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# THE YEAR OF THE GORILLA

by George B. Schaller

‘ENTHRALLING ... A YOUNG SCIENTIST’S ACCOUNT OF WILD AFRICAN GORILLAS IN THEIR JUNGLE WORLD.’

Sally Carrighar author of “Wild Heritage”

WITH 32 PAGES OF PHOTOGRAPHS

# THE YEAR OF THE GORILLA

is one of the most remarkable books ever written—a fascinating, exciting, informative, and absolutely unique book about the world's largest primates, the mountain gorillas of Africa.

Dr. George Schaller, a young American zoologist, went to the high rain forests of East Central Africa to observe gorillas in their natural habitat. Here, