



INTERVIEW WITH BENSON KANYONYI, RANGER GUIDE WITH THE UGANDA WILDLIFE AUTHORITY, PART OF THE INTERNATIONAL GORILLA CONSERVATION PROGRAMME BWINDI IMPENETRABLE NATIONAL PARK, UGANDA, EAST AFRICA



The ancient forest of Bwindi lies along the Albertine Rift Valley to the north of the Virunga volcanoes.

PREPARATIONS - FOR GORILLA TRACKING OR A PATROL OF THE FOREST

“We wake up at 6.30 am when it is still dark outside. By the time we get out the sun is rising - it is the dawn of a new day and the whole forest is waking up.

“We establish a team of about six to eight rangers who will walk into the forest and we plan a time to set off. Then we get all our equipment together - we need satellite phones for communication, radio handsets too; a compass, a GPS system, insect repellent, binoculars, hand watches and rain gear - including waterproof boots and jackets. Every ranger also carries a machete to help make his way through the forest and to open up a trail if he needs to.

“We always take dry rations with us and each of us must carry our personal water supply. A first aid kit is vital too. If we are going on an overnight patrol (that could last for anything up to a week) then we’ll take tents, sleeping bags, saucepans, plates, cups, food and matches as well. We pack everything up into our backpacks - which can each weigh up to 15kg.”

MAPPING THE ROUTE... AND DEALING WITH THE TERRAIN

“A group of rangers monitors the gorillas every day to check their health and wellbeing. So from one day to the next, we know where the gorillas were last seen and we update all the data to the Uganda Wildlife Authority management and research teams.

“Before we set off, we’ll probably have a good idea of the route that we’re going to take based on the gorillas’ location the previous day. It’s important for us to have clear directions so we use a topographic map showing the terrain and plan our route according to the sectors of the forest.

“If the gorillas are far away, we may need to walk for a whole day - some eight to nine hours - just to reach them. And even after we have found the gorillas, we will need to keep on the move if they are mobile, so the distance we eventually cover is dictated by the movement of the gorillas that day.



Buhoma in the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, Uganda
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“The weather is unpredictable here, but it’s typically very hot and humid, and the forest terrain is rugged and difficult to walk through. We often walk for hours through the mud and sprawling wet undergrowth. We walk on narrow paths that wind up and down the mountain slopes (the highest point in Bwindi being 2,607m).

The vegetation is extremely dense in places and we need to use our machetes sometimes to be able to scramble through. We don’t like to clear pathways as it’s not good for the forest, so we do try to keep cutting to a minimum. All this means that even when the distance is short, the hours can be long. You could track the gorillas the whole day - and maybe travel only 6km.”

SIGHTS AND SOUNDS IN THE FOREST

“We all experience different things in the forest - you can hear the tumbling of waterfalls, you can hear birds making their different calls... you can hear noises from all sorts of animals and insects. I’m most happy when, all of a sudden, I hear the gorillas beating their chests.

“We try to be quiet when we’re walking in the forest because many of the animals are very shy. We can encounter many different animals in any one day: chimpanzees, monkeys, elephants (who can really disorganise our tracking!) bush pigs, golden cats which prey on small antelope (called duikers) the African green broadbill... There are often butterflies on the trail, as well as frogs, snakes, lizards, spiders, beetles, wasps and bees. However, we try to avoid areas where bees are nesting so we don’t disturb them. You’ve also got to remember to keep your trousers tucked into your boots, because there are red fire ants - and they REALLY BITE!

“We try not to make any loud noises, and only talk occasionally in whispers. Sometimes it is more important to leave nature to do the talking. If we hear a noise, the whole team has to be quiet so we can find out what it is and what is going on. If there is a dangerous animal approaching then we don’t want to be in its way.”

TRACKING THE GORILLAS

“We pick up from where we last saw the gorillas the previous day. We look for signs such as broken twigs and leaves and check the direction in which the foliage has been crushed. We’ll look for signs in the undergrowth or on trees showing where they may have been eating and we’ll look out for their droppings. We can usually follow these signs to the place where the gorillas slept the previous night. And from there we’ll be able to follow their fresh trail.

“You can hear the gorillas in the forest so you know when you’re getting close. Sometimes you’ll hear chest-beating first. Other times they might sound the alarm - a sign showing that they know something is coming towards them and it’s getting them excited.

“So what we try to do is respond to them. We have the calming sound that we make [a slow, low, two-part cough] that says we are not a threat to them. This enables



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us to approach them. If we are moving too fast, then we reduce our speed accordingly. We make sure we do whatever we need to, to ensure the gorillas are not intimidated by our presence.”

