

VICTORY OF THE APES

Deep in the forests of Gabon, a landmark release programme has successfully reintroduced the western lowland gorilla to the Batéké Plateaux, an area from which it had been hunted to extinction 50 years ago

AT FRANCEVILLE airport, in southeast Gabon, the terminal building is chaotic with passengers piling off the plane from the capital Libreville and heading to the baggage belt to shove and push for luggage. Small boys rush towards me offering to carry my backpack. It's a relief when a tall American approaches and takes my bag. Paul Telfer is a primatologist for the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and the project manager for the Plateaux Batéké National Park. Standing next to him is a thin long-haired woman in jeans – Liz Pearson, the director of the John Aspinall Foundation-funded Gorilla Protection Project in Gabon. She has bites and scratches all over her bare arms. She's taciturn with a shy smile. Later, she'll tell me that she's "lost the habit of small talk" after years spent isolated with gorillas in the forest. A day later, when I get there, I soon understand why.

I have travelled to Gabon, close to the Congo border, to visit a pioneering gorilla release project. Getting there tomorrow will involve a bone-shaking five-hour journey in a 4WD across savannah and forest to the River Mpassa where we'll unload the Jeep of fuel, wood and food supplies, pile it into a motorised pirogue and chug upstream for three hours. Dense foliage and thick lianes will line the banks, and under the water snout-nosed crocodiles and pythons will lurk; this will be a journey reminiscent of *The African Queen*. An hour in, just as it did for Bogart and Hepburn, lightning will crack and thunder rumble and we'll be forced to sit huddled, heads on knees, wrapped in bright yellow oilskins, as the skies open and a tropical storm beats down on us.

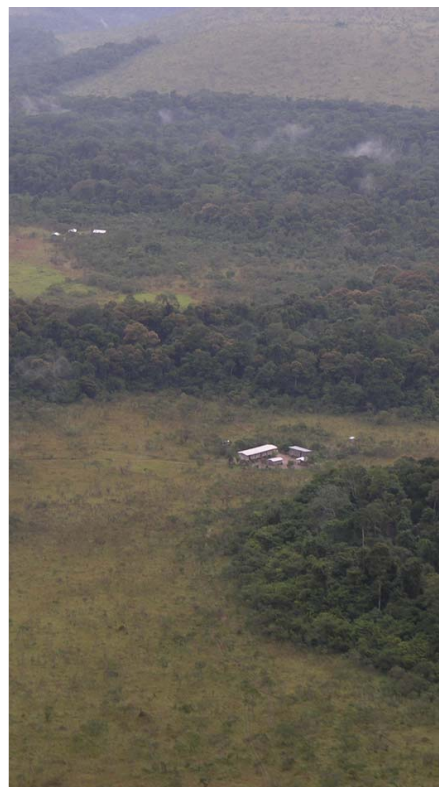
But first, Paul, Liz and I head to Moanda Airfield to clamber into a tiny four-seater Cessna to get a glimpse of the remote gorilla camp from the air. An hour later, we're flying over dense forest and down below is the camp close to the banks of the river. Somewhere in these trees beneath us, gorillas are swinging in the branches, munching on tropical fruits and roaming free.

In 1998, Liz made this same overflight to help scout out primary forest in which to establish the gorilla project with Mike Fay, an American biologist employed by the WCS. Mike is renowned for having carried out what *National Geographic* dubbed the 'Megatransect' – a 15-month trek across the Congo Basin – which resulted in his persuading President El Haj Omar Bongo Ondimba to create 13 national parks and protect his country's extraordinary biodiversity for posterity.

