

Face to Face with a Mountain Gorilla

MICHAEL WOODFORD, now Administrator with the Nuffield Unit of Tropical Animal Ecology in Uganda, recently visited Rwanda, and sent this description of seeing mountain gorillas on Mount Karisimbi in the Parc des Volcans, an offshoot of the Kivu National Park:

'The Conservateur provided us with a guide who took us up Mount Karisimbi, the next volcano in the range to the west of Mount Visoke. After toiling uphill for two and a half hours, the last part through a tunnel of bamboo with a foot of glutinous black mud, we reached the ridge leading to the summit and came upon a small clearing where we were greeted by the most awe-inspiring sounds – a terrific thud followed by vigorous breast-beating noises and angry roars. There were four large male gorillas just off the track in the bamboo. Our guide, who refused to go any further, kept saying "Advance, messieurs". At first the gorillas were invisible but after a bit we could see the bamboo moving as they tore up branches and threw them in the air in displays of strength.

'I crept into the bamboo on my hands and knees to try to get closer and after a bit I became aware of a large black face peering at me through a lattice of bamboo about 20 feet away. I lay flat on my face and hoped that Schaller was right when he said that gorillas are non-aggressive. You could have heard my heart beating in Kigali! Photography was impossible. The light was very bad and the network of bamboo stems made it impossible to focus. Every couple of minutes the gorilla stood up and beat his breast, roared and tore up vegetation all round him. After about 20 minutes, during which we peered at each other trying to decide who was most scared, the gorilla had cleared quite an area round himself so I crept forward on my face in the hope of getting a photograph. But suddenly there was a terrific clap of thunder, the sky became black as night, and a cloud rolled over the volcano wrapping everything in a cold, clammy mist. Then it started to rain. In a very few minutes the torrential downpour had turned the area into a quagmire and the hitherto tenacious black mud became liquid and started to flow like lava down the track.

'The gorillas didn't like the rain at all. They stopped demonstrating at once and withdrew to shelter in the thick bamboo; I slithered back to the clearing. I ought to have been frozen since I was soaked to the skin but the whole experience had been so exciting and dramatic that I didn't notice the cold.

'It seems that there are still quite large gorilla populations on the volcanoes wherever they are relatively undisturbed by humans. The lower slopes of the volcanoes are intensively cultivated, and the park boundary, which is not marked, is at about 8000 feet. Nevertheless, on Visoke there are many cattle illegally grazing well into the park and doing a lot of damage to the vegetation. The Conservateur said that he occasionally got his guards (there are only eight covering the whole area) to shoot some cows to discourage the cattlemen, but this does not seem to have a lasting deterrent effect. I saw no evidence of cattle on Mount Karisimbi but the local people do go high up the mountain to cut bamboo well into the park. This seems unnecessary; not only are there bamboo groves lower down below the park boundary but it would be easy to grow enough bamboo on some of the uncultivable gullies down in the settled areas to meet all the needs of the locals for basket-making and building. This is the sort of conservation practice which is so easy but which is so rarely carried out. If it could be made unnecessary for the people to go above 8000 feet for bamboo, and the existing legislation forbidding the grazing of cattle in the park was enforced, then the safety of the gorillas would be ensured.'