

UGANDA JUNE 26 2018

EASTERN MOUNTAIN GORILLAS WITH SANDWICH BIRD TOURS



Today was the day filled with anxiety, excitement and anticipation. We had been prepared for a tough trek with lots of ups and downs and scrambling through thick and thorn covered vegetation. We were told to have good footwear and wear gloves and were expected to be reasonably fit.

We left the lodge at 0530 and arrived at the gate of the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park at about 0800. We signed in and joined a half hour briefing about the forest and its gorillas, how to behave and what to expect on the trek. If that was to put our minds at rest, it did not work. Take a stick, hire a porter were the order of the day. We all had our individual porter, not only to carry our bags but to drag us up the slope when required. There was a guard with a rifle in case a rogue elephant should appear. We were told that if you can't go any further they will bring a stretcher to carry us to see the gorillas and in worst case scenarios a helicopter can be brought in to get us out of there.

So the walk started with a long downward slope, which of course had to be ascended on the way back. A short flat bit and up we went for what seemed like ages. After 45 minutes of walking the path, the call came through that the trackers, who had been in the forest since 07.30 had located the Bitukura family of Gorillas. A family of 11 animals consisting of a silverback, a retired adult male, a young male a couple of females and series of youngsters of differing ages including a baby.

We could hear the trackers but they were somewhere up the hill and so we were physically dragged up the 45 degree slope, slipping and sliding, by our porters. We now saw the need for individual porters. To say it was tough is perhaps an understatement. In fact it was a bit scary, but even the least mobile of us got there in the end. We were greeted by a sighting of an adult female busily stripping leaves of their stems when a young one appeared. They took absolutely no notice of us multi-coloured relatives with unusual hairdos and strange metal appendices. They just went about their business.





A little further down the track was the dominant silverback of the family also accompanied by a youngster and again he took no notice of us with our clicking cameras and staring into the distance with total disdain. Further females and youngsters were seen until a total of ten out of the eleven family members were seen and photographed. The ousted adult male who apparently sometimes joins the group had gone out for the day.

At one stage a young male with a baby on his back brushed my leg and walked within inches of our group.

It had been an incredible and quite humbling experience and one none of us will ever forget. I have had many amazing animal experiences on our tours but this one must be rated as the top one and perhaps on this occasion the photographs do the experience justice.

We had indeed been very fortunate to meet a

family so close to the gate, to have such excellent trackers and porters to enable us to see the animals which fortunately sat out in the open for much of the time.

We returned to the gate which as the itinerary suggested was far easier than the inward walk with our minds occupied with thoughts from the last hour.

Then we had the de-brief and the graduation ceremony. We were each presented with a personal certificate to indicate our survival and successful Gorilla sighting.

We returned to the lodge and on arrival the rain came down. Such timing. It put paid to the afternoon's bird-walk but I don't think many were too worried as this morning's activities had drained our energy banks.

The status of the Eastern Mountain Gorilla is classed as Endangered although through conservation, strict anti-poaching procedures and tourist dollars the numbers, we were told, have increased from 440 in 2002 to may be 1000 today in Uganda. In the Congo however things apparently are not so positive. Although it is quite expensive to visit the Gorillas we were told that the money is not a payment for seeing them but a donation towards their conservation. We were quite happy to accept that notion. *John van der Dol*

