

Nature of the beast

In Uganda, people and primates face unique struggles

By HOLMES ROLSTON III

For the Coloradoan

"Wow, he's huge."

The silverback gorilla appeared from deep shade, a hairy hulk, 15 feet away. He was black as midnight, except for the white back band marking his age.

I'd been watching his harem of four females and five youngsters. The dominant male had to be nearby. I made out a gigantic foot thrust through some fig leaves. Still, I wasn't prepared for his enormous size — 450 pounds and more than 5 feet tall. He was twice the size of the females, and my guide estimated him at more than 30 years old.

Gorillas rest during midday. Two immatures had been climbing on their reclining mother's breast, with play-chuckle calls and grunts. One chased the other, who ran behind the tree and climbed on his father. That provoked the old male to step forth.

Startled, especially by his massive head with its human-like face, I realized why no African animal has given rise to more legends than the mountain gorilla. Unfortunately, we often have read our most beastly traits into the gorilla, which is as misunderstood as the big bad wolf.

I was tracking gorillas in Bwindi Impenetrable Forest in western Uganda. Here, too, we found chimpanzee nests and heard their calls. The chimps we managed to see, however, were in nearby Kibale Forest. I was seeking an encounter between Earth's three most highly evolved primates — the third species, of course, includes myself.

The mountain gorilla is the world's largest and most endangered primate. None survive in captivity; lowland gorillas in zoos are another species. One sees mountain gorillas wild or not at all.

Only about 600 remain and more than half are in this park. The others, made famous by Diane Fossey's "Gorillas in the Mist," live not far away in a park crossing the boundaries of Uganda, Rwanda and the Congo. There, poachers, meat hunters, horrific civil war, refugees and unruly soldiers decimate them.

Apprehensive, we rose well before daybreak and were early on the trail. After several hours, the trails faded and our guide, machete in hand, was whacking a way through thorny vines, lianas and downed trees. We found fresh scat and broken bushes where they had nested the night before.

Another kilometer and a half, tiring from the trek, I paused to rest, wondering how to get through ahead. Suddenly, one of those black patches in the forest moved. There were shiny, beady eyes looking back. I was encountering gorillas face to face. After watching for 20 minutes, one youngster came even closer, climbed a tree and looked our way. I had to step back. We had been warned to stay at least 5 meters away, not for our sakes but for the gorillas' sakes. They catch human diseases. Only six of us were permitted to watch and only for an hour, lest we stress these rarest of primates.

The next day we found a different



Courtesy Holmes Rolston III

RARE: A silverback mountain gorilla at Bwindi Impenetrable Forest in Uganda peels the bark off a branch.

group of 18 gorillas. I got to see the silverback beat his chest and hear him give a hoot-call series, asserting his dominance.

The encroaching subsistence farmers press even the Bwindi gorillas, with banana and tea fields right up to the edge of the park. The Ugandan Wildlife Authority is now resolute about saving them. My best evidence was three soldiers armed with automatic rifles, one ahead and two behind us. The soldiers were to protect us, we were assured, not from the gorillas but from the guerrillas.

I recalled that my own trip had been twice postponed. In 1999, terrorists killed eight tourists in a campground that I was scheduled to use three weeks later. In 2001, my tracking was postponed when robbers assaulted tourists. Uganda is more stable now, and this time I was more fortunate.

The chimpanzees were just as hard to

see. We first saw them with tantalizing glimpses when they made jumps high overhead. With persistence, we were rewarded with better views. There was a mother swinging from a limb with one arm and her infant in another.

We saw more than gorillas and chimps. With persistence, we managed to see eight primate species.

Uganda is "the pearl of Africa," wrote Winston Churchill in 1908. Uganda is well-watered, fertile and the forests are lush. Bwindi Forest has the richest faunal and floral diversity in East Africa. The bird life is marvelous; there were kob (an antelope), waterbuck, elephants, lions and hyenas. In a cave, I saw 10,000 large fruit bats and watched a huge python eat two of them. Banded mongoose followed each other closely and moved like a huge snake across the field.

Uganda, as Ugandans reminded us is

"a bloodstained pearl," recalling the dictator Idi Amin. Poverty and disease, especially AIDS, remain challenging, as does an escalating human population. But today there is hope with the hard-ship.

I could see that in the faces of women hoeing the fields and carrying water gracefully atop their heads. I could see it most of all in the children smiling, constantly waving to us, poor though they were.

My Uganda primate encounters left me with a more lasting search for human origins and future hopes. The Ugandans face an ongoing challenge like none other on Earth. Here the human species, attempting to overcome tragedy, is seeking to conserve these nearest-of-our-primate kin. Paradoxically, in that very caring, we reveal the still quite stupendous divide that separates us from them.