On that first reconnoitre, Mike identified a 170,000-hectare setting isolated from humans and rich in wildlife and vegetation. It was perfect, he realised, for their purposes. On one side of a river, the human camp could be placed; on the other, the gorillas could be safely released. →

NICK NICHOLS





NICK NICHOLS, SARAH MONGHIAN

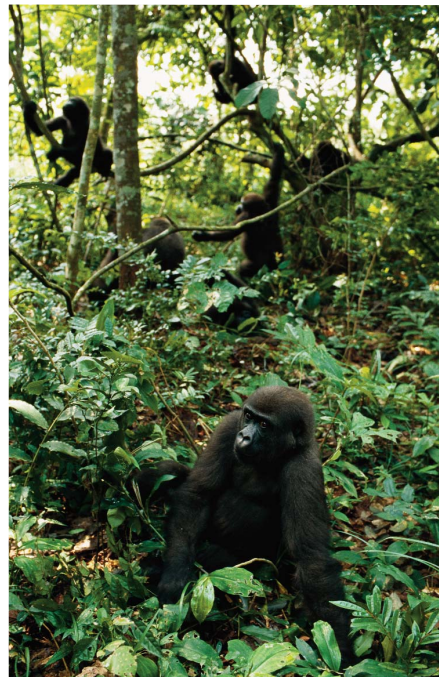
The reserve was the vision of a well-known British millionaire-businessman, the late John Aspinall, who founded two private zoos in Kent, England – Howletts and Port Lympne. His zoos are known for returning endangered species to the wild such as Prezewalski's horses, Cape buffalo, and pythons. His dream was to return western lowland gorillas to the Congo forests as well. He visited the site in 1998: "I flew over it for an hour and I was beguiled by its beauty, its remoteness," he is reported as saying. "I saw no human habitation for miles, just animals. I knew it was ideal for a sanctuary."

There were no gorillas here then – half a century ago there would probably have been a wild population, but as in so much of the Congo Basin they had been hunted to extinction. Conservationists say the western lowland gorilla and the Central African chimpanzee are on the cusp of extermination because of the bushmeat trade, the logging industry and now, the Ebola virus, the main threats to their survival.

That evening, Liz and I go out for a pizza in Franceville. The air smells of roasting meat. "It's hard to find a restaurant here that doesn't serve bushmeat," she says. The neighbouring establishment is offering all kinds of 'gibier': crocodile, porcupine, python and antelope. Despite the fact that hunting is a major problem endangering Gabon's precious wildlife, bushmeat remains the meal of choice for the Gabonese.

Over a bottle of Liz's drink of choice, Regab, the locally brewed beer, I get a sense of the extraordinary dedication that has driven her to

EMOTIONALLY, GORILLAS ARE VERY SENSITIVE. IF YOU DON'T FORGE A REAL BOND WITH THEM THEY DON'T EAT



Clockwise: Liz Pearson puts two young gorillas into their forest enclosure for the night; the isolated gorilla project camp seen from the air; roaming free: the older group of reintroduced gorillas is now covering a territory of 11 square kilometres; a baby gorilla clings on for comfort to one of the staff

spend nearly all the last decade of her life cloistered in the forest. Before becoming director of the project in Gabon, she worked with the Jane Goodall Institute with orphan chimpanzees, and then at another John Aspinall Foundation (JAF) gorilla release project in the Republic of Congo where orphan gorillas were released at the Lésio-Louna reserve. "I was there for the first transfer of orphan gorillas, but three out of the five died of amoebas. It was horribly depressing, the failure of it," she says. That said, it was the start of many successful reintroductions. Last year, three apes there became the third and fourth gorillas ever to be reintroduced to the wild and produce offspring. Says Liz: "As I cared for two of the parents when they were babies, I feel like a grandmother right now."

When civil war broke out in 1997 in Congo, Liz was part of a rescue operation to save animals in the Brazzaville Zoo. She was with Amos Courage, director of the JAF overseas projects. "Amos had a broken leg and gun shots were coming through our apartment walls," she says. "It was terrifying. In the end, we put all our money into his plaster cast and dashed from the building. Eventually I got to the French military who evacuated me by plane to Libreville and helped Amos flee with the gorillas and chimps to Pointe Noire."

