

# GORILLAS: GREATEST OF THE APES



*From the point of view of hemoglobin structure, it appears that the gorilla is just an abnormal human or man an abnormal gorilla . . .*

EMILE ZUCKERKANDL, 1963

*Once again I marveled at the sense of curiosity gorillas possess.*

DIAN FOSSEY

**FEW ANIMALS HAVE CAPTURED** the public imagination more than gorillas, the largest of the great apes and the largest living primates. Like elephants, whales, lions, tigers, and polar bears, gorillas are charismatic megafauna, among nature's largest living creatures in the animal kingdom. The public can't seem to get enough of them. In fact, gorillas were the first apes known to the Western world. The first mention of any great ape in the written records of Western civilization occurred in 470 BC, when a group of colonists reached West Africa. There the colonists killed three females the locals called "gorillas." The dead gorillas were flayed and their skins brought back to Carthage where they were displayed at the Melkarth Temple dedicated to Juno.

Two thousand years passed before Western civilization encountered gorillas again. This time their size and alleged ferocity left a more permanent impression. Reports of large, hairy creatures, perhaps part human but exceptionally strong and aggressive, fit prevailing images of Africa, the so-called dark continent.



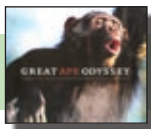
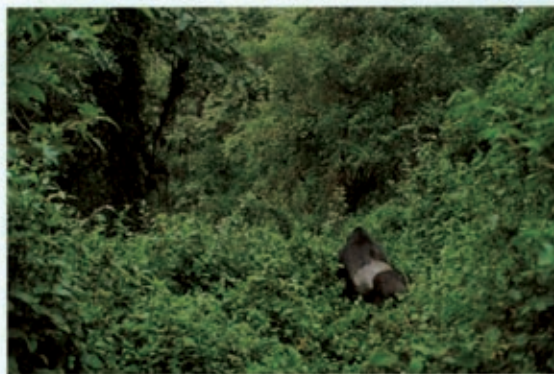
Not until the mid-nineteenth century did the stories of the hairy "gorilli" begin to be accepted as more fact than fiction. In 1847 a Christian missionary, Thomas Savage, collaborated with an anatomist, publishing a detailed description based on a single skull from Gabon and reports gathered in Africa. Even then there was confusion distinguishing between the great apes. Although the gorilla was finally declared separate from the other great apes, it was still termed a "new species of orang."

Unfortunately, Savage emphasized the gorilla's size and savagery, describing the male's "indescribable ferocity" and emphasizing that while hunting gorillas, if the gun failed to go off, the encounter could easily be fatal for the hunter. But the American big game hunter and traveler, Paul du Chaillu, probably did more than any other person to perpetuate the myth of the brutish, blood-thirsty gorilla. Chaillu was also frank in suggesting that part of the thrill of killing gorillas resided in the "dreadful note of human agony" that accompanied their deaths. The vicarious thrill of killing something almost human resonates in his books, in which he recounted his exploits killing these "hellish dream creatures . . . half man, half beast." These books attracted much attention and laid the foundation for the general belief that gorillas are monsters of nature. Museum displays and statues of large male gorillas mounted on their hind legs as if ready to charge, with their teeth bared and mouths foaming, also contributed to the image of a mighty "man-eating beast."

This image culminated in the film *King Kong*, which became the highest grossing film of 1933. The story of King Kong is essentially a more vigorous, brutalized version of the old European folktale "Beauty and the Beast." King Kong was 50 feet tall, king of the gorillas, to whom African villagers sacrificed beautiful maidens. He was captured and brought to North America where he escaped, climbed the Empire State Building, and was brought down by machine gun fire shot from airplanes. His downfall was caused by his love for the glamorous blonde Fay Wray.

The myth of the brutal ape was perpetuated in films like *King Kong*, but it still lives on today. Best-selling author Michael Crichton's book *Congo*, with its good gorillas (including the signing gorilla heroine) and its evil gorillas—a Hollywood blockbuster movie in the 1990s—may have reinterpreted the stereotypes, but it failed to eliminate them. As recently as 2003, while I was at a zoo taking a picture of an adult male gorilla, a Korean tourist who spoke only a bit of English came up to me, smiled, pointed at the large ape and said, "King Kong!"

The gorilla is not only the largest living primate, it is also the largest of all primates known to science. (The fossil *Gigantopithecus* has equally large teeth but its actual body dimensions and weight are not known.) How large are gorillas? Very large, indeed. Some male gorillas have weighed over 500 pounds and stood over six feet tall when upright.



In the late 1950s George Schaller, a lean and stern-looking American zoologist, conducted the first scientific study of gorillas. Writer and naturalist Peter Matthiessen portrayed Schaller as a man not much seen but whose presence is deeply felt, much like the shadowy subject of Matthiessen's book, *The Snow Leopard*. In his groundbreaking study, Schaller overcame the gorillas' fear and resistance by wearing drab clothing and by resolutely and quietly tracking them until they finally learned to accept him. Jane Goodall once told me that when she first met Schaller, shortly after she began her own pioneering work, she followed him around awestruck because he had gotten close enough to actually observe wild mountain gorillas while at that point she couldn't get within half a mile of the chimpanzees she was trying to study.

But not until the long-term studies of Dian Fossey did attitudes toward gorillas begin to change. Almost singlehandedly, Fossey dissolved the man-eater image and replaced it with that of the gentle giant. Fossey published articles in *National Geographic*, wrote the popular book *Gorillas in the Mist*, and attracted major media attention as she lectured extensively throughout North America. After Fossey's brutal murder, the film, based on the book with Sigourney Weaver in the title role, was instrumental in sealing the public's approval of gorillas. With extensive documentation, Fossey revealed gorillas as gentle vegetarians and the allegedly fearsome and ferocious adult males as gentle and caring fathers.

