

New survey of mountain gorillas under way in Uganda

A long-awaited census of mountain gorillas has begun in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in a bid to assess the status of these remarkable great apes.

A team of researchers is currently combing through the forests of the aptly named Bwindi Impenetrable National Park for signs of mountain gorillas as part of a major effort to understand the conservation status of this great ape and other wildlife that shares its habitat.

Once complete, the survey data will be analysed and combined with the results of a similar census in the Virunga Massif¹ – the only other place on earth where mountain gorillas are found – in order to give a complete picture on how these animals are faring.

But gathering this information is no mean feat. In addition to Bwindi's rugged terrain – dense vegetation and narrow valleys intersected by rivers and steep hills – the 52-strong research team will also have to contend with the elusive nature of Bwindi's unhabituated gorillas.

Because these unhabituated gorillas are rarely seen (and therefore cannot be counted directly), the researchers will rely on signs of gorilla trails and nest² sites, collecting samples of gorilla faeces from each nest they encounter, which will then be sent for genetic analysis to enable a more accurate population estimate.

“Although we have a good understanding about the status of habituated gorillas, it takes systematic surveys like the two censuses in Bwindi and the Virungas to get an accurate picture of what is happening for this critically endangered subspecies,” explained Anna Behm Masozera – Director of the International Gorilla Conservation Programme (IGCP), which is coordinating the research together with the Greater Virunga Transboundary Collaboration and other partners³.

As well as searching for gorilla signs, the team will also be recording traces of other large mammals that share their habitat as well as collecting data on illegal activities within the park. The latter will then be analysed alongside the gorilla records to see whether human activities are affecting gorilla distribution and dynamics.

The Bwindi census is just one facet of the work being supported by players of People's Postcode Lottery as part of a new £250,000 award to Fauna & Flora International, which together with WWF forms the IGCP coalition.

People's Postcode Lottery's Head of Charities, Clara Govier, said: "Ever since Attenborough introduced mountain gorillas to viewers around the world, people have been captivated by these gentle giants. Fauna & Flora International has been working to protect mountain

gorillas for many years and has played a vital part in the successes seen to date. We are thrilled to be joining forces with them to build on these achievements and help ensure that mountain gorillas – along with the many other endangered species that FFI works to protect – continue to thrive long into the future."

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For further information (including high resolution images), please contact:

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Notes to editors:

1. Surveys for the mountain gorilla census of the Virunga Massif – a 451 km² area spanning the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda and Uganda – were carried out in 2015/2016, with samples then sent off for genetic analysis. The results are due to be announced imminently.
2. 'Nests' are beds of vegetation, which mountain gorillas prepare each night to sleep in.
3. The 2018 Bwindi-Sarambwe population surveys of mountain gorillas, large mammals, and illegal activities are being conducted by the Protected Area Authorities in Uganda and the DRC (Uganda Wildlife Authority and l'Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature) under the transboundary framework of the Greater Virunga Transboundary Collaboration. The census is supported by the Rwanda Development Board, International Gorilla Conservation Programme (a coalition of Fauna & Flora International and WWF), Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund, Institute of Tropical Forest Conservation, Gorilla Doctors, Conservation Through Public Health, Wildlife Conservation Society, WWF Uganda Country Office, and Bwindi Mgahinga Conservation Trust. The census was funded by Fauna & Flora International, WWF, and Partners in Conservation at the Columbus Zoo & Aquarium.

About Fauna & Flora International (FFI) (www.fauna-flora.org)

FFI protects threatened species and ecosystems worldwide, choosing solutions that are sustainable, based on sound science and that take account of human needs. Operating in more than 40 countries worldwide, FFI saves species from extinction and habitats from destruction, while improving the livelihoods of local people. Founded in 1903, FFI is the world's longest established international conservation body and a registered charity.

About IGCP

The International Gorilla Conservation Programme (IGCP) is a coalition programme of Fauna & Flora International and WWF with the mission to secure the future for mountain gorillas. IGCP operates in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda.

About People's Postcode Lottery

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