The next evening, after our long 4WD and boat journey, we reach the camp. "We're home!" says Liz. 'Home' is a wooden kitchen hut with a gas-powered freezer and an adjoining study with satellite phone and computers where data on the ranging patterns of the gorillas is logged each day. There are mosquito-screened huts for Liz and her colleagues, Paul Aczel, who has worked on the project for the last seven years and is responsible for habitat protection, and Hélène Quetier, the administrator, to sleep in, and a shower block fed with water from the river. There are huts too for four gorilla trackers and the six eco-guards who patrol the forests and savannah for poachers. →

Forging a bond: Liz Pearson spends some recreational time with a young gorilla



APRIL MORGAN

They've got the forest terrain marked out into blocks using GPS mapping so that every day Liz and the trackers can go out and record the gorillas' movements.

As I climb under my mosquito net that night, I realise I have never been anywhere so remote in my life. As darkness falls, the tropical night strikes up with thousands of insect and animal sounds that rise and fall like an orchestrated concert: the heavy percussion gloop-gloop of a rainforest frog, the piped ting-ting of a fruit bat, the string notes ping-ping of a cicada, the maracas-like whirl-whirr of crickets, the joyous soprano whoop-whoop of galagos (a type of bushbaby). It's an astonishingly soothing blanket of prehistoric sounds.

I can't hear them, but somewhere, on the other side of the river, sleeping in branches in the trees, are 23 gentle giants – gorillas. One group of 14, known as Marco's group (after the name of the dominant male) was released in 1998. A second group of younger gorillas, Kwibi's group, was released in 2003 at a spot in the forest several kilometres away from the first.

Many of these gorillas began life in tragic circumstances; all of them are lucky to be alive. The project began with four orphans: Marco, Sophie, Lekedi and Moanda. Moanda, a bushmeat orphan, was just one month old when she was found. Totally bald like a human baby, she had only two teeth and weighed as little as a bag of sugar.

The gorillas were rescued from different areas of Gabon and were brought to Libreville. The problem was, how to get them to the gorilla camp in the southeast? "We didn't know how we were going to be able to transport them," says Liz, "until we spoke to a contact in the French Republican Guard. He put us in touch with the Gabonese mili-

tary who arranged for us to hitch a lift in a helicopter going to pick up the President's wife in Brazzaville." They dropped their usual passengers off at the site where the team had built simple cages and put up tents. "Sophie and Marco were old enough to sleep together in cages and Lekedi and Moanda, who were still in diapers, slept with me and another staff member," says Liz. "When they're really little, gorillas need milk feeds in the night in the same way as human babies."

Over the next year, these gorillas were joined by others: Ndjima's mother had been caught in a snare and found dead by hunters four days later, her foot left behind in the trap. She had either chewed or pulled it off. Ndjima was seven months old, dehydrated, and still clinging to her mother's dead body.

An emotional bond

Kongo came from a zoo in Port Gentil. "He was a year old, in a very bad state. He lay on the zoo cage floor, staring up vacantly. He had machete scars on his head," Liz recalls. When the gorilla project boat arrived to pick them up at the edge of the forest, the propeller hit a log in the water and she was forced to climb out and walk for miles in the dark. "Kongo was terrified: he kept clinging to me then biting, then when I put him down, he'd want to come back up. I ended up with my left breast and arm covered in blood," she says.

Boumango was found abandoned in a tree by hunters. His family, they said, had left him behind. Liz suspects the adults had been killed by the hunters. "Gorillas don't abandon their young. I've seen gorilla mothers carry dead infants for three days," she says.

For rehabilitation to work, establishing an attachment quickly with



GETTY

young gorillas is crucial. "Emotionally, gorillas are very sensitive," says Liz. "If you don't forge a bond with them, they don't eat. The lights go out in their eyes and they die."

To help the gorillas adjust, each started their new lives living in the forest where they were to be released and slept there at night in little cages. "It means they get to grow up in familiar surroundings," says Liz. The youngest gorillas were put 'across the river' when they no longer needed nocturnal milk feeds and were old enough to spend the night in an enclosure. "For me, the hardest part is letting them go," she says. "When I put Moanda across, I could hear her cry."

