

A Day with Mountain Gorillas

By: Dean Jacobs

When I am in Rwanda, Africa I spend time with mountain gorillas in the wild. My day with the gorillas always starts with a walk up a volcano because that is where the gorillas live. Sometimes we have a path to walk on. Other times there is no path. On those days we have to cut our way through lots of leafy plants and thick, sticky mud. It is all worth it, though, when we finally get to see the gorillas!



Volcanoes National Park

When I visit the gorillas I am with a group of scientists. One of the scientists is my friend Felix. We always joke with each other about whether or not it will rain. This is a joke because we are walking into a rain forest! I make a bet that it won't rain until we leave the forest.



Felix

The scientists follow eight groups of mountain gorillas through the Volcanoes National Park. The total number of gorillas in all these groups is 120. Scientists are the only people who get to see these gorillas. The other 180 gorillas who live in the park are visited by tourists. People spend \$500 to spend one hour with the gorillas. I feel lucky to be able to spend four hours a day taking pictures of them for the scientists.



As we get close to a group of gorillas we have to make special noise so they know we are friendly. Felix begins a deep “haaaaummmm” sound. I try it too. Mine doesn’t sound quite like Felix’s but the gorillas don’t seem to mind. I listen in awe as the gorillas make the same sound back to us. This is the same sound the gorillas use to let other gorillas know they want to be friends.

For the next four hours, Felix and I watch gorillas. He writes down everything they do and what they eat. He writes about who sits next to whom and how close or how far they stay from the lead male, called a silverback. He also writes about the sounds they make to each other. Felix understands each gorilla movement or sound. He has spent a lot of time with the gorillas and knows them well.



Each day a mountain gorilla will eat 40 to 50 pounds of leaves, roots, vines and stems of more than 200 different types of plants in the park. One of their favorites is nettles. To eat these prickly plants the gorilla strips the leaves off the stem, stuffs them in its hands, and chumps away. It is a hard day when we find gorillas in the nettles because we have to wade into the large green patches to be with them. One day I forgot to roll my sleeves down. Now I know why they call them *stinging* nettles! My arms hurt so bad I wondered if they were about to fall off!

The four hours with the gorillas go by quickly. Soon it is time to begin our walk out of the park. On the way back, Felix explains why they study the mountain gorillas. He says that if we understand how gorillas behave and what they need, we can learn how to help them survive.



I think about this as we walk. The clouds open up and a light rain begins to fall. I'm glad that the people of Rwanda know how important these gentle animals are and are trying to help them survive. I may have lost the bet about the rain, but the gorillas are winning their race for survival.