

Mountain Gorillas: Going, Going, Almost Gone

Mountain gorillas are some of the most threatened animals on the planet. Only two groups of mountain gorillas remain. One population lives in the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Uganda. The other group lives in the Virunga Mountains. This mountain range of extinct volcanoes borders the African countries of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda.

These gorillas are members of the primate family known as great apes. Other great apes are orangutans, chimpanzees, and bonobos.

Mountain gorillas live in misty, cold forests high up in the mountains. They have thick fur that helps them stay warm. Their fur is thicker than the fur of other great apes.

Male mountain gorillas are large and powerful. They can weigh over 400 pounds. Female mountain gorillas are smaller than male mountain gorillas. But female mountain gorillas can still weigh over 200 pounds.

Mountain gorillas are very social animals. They live together in small groups known as troops. Each troop is led by an adult male gorilla known as a silverback. Adult males are called silverbacks because they have a stripe of silver fur on their back. Troops also include younger male gorillas, female gorillas, and baby gorillas. The silverback decides all of the activities of the troop. He decides when and where the troop will rest and sleep. He also decides when and where the troop will eat.

As for their diet, mountain gorillas are herbivores. This means that they mainly eat plants, leaves, stems, and shoots. Their diet includes over 100 different types of plant species.

Mountain gorillas are generally calm and shy. They can be aggressive, however, if they feel threatened.

Today mountain gorillas face many threats. War and conflicts near the Virunga Mountains have disturbed their forest habitat. People fleeing the conflicts have moved into their habitat and cleared the forest to build farms. Mountain gorillas are also sometimes injured or killed by traps set for other animals. Human diseases are another serious threat to gorillas. Gorillas who come into contact with humans may become sick. This is because their immune system cannot fight human diseases.

Scientists estimate that there are only 880 mountain gorillas remaining in the wild. They are considered a critically endangered species. This means there is a very high risk they could disappear from the earth forever.

Wildlife organizations are working hard to protect these large and gentle animals. The number of mountain gorillas is slowly beginning to increase.

Their future is still uncertain though. The race to save them is far from over.

Questions

1. Why do mountain gorillas have thicker fur than other great apes?
2. How do we know that mountain gorillas are social animals?
3. Name two threats to mountain gorillas.
4. What does it mean to be a “critically endangered species”?

Vocabulary List

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. primate
2. troops
3. herbivores
4. habitat
5. immune

Context Clues

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

1. "These gorillas are members of the **primate** family known as great apes"
 - a. elementary
 - b. wild; untamed
 - c. living on land
 - d. biologic order of mammals

2. "They live together in small groups known as **troops**"
 - a. wanderers; travelers
 - b. bands or companies
 - c. schools; classes
 - d. fruit eaters

3. "As for their diet, mountain gorillas are **herbivores**"
 - a. plant eaters; vegetarians
 - b. harvesters
 - c. hungry eaters
 - d. nocturnal or night eaters

4. "War and conflicts near the Virunga Mountains have disturbed their forest **habitat**"
 - a. social structure
 - b. food source
 - c. home territory; environment
 - d. routine; habits

5. "This is because their **immune** system cannot fight human diseases"
 - a. protection or resistance
 - b. food processing
 - c. inferior or poor
 - d. breathing; inhaling