She will also never forget the cry Kongo uttered when he arrived at the camp. "He made a sound I'd never heard before," she says. "It was a hollow call, like he was glad to see the forest again, but I think he was also calling for his family." At the start, Kongo was so traumatised by his zoo experience, he didn't mix with the other gorillas. "They would go up to him and try and hand him leaves," says Liz.

She has had to let gorillas go in the ultimate sense too – two gorillas, Kwakwa and Kwam, added to this group arrived from Howletts Wild Animal Park in the UK but neither survived. Kwakwa died from an appendicitis and Kwam from parasites. It was yet another lesson for Liz about the vulnerability of this sensitive species.

Now entirely independent, Marco's group is roaming across an 11-square-kilometre area and they are nearing the age when they should begin to mate. "It could happen in the next year or two," says Liz. "The oldest female is 10, which is when she should reach sexual maturity, and the oldest male is 11."

Kwibi's group, released in 2003, differs from Marco's group because six of them were born in captivity in the UK. It is the first time in the world this type of wholesale reintroduction has ever been attempted. Although not physically and psychologically harmed like the older group, these zoo-born babies presented an entirely different challenge. They had been brought up in cages so they were scared to death when they first saw the forest. "They didn't like its sounds and they panicked at the sight of a dung beetle!" says Liz. "Plus they had to get used to different food, not the zoo fodder they were used to. Now it was salad leaves and forest fruits that they had to gather themselves."

When the gorillas arrived, Liz and the staff would take them into the forest each morning and spend all day with them, bringing them back at five. "It was guided exploration. We were surrogate parenting," she says. "I was worried at the beginning they'd eat something poisonous, and they have eaten things that didn't agree with them but no disasters. The amount of foods we showed them was very limited – such as →

FUTURE INVESTMENT

WESTERN lowland gorillas in Gabon are at serious risk of contracting the devastating Ebola virus, but they could be protected if a vaccine programme were funded.

More than 5,000 gorillas may have died in recent outbreaks of the Ebola virus in Central Africa according to a new study and scientists are now warning that this, coupled with the commercial hunting of gorillas, may be enough to push them to extinction.

The study, published in the US journal *Science*, looked at gorilla colonies in the Republic of Congo and Gabon. Ebola is also blamed for many chimpanzee deaths. Gorillas suffered a 95 per cent mortality rate, while chimps had a 77 per cent mortality rate, according to transect surveys conducted by the researchers. One of the most virulent viruses known, Ebola has killed more than 1,200 people since it was first recorded in 1976.

The researchers, led by Magdalena Bermejo of the University of Barcelona, focused on western gorillas. Dr Peter Walsh, a group leader in the Department of Primatology at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany, says: "An educated guess is that about 25 per cent of the world's gorilla population has been killed by Ebola in the last 12 to 15 years." The outbreaks are particularly troubling because they are occurring in areas set aside for ape conservation.

So can nothing be done? On the contrary, it can, according to the researchers: all that is needed is the will and the cash. "The current lack of a vaccination programme is not due to a lack of vaccine options, as several different vaccines have now protected laboratory monkeys from Ebola and some major vaccine laboratories are anxious to help," they say.

Dr Walsh adds that uncertainty about whether a large Ebola control effort is necessary or even possible has paralysed major conservation organisations: "We are hoping that the starkness of our results will push some public or private donor to finally commit the \$2 (€1.5) million thought to be necessary to develop a safe and effective way of delivering Ebola vaccine to wild apes."

He says that the initial costs of a vaccination campaign scare off conservation groups. "People in the conservation community are intimidated by the up-front costs and would prefer to spend the money on anti-poaching. What they are not factoring in is the fact that one year of Ebola vaccination could save as many apes as decades of anti-poaching. We need to do both."

The costs involved in mounting an Ebola control programme for apes, he says, are "trivial". "The real tragedy is that a relatively small amount of money, a few million dollars, could make a huge difference," Dr Walsh continues. "Why do we always wait until it is too late? When people look back 100 years from now, most won't even remember Iraq. One thing they will remember is that we sat by and did nothing while our closest relatives slipped away. This is a case where one wealthy individual could have an enormous impact. He or she could quite literally save gorillas from ecological extinction."