FINDING THE GORILLA TROOP AND MONITORING THEIR BEHAVIOUR

“We need to constantly gauge how the gorillas are responding. When they are calm it is fine to look at them and even make eye-to-eye contact. But you shouldn’t make direct eye contact with a gorilla if it is looking threatened by you, chasing you, or looking like it may attack you. You need to crouch down, avert your eyes, pick leaves and pretend you are eating something. You should make the calming sound. You need to try to look like you are not afraid but put yourself in a position so that you look smaller, and less strong, than the gorilla. Once the gorilla realises that you are not challenging him, then in time he will look on you as a friend and be calm.

“We need to keep quiet when we’re near to the gorillas. We also stand back and maintain a 10 metre distance from them.

“We record everything while we are there. We use the GPS system every 30 minutes to record the movements of the gorillas. We visit the area where the gorillas slept and count the number of nests and examine them. We collect samples of the gorilla droppings from each of the nests, and check for signs of diarrhoea, recording all the information on data sheets.

“We observe the gorillas and make notes about their behaviour. Are they playing, feeding, grooming, moving, resting, beating their chests, showing their teeth, disciplining juveniles? Are they healthy? Are there any pregnant females?

“When they are eating they often make certain sounds - you can certainly tell if they’re enjoying their food! If a stronger gorilla finds a subordinate eating some of their favourite plants or fruit the dominant gorilla will chase the other one away - because the food is that good! We make a note of all these sorts of behaviours.

“Gorilla troops are broken down according to age. So infants are 3-5½ years. Juveniles 5½-8 years (male and female). Blackbacks are males aged 8-13 years. There are the older females, and of course the silverback. Some troops have more than one silverback - and we have seen this in the Habinyanja gorilla troop that we track in Bwindi.



“If we encounter other animals that are in close proximity to the gorillas in the forest, that information could also be relevant to the research. We’ll watch the behaviour of these other animals as it could show, say, that there is an abundance of food in the area if animals such as chimpanzees and elephants are also feeding there.

“There are many rules that we follow, for example we don’t go into the forest if we are sick; we don’t eat or drink near the gorillas; and we limit our stay with the gorillas to a maximum of one hour per day.”

ILLEGAL ACTIVITIES IN THE FOREST

“When we are on patrol we are checking for illegal activities in the forest, and this is very different to the job of gorilla tracking and monitoring - although obviously there can be some crossover.

“We need to ensure that all areas of the forest are safe so that when the animals in the park are moving around they won’t get caught in snares. Whenever we come across an animal snare, we need to dismantle it and remove it completely, log the location on a map and take the evidence to the park

management so that this area of the park can be more closely monitored in future.

“We have to be very careful removing snares as they can obviously hurt or injure humans as well as animals. We look for a wire that’s connected to a pole or branch that acts as a spring, and there’s usually a pit hidden in the undergrowth below. The trap is set so that when an animal steps in it, it gets caught and hanged. So we need to remove the snare without stepping in the pit.

“There is also a serious threat from armed poachers in some parts of Uganda. In Bwindi, the poachers tend to be armed with machetes. In other areas, poachers are known to be armed with guns. Whenever possible, we try to catch poachers and take them to the proper authorities for questioning.

“If we are going to be camping overnight in the forest then we will carry guns with us as we have to be very security conscious.”

RETURNING BACK TO BASE

“After a successful visit to the gorillas we are very happy, but also tired. So it’s a slow walk back. We are already thinking of tomorrow and planning the best route to find the gorillas again the next day.

“When we get back to base, we write a detailed report on all our observations.”

AND FINALLY, BENSON’S APPEAL TO WWF SUPPORTERS

“The job of a ranger is certainly very interesting and I enjoy being involved in the conservation and protection of the mountain gorillas.

“To help us do our job to the best of our ability, we need field equipment and we need to be fully trained in using it - whether it’s a GPS system or a satellite phone. We also have a need for staff accommodation close to the office which would enable us to work much more effectively as many of us currently have to walk a long way between our homes and the ranger base. We would also like to learn from other national parks and gain experience of their management techniques so we can improve our own.

“Rangers have given their lives to protecting these endangered animals - please, let’s give something tangible back to them.

“I encourage people to support the mountain gorillas - these animals are yours, these animals are ours, and they are there for the global community. We must continue our work monitoring them and protecting them so they can continue to have a future alongside ours.”