

The Gorilla Doctors examine a male mountain gorilla in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Gorilla Doctors

A team of veterinarians is working to save Africa's mountain gorillas from becoming extinct, one patient at a time.

Deep in a rainforest in Africa, a baby mountain gorilla is in trouble. It's caught in a wire snare set by poachers. If the gorilla isn't freed soon, it might lose its hand. Even worse, it could die if the wound gets infected.

Luckily, help is on the way. A team of veterinarians has spotted the injured gorilla. But the vets need to be cautious. A huge adult

male gorilla, called a silverback, is lurking nearby and could attack at any moment. Some of the vets make noise to scare him off. Meanwhile, their colleagues work quickly to remove the snare and treat the baby's wounds.

These veterinarians are part of a group called the Gorilla Doctors. They work in countries in Central Africa to keep the gorillas there alive and healthy.

The vets have their work cut out for them. Mountain gorillas (one of the four subspecies of gorillas) are critically endangered. Fewer than 900 of them are left in the wild. Because the population is so small, the death of even one



A vet removes a wire snare from a young gorilla's wrist.

gorilla is a big loss. The Gorilla Doctors realize the importance of their work. Their motto is "saving a species, one gorilla at a time."

Surviving in Virunga

The Gorilla Doctors' work often takes them to Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic

Words to Know

refuges (REH-fyoj-ehz) *noun*, plural. places that provide shelter or protection

lethargic (leh-THAR-jihk) *adjective*. lacking energy; sluggish



A veterinarian feeds an orphaned gorilla.



of the Congo (DRC). It is one of the last remaining **refuges** for mountain gorillas. Many of the other forests where they once lived have been cleared and turned into farmland.

Like the animals in U.S. national parks, the gorillas in Virunga live in protected habitats. However, they often still face dangers from human intruders.

The mountain gorillas are sometimes targeted by poachers, who hope to sell their babies as pets illegally. The Gorilla Doctors have had to rescue orphaned gorillas whose mothers were killed while trying to protect them from poachers.

Also, Virunga National Park is in the middle of a war zone. In the DRC, armed rebels have spent years trying to overthrow the government. Fighting in the neighboring countries of Rwanda

and Uganda has also spilled over into the park. The gorillas have occasionally been caught in the crossfire.

Gorilla Guardians

Despite the dangers, twice a week the Gorilla Doctors go into the jungle to treat injured or sick gorillas. They're always looking for symptoms of another human threat: infectious diseases.

Because gorillas are so closely related to humans, diseases can easily spread to them from people in the park. Illnesses range from the common cold to pneumonia, which can be deadly.

"We monitor very carefully when they're not eating, they're **lethargic**, they're coughing," says Mike Cranfield, the co-director of the Gorilla Doctors. "At that point, we'll go in and treat them."

Gorillas can be difficult patients. A few vets have been bitten on the job. Cranfield says the gorillas are aggressive only if they feel threatened. To protect the gorillas and themselves, the vets often use tranquilizers to knock out the apes while treating them.

The tireless work of the Gorilla Doctors is having a big impact. Mountain gorillas are the only species of great ape whose numbers in the wild are growing. The gorilla population in Virunga National Park has nearly doubled since the 1980s. Cranfield calls that success "phenomenal," but he knows the Gorilla Doctors' work is far from over. They're continuing to try to help one of our closest relatives, one patient at a time.

—by Joe Bubar

Mountain Gorillas by the Numbers

254 Population of Virunga mountain gorillas at its lowest point, in 1981. It has nearly doubled since then.

6 feet Maximum height of a male gorilla. Adults can weigh more than 400 pounds.

60 pounds Amount of vegetation an adult gorilla can eat in a day. The gorillas chow down on leaves, shoots, fruit, and tree bark.

35 years Average life span of a mountain gorilla in the wild.

4 pounds Average weight of a gorilla at birth. Babies ride on their mothers' backs until they're about 3 years old.



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