THE HUNT IS ON

SOME CONSERVATIONISTS are critical of single species reintroduction programmes, arguing that rather than looking after one endangered species it might be more effective to look after large chunks of land and all the inter-related species living there. That said, given the terrifying vulnerability of the world's gorilla populations, how else is the largest of the living primates to be saved?

But since the start, the John Aspinall Foundation (JAF) has also championed the need for wholesale ecosystem preservation at the Plateaux Bateké National Park where the gorilla project is located.

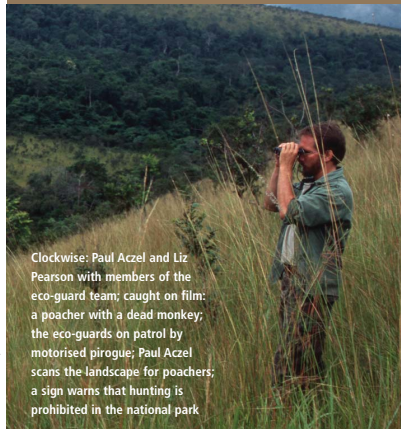
Here JAF is working closely with the national park authorities and the Wildlife Conservation Society to manage the 170,000-hectare reserve and is funding the training, equipping and salaries of a team of six eco-guards.

The biodiversity of the park is seriously threatened by Congolese and Gabonese poachers who target its population of duikers, red river hogs, apes, elephants and buffalo. Paul Aczel is responsible for the park protection and manages its team of eco-guards. He recalls his horror two years ago at learning of an elephant 'massacre' at Jobo Bai – a mineral-rich waterhole in the forest that attracts animals. Tragically, the bai attracts hunters too and the corpses of several elephants were discovered here. Says Paul: "They had been stripped of their tusks and the hunters had taken away as much meat as they could possibly carry."

Not any more, however. Poachers in the area have now become wary of hunting in the park thanks to the team of uniformed eco-guards who patrol on a daily basis, travelling the waterways by motorised pirogue and the savannah and forests on quad bike. Crucially, they have also targeted hearts and minds, carrying out awareness campaigns in the Congolese and Gabonese villages around the park.

And it's paying off. "In the two years we've been focusing on this, I've seen so much more wildlife and so many more elephant trails in the park," says Paul. "I reckon I've seen a reduction of 50 per cent of poaching. Before, the hunters were everywhere; now just our presence has made them think twice."

In the last two years, the team has arrested 34 hunters and confiscated 19 guns and two machine guns. "It's great progress," says Paul, "but we can't be everywhere at once. Ideally we'd like a team of 15 eco-guards. Then we'd be able to cover the whole territory and we'd really see the park's animal population soar."



Clockwise: Paul Aczel and Liz Pearson with members of the eco-guard team; caught on film: a poacher with a dead monkey; the eco-guards on patrol by motorised pirogue; Paul Aczel scans the landscape for poachers; a sign warns that hunting is prohibited in the national park



the Koco leaf and Aframomum, which is a plant similar to wild ginger." These 'British' apes even had to be given malaria tablets and other medication. "It's just the same process when a Westerner comes to live in Africa – it takes time to build up immunities," says Liz. To monitor their health, a vet was based at the camp for the first two years.

There were dangers in the forest for the humans too, aside from snakes, mosquitoes and biting Tsetse flies. "I came across a female elephant one day," says Liz. "She trumpeted at me and made to charge, so I tried to get the Gabonese trackers to walk past but they were afraid." So were the gorillas. "The babies all leapt on me clinging on out of fear so I couldn't move," she says. Slowly she backed away and got the apes into a boat. "Afterwards I looked carefully at the elephant's tracks and realised she had had a baby behind her which is why she would not leave – she was being protective."

Kwibi's group are now aged four to eight and living autonomously in the forest and ranging over a three-kilometre area. As they get older, their roaming span will increase. "They are going through the adolescent phase right now," says Liz. "They get very excited and have sugar rushes – they're a real handful." She goes regularly out to the forest to track them and says they can get over-activated in their joy to see her. "The older ones want me to play and tend to show it by biting and scratching, but of course we humans don't have the same hair covering so it can hurt! The two youngest will still nap on my lap for 15 minutes or so."

