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## GORILLA FACT SHEET

**STATUS:**

Endangered.

**DESCRIPTION:**

Of the three subspecies of gorilla, the mountain gorilla is the largest and rarest. Remarkably strong, the mountain gorilla has a short trunk and a broad chest and shoulders. Males develop a streak of silver hair on their backs when they mature and are called "silverbacks."

**SIZE:**

Male mountain gorillas reach an average of 6 feet tall (when standing upright) and weigh 400 to 500 pounds, making them the largest of the great apes (chimpanzees, orangutans, and gorillas). Females are smaller,

standing an average of 4 to 5 feet tall and weighing 150 to 200 pounds.

**POPULATION:**

Fewer than 650 mountain gorillas survive today in two geographically isolated populations. Approximately 320 gorillas inhabit the Virunga volcanoes region of Rwanda, Zaire, and Uganda, while the remaining number inhabits Uganda's Bwindi National Park.

**LIFESPAN:**

Mountain gorillas live up to 53 years in captivity.

**RANGE:**

Mountain gorillas can be found only in the forest ecosystems of Rwanda, Zaire, and Uganda.

**HABITAT:**

The dense, forest ecosystems of the mountains of East Africa are the last remaining habitat of the mountain gorilla.

**FOOD:**

Mountain gorillas eat large amounts of vegetation and spend about 30 percent of each day foraging for food. They consume roots, leaves, stems of herbs, vines, bark from trees, shrub-sized plants, and bamboo shoots.

**BEHAVIOR:**

Mountain gorillas are shy, retiring animals. They live in social groups of 2 to 35 individuals. An adult male silverback is the leader and protector of his band, which consists of females and offspring. Silverbacks will charge anything that threatens them or their group and are known for their chest beating displays when in danger.

A silverback is an adult male gorilla, typically more than 12 years of age and named for the distinctive patch of silver hair on his back. A silverback gorilla has large canines that come with maturity. Blackbacks are sexually mature males of up to 11 years of age. Silverbacks are the strong, dominant troop leaders. Each typically leads a troop of 5 to 30 gorillas and is the center of the troop's attention, making all the decisions, mediating conflicts, determining the movements of the group, leading the others to feeding sites and taking responsibility for the safety and well being of the troop.

Males will slowly begin to leave their original troop when they are about 11 years old, travelling alone or with a group of other males for 2–5 years before being able to attract females to form a new group and start breeding. While infant gorillas normally stay with their mother for 3–4 years, silverbacks will care for weaned young orphans.

If challenged by a younger or even by an outsider male, a silverback will scream, beat his chest, break branches, bare his teeth, then charge forward. Sometimes a younger male in the group can take over leadership from an old male. If the leader is killed by disease, accident, fighting or poachers, the group will split up, as animals disperse to look for a new protective male. Very occasionally, a group might be taken over in its entirety by another male. There is a strong risk that the new male may kill the infants of the dead silverback.

#### **OFFSPRING:**

Females reach breeding age at about 10 years old. They typically bear young every four to five years, giving birth after a gestation period of eight to nine months. Young gorillas cling to their mother's chests until they are old enough to ride on her back. A young gorilla remains with its mother until 5 years of age.

#### **INTELLIGENCE:**

Gorillas are closely related to humans and are considered highly intelligent. A few individuals in captivity, such as Koko, have been taught a subset of sign language. Gorillas are now known to use tools in the wild. A female gorilla in the Nouabalé Ndoki National Park in the Republic of Congo was recorded using a stick as if to gauge the depth of water while crossing a swamp. A second female was seen using a tree stump as a bridge and also as a support while fishing in the swamp. This means that all of the great apes are now known to use tools.

In September 2005, a two and a half year old gorilla in the Republic of Congo was discovered using rocks to smash open palm nuts. While this was the first such observation for a gorilla, over forty years previously chimpanzees had been seen using tools in the wild, famously 'fishing' for termites.

It is a common tale among native peoples that gorillas have used rocks and sticks to thwart predators, even rebuking large mammals. Great apes are endowed with a semi precision grip, and certainly have been able to use both simple tools and even weapons, by improvising a club from a convenient fallen branch.

#### **CAPTIVITY:**

Gorillas used for entertainment spend their lives imprisoned in small cages or enclosures. While zoos and aquariums may appear to be educational and conservation-oriented, most are designed with the needs and desires of the visitors in mind, not the needs of the animals.

Many animals in zoos and aquariums exhibit abnormal behavior as a result of being deprived of their natural environments and social structures.

Some zoos and aquariums do rescue some animals and work to save endangered species, but most animals in zoos were either captured from the wild or bred in captivity for the purpose of public display, not species protection.

The vast majority of captive-bred animals will never be returned to the wild. When the facility breeds too many animals they become "surplus" and often are sold to laboratories, traveling shows, shooting ranches, or to private individuals who may be unqualified to care for them.

#### **THREATS:**

Habitat destruction and poaching pose serious threats to the future of this species.

#### **PROTECTION:**

Endangered Species Act, \*CITES, Appendix I