

GORILLA HUNTING IN SOUTHERN NIGERIA

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See note on author at end of article.

IT should be remarked at the outset of this article that no attempt is being made at giving a biological treatise, nor have I any intention of formulating any theory, or of laying down any laws governing the habits and mode of life of the gorilla. The following is merely a record of observations taken during an expedition into the gorilla country, and, as the time at my disposal was extremely limited, the habits observed and noted cannot necessarily be held to apply generally to this species of gorilla. It seems evident that the individuality of the gorilla is very much more strongly marked than that of any other animal, and it is therefore quite possible that the habits and mode of life of one individual gorilla, or group of gorillas, may differ considerably from those of another.

It has been for some time known that gorilla existed in the Cameroons Province of Nigeria, but it is only recently that their presence was suspected in any other part of the country. Stories are current among the Ibo tribes of great apes, which are occasionally seen around their villages, but there can be little doubt that these apes are merely chimpanzees, this supposition being borne out by the fact that no word exists in the Ibo language for the gorilla, while the chimpanzee is named by them "Ozo." I am open to contradiction when I state that the presence of these gorillas in the Ogoja Province was first discovered by Dr. C. Dyce-Sharpe, although none had actually been seen until the time of the present expedition. The gorillas at present under reference roam in bands, varying in numbers from two to over fifty, through the thickly-forested mountain country round the intersection of the Obudu, Ikom and Mamfe boundaries, on the eastern slopes of the Sankwala mountains. Their haunts are most easily reached from the village of Umaji, in the Obudu District, and it is remarkable, in view of how near the animals approach to that village, that their presence has not been discovered earlier by Europeans.

The local natives have, of course, always been aware of their existence, and the more courageous among them have frequently hunted them, but they have not so far broadcasted their knowledge. In view of the ferocious and deadly nature of the animals, native gorilla-bunters are few in number, and those that have the courage to pursue the beasts thoroughly deserve the success they obtain. To face an enraged gorilla when armed with a modern magazine rifle can be no pleasant experience, but the same situation when one is armed with only a flintlock musket, which has probably already been discharged, must be enough to discourage all but the boldest spirits.

Towards the end of February, 1930, the expedition wound its way through dense forest up the side of the mountain overhanging Umaji. From the moment when the outskirts of the

village had been left behind it was necessary to cut the road through the dense undergrowth, and therefore progress was slow. After four or five hours' climb a halt was made at a mountain stream, about half-way up the mountain-side. We were now on the borders of the gorillas' haunts, but so far the only sound which had broken the silence of the forest had been the occasional startling cry of the colobus monkey.

Half an hour after we had left the stream the muffled drumming of the male gorilla was distinctly heard. Had we not been far from any Village the noise would have passed unnoticed, as that of a native tom-tom. As it drew nearer, however, the difference could be clearly distinguished. The drumming of a male gorilla, although of the same pitch as the larger native drums, is more muffled, and therefore does not carry as far as the clear note of the drum.

As the gorillas approached they could be distinctly heard breaking their way through the thick undergrowth. From the sound it was clear that we had met with a very small band, in fact probably only a pair. This surmise was borne out as the gorillas drew near us. Suddenly the female gave tongue, her unearthly cry echoing through the forest. The cry of a female gorilla is a most eerie sound, especially when it suddenly sounds through the apparently deserted forest. It was clear that they were following the faintly-defined track on which we stood, and which had probably been worn by the frequent passage of the animals. There appeared therefore to be a strong chance of capturing the approaching couple, for the number certainly did not exceed two. However, in this instance Fate was against us, for just at the moment when the beasts would have come within our range of vision two fowls, which constituted the rations for the expedition, took it into their heads to fight. At the first sound of the scuffle the gorillas were off, and could be heard crashing through the undergrowth. We pursued them for some distance, but from the first the chase was hopeless, as the animals travel at an incredible speed when frightened. The party then re-assembled and continued the journey to the top of the mountain, which was reached some half an hour later. As the summit was reached the trees fell away, being replaced by short grass, which, having been recently burned, was easy to walk upon. Far into the distance on every side stretched virgin forests with no sign of human habitation, and it was easy to understand why the gorillas had chosen this spot for their home.

Camp was pitched on the grass on the top of the mountain, while the hunters descended into the forest on the other side to search for game. On that day it would seem that the gorillas had got wind of our coming, as none were either seen or heard, although many traces of them were found. At sunset we returned to the camp for the night. However, Fortune had not entirely deserted us, as, just as the sun was setting, the silence was broken by the shriek of a female gorilla, which proceeded from a spot in the forest less than a mile below the camp. Another took up the cry, and yet others, until the forest was echoing with the unearthly noise. As their cry slowly sank into silence the deep roar of the male could be heard, ending in the muffled drumming which we had heard before. As the night descended

on us silence once more reigned, and nothing more was heard that night.

It was plain that the band of gorillas was spending the night in the vicinity of our camp, as they never stir after dark, but spend the day wandering round the forest, taking their rest at night. It was useless to attempt to follow them at once, as it would have been impossible to have found our way through the thick forest at night, and had we tried to do so we should have stood in some danger. The female gorilla makes her bed in the branches of trees, while her mate sleeps at the foot, ready to ward off intruders, and many native hunters, stalking the beasts after dark, have suddenly tumbled upon a male gorilla, who has shown his resentment at their intrusion in no unmistakable manner. We therefore determined to start Just before dawn on the following day.

Just as the night was beginning to pale we set off in the direction of the sounds heard on the preceding night, the spot having been carefully marked. For about half an hour we made our way painfully through the forest, until the practised eye of the hunter detected unmistakable signs of the presence of gorillas. At the same time we saw the animals' beds in the surrounding trees, although unfortunately they were empty.

From the aspect of these beds, which we examined, the gorilla would appear to be something of a sybarite. Cunningly made of branches bent together, they are thickly thatched with leaves, and offer as comfortable a resting place as any civilised human being could require. It is astonishing that, although the labour involved in the making of these beds cannot be inconsiderable, the gorillas never sleep more than once in the same spot, sometimes wandering many miles in the course of the day. Nor is there any record of such beds being occupied by other bands. This fact makes the stalking of the animals a difficult matter, as the hunter cannot station himself near these beds, and wait until the gorillas retire to rest.

After examining the beds we pushed on, following a faint, but clearly-defined, track, through the forest, which marked the direction taken by the gorillas. For two or three hours we followed them, continually coming across chewed pieces of fruit and wood, and at times small trees which had been torn up and gnawed. At last we decided that the pursuit was hopeless, and determined to retrace our steps, when suddenly, out of a thick clump of "bush" about two hundred yards above us, came a deep, muffled drumming, followed by the champing of powerful jaws, as the male gorilla partook of his morning meal.

We approached the spot softly, as the least sound would be sufficient to put the whole band to flight. Almost immediately we found our path blocked by a barrier of impenetrable thorn, and were therefore obliged to stand at the edge, waiting for the gorilla to make the next move. As we stood there round the trunk of a large tree in the middle of the clump appeared a female gorilla. Slowly and deliberately she climbed, until she reached a small cluster of fruit, which the natives call "bush mango," growing out of the tree after the fashion of mistletoe. As slowly she plucked the bunch and threw it to the ground, where other gorillas,

probably males, were waiting to receive it. She then climbed to the next bunch and repeated her action, this time, however, retaining a portion of it for her own consumption.

It is impossible adequately to describe the size and the ferocious appearance of the animal. Although only a female, and consequently by no means a record as regards size, she stood well over five feet in height, with a breadth of shoulder out of all proportion to her height. The point which first strikes one about the beast is the enormous length and thickness of its arms. Stretching almost to its feet, they are equal in girth to the thigh of a normal man, and give the impression of gigantic strength. It was remarkable that her thick fur was grey in colour. The native hunters assert that all female gorillas are of this colour, while the males vary in colour from black to red-brown. Whether this is true or not I am not in a position to say, but certainly my experience tends to confirm the assertion.

As we stood regarding this novel spectacle the gorilla saw us. Like a stone she dropped from the high tree, there was a loud crashing of bushes, and then all was silent again. The speed with which the band disappeared was astounding, and of course it was out of the question to pursue them, as having taken alarm, it was probable that they would travel many miles at full speed before stopping for a rest. We therefore returned once more to our camp.

By this time the day was well advanced, and the massing of heavy, dark clouds in the east predicted a stormy night. That morning all the carriers save one had been sent back to Umaji, as it was thought that the presence of so many men in that region would alarm the gorillas. Therefore the prospect of a night on the top of the mountain with a tornado raging, and with no means of shelter, was not very enthralling.

As the sun set the threatened storm broke, and for nearly five hours we were exposed to the fury of the elements, with no cover but what the trees of the forest afforded. Just about midnight, however, the rain ceased suddenly, and out of the bank of clouds the moon swung into sight. Almost immediately, from the valley below us, we heard the high-pitched cry of the chimpanzee. A moment after the chorus was swelled by the deep roar of the male gorilla, proceeding, to our surprise, from the same spot. For a few moments the cries continued, but, as the moon again became obscured, silence again reigned in the forest. As the gorilla does not cry at night, it appeared that the bright moonlight had been mistaken for daybreak, but unfortunately the darkness once again prevented us from making any attempt to approach the animals.

At dawn we again set off in the quest of our quarry, this time making what speed we could, in an attempt to surprise the beasts before they rose from their beds. After a short time we came upon their beds in the trees, and from the number of these it appeared that the band which we were pursuing was very large. The trail was this time clearly marked, and we lost no time in following them. This time it was plain that our quarry was not far ahead of us, and in a very short time we could hear them moving. It is surprising how, in spite of its enormous bulk, the gorilla moves naturally almost without a sound. It is only when they are

alarmed that the animals can be heard from any distance, and for this reason the hunting of them is very fatiguing. As one never knows when they are in the neighbourhood the hunter has always to proceed with the utmost cautiousness, taking care never to tread upon anything that is likely to snap, and thus make a noise loud enough to -scare the quick-eared beasts. When it is said that in a day's hunt it may be necessary to cover up to twenty miles of mountainous country almost on tiptoe some idea may be given of the physical strain involved.

We proceeded as swiftly and as noiselessly as possible for a short time, until from a spot almost directly over our heads came the shrill, ghastly chorus of a number of female gorillas, followed by the shrieks of chimpanzees. In another moment we came into full view of the band. Three or four large trees in front of us were swarming with female gorillas and chimpanzees, while in the undergrowth beneath the trees the enormous figures of the males could be clearly seen. Curiously enough the chimpanzees seemed to stand in no fear of the gorillas, but were mixing with the band, and playing with the young ones, as though they were of the same species. The females, some of whom had their young at their breasts, were busily engaged in supplying their mates with food from the trees.

For some moments we gazed on the fascinating scene, although it would have been an easy matter to have put a shot into any of the animals. Then a too enthusiastic native hunter, who could not bear the idea of losing a chance of fresh meat, lifted his musket and fired at a female on the tree. The range was however too great for such primitive weapons, and the shot was ineffective. There was a crash of branches, and almost immediately the forest was still again, with no sign of life. It seemed incredible that a moment ago the place had been teeming with life.

As the time at our disposal was exhausted we were obliged to give up this fascinating pursuit and to return to the plains. Owing to misfortune we had not had the opportunity for much useful observation. However, the mere fact of seeing a gorilla is an unforgettable experience, and we had had the good fortune of being able to confirm-certain theories as to these animals' mode of life. It was also interesting to note that the chimpanzee has no fear of fraternising with the acknowledged "monarch of the forest." While it is of course impossible to give any accurate estimate of the number of gorillas in this region, there is no doubt that they are very numerous. The band seen by us must have numbered no less than thirty, and on our return to the camp we received reports of two other large bands seen on that day in other directions, which could not possibly have had any connection with those seen by us. It is probable that their haunts extend from the Sankwala Mountains all along the Ikom-Obudu boundary as far as the Snake Mountain (Enye Etang), and for a considerable distance inside the Ikom and Mamfe Divisions. The toll taken by the native hunters has been comparatively small, and it is doubtful if it has had any effect on the numbers of the gorillas. It is gratifying, however, to think that the animals are now protected for ever, and stand in no danger from the professional European hunter and the collectors

for menageries.

Note on author, by Joyce Lowe

James G.C. Allen is one of the founder members of the Society, as listed on page 48 of the first issue, where his post is given as A.D.O. (i.e. Assistant District Officer). He also wrote an article on "Community Development up to date", in vol. 46, 3-9 (1981) under the name Godfrey Allen.

I received more information in 2009 regarding Mr Allen from one of our long-standing members, Mr F.D.B. (Roy) Somerset, who was enquiring if there had been an obituary of Godfrey Allen in the Nigerian Field (there has not). He had been in the Administration when Mr Allen was Resident in Port Harcourt. Mr Somerset writes:

He did not retire when Residents were abolished in preparation for Regional Self Government in 1957, but became Principal of a college in Lagos, and subsequently Chairman of a Development Board in the Rivers State. He came to Nigeria as an administrative cadet in 1926.

Mr Allen was appointed a C.M.G., but I do not know when. In his 1981 article, Mr Allen writes that in 1975 he was recalled from retirement to work with the Rivers State Government, and with the support of the Military Governor (Colonel Zamani Lequot) established the Rivers State Rural Development Association. This was very successful in setting up plantations and fishponds based on voluntary labour and self-help. However, the Land Use Decree of 1978 nationalised all land, making its sale or lease extremely complicated, and the actions of the new civilian government made continuation of the Association impossible.

If you put J.G.C.Allen into "Google", you will find that in 1948 he was the second piano teacher of Akin Euba, the Nigerian composer.