyle wrestling match. A fallen *Hagenia* tree in their midst made the perfect prop for a rough-and-tumble version of king of the mountain, with the added complexity of a slippery trunk and dangling vines as alternate attack routes to the top. And the intertwined limbs of bent and broken *Vernonia* thickets formed a remarkable imitation of a playground jungle gym—or is the jungle gym a fair copy of the *Vernonia* clump? Whatever one’s perspective, young gorillas play as much as one third of their waking hours, sometimes even enticing their elders to join in. Gorilla youngsters may not laugh and scream, but they do emit a stuttering “chuckle” and certainly enjoy themselves as much as any human children at play.

Drs. Bill Weber and Amy Vedder will present “Saving Them, Saving Ourselves” at the 36th Annual Yoga Research Society Conference.

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