Gorilla whisperer

Liz employs imitative gorilla sounds to reassure them. "They cough to show they're not happy. I know all the noises, but gorillas don't vocalise that much and there are a lot of subtleties we don't know about," she says. "I never want to 'say' too much in case I'm speaking the wrong words. It's mainly body language I use with them. For example, if I sit hunched with my arms and legs closed, they won't approach me, but if I am open they will come to me."

What does the future hold for these gorillas? Although separated by many kilometres, the two groups have come peaceably into contact several times by making canopy crossings over tributaries of the Mpsa. Will they breed together? This is one of Liz's biggest questions. "This is the first time this has ever been done with gorillas born in captivity," she says. "It is a *Lord of the Flies* experiment. All of these gorillas have grown up without real adult gorilla parenting and there is always the possibility they will see each other as siblings." Hopefully, however, as they get older, the groups will mate, split and form new family units, but only continued research and monitoring will provide an indication of the long-term success of this programme.

A third release group is now under consideration by JAF using more Gabonese orphans and zoo-born babies from the UK. "It's something we have to think about carefully because we are here for the long term, but we do have the capacity here – the forest space. We could accommodate another group of about 10," says Liz.

It's a hackneyed comparison so Liz smiles when I ask if she ever compares herself to Dian Fossey, the scientist who spent her life working to save the mountain gorillas of Rwanda and whose life was somewhat romanticised in the film *Gorillas in the Mist* starring Sigourney Weaver. "There are hundreds of dedicated people working in various capacities to save great apes and other endangered species throughout the world," says Liz. "This has been a unique experience and opportunity to bring the plight of gorillas to the public and raise awareness. I just feel so fortunate to have been involved in the process." ■

Sarah Monaghan

The John Aspinall Foundation relies on the support of the public to help fund its work. To find out more or to make a donation, visit www.totallywild.net

GORILLA FACTS

THERE ARE two species of gorilla: the western gorilla and the eastern gorilla.

The western gorilla is divided into two sub-species: the western lowland gorilla, found in the rainforests of Central Africa, and the cross river gorilla, now restricted to forested hills on the Nigerian-Cameroon border.

The eastern gorilla is also divided into two sub-species: the eastern lowland or Grauer's gorilla, found in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and the mountain gorilla found in Rwanda, Uganda and DRC.

The status and population figures of the four sub-species of gorilla are dwindling fast and according to the publication *Primates in Perspective 2007* are currently:

- Western lowland gorilla: endangered at 50,000 to 110,000
- Cross river gorilla: critically endangered at 200 to 250
- Eastern lowland gorilla: endangered at 5,000 to 15,000
- Mountain gorilla: critically endangered at 700

The western lowland gorilla

- lives in lowland tropical forests in Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Nigeria
- has a brownish-grey coat with a red or auburn crest. Adult males stand about one metre 60 centimetres tall and have a silvery white saddle extending from the back to the rump and thighs, and are called silverbacks
- has a well-developed social structure, living and travelling in family groups which typically number five to 10. They have a home range of up to 30 square kilometres and are mainly herbivorous, feeding on stems, shoots and fruits, supplemented with bark and invertebrates. Groups tend to consist of one dominant silverback, three adult females, and four or five offspring
- sees nearly all female gorillas leave their natal group at maturity to join other groups or single males. Females become sexually mature at seven to eight years old. Males mature later than females (12 years), with few breeding before the age of 15
- has a long gestation period (251-295 days), a tendency to single births, and a prolonged period of maternal care meaning that on average only one infant is reared in a four to eight-year period. The young are born totally helpless, rather like human babies, and must be cared for at all times. They are carried by their mothers until they are three months old
- self-medicates using, for example, the fruit of the Aframomum to soothe the diarrhoea, ingesting soil for rare minerals and chewing leaves with bactericidal qualities
- lives up to 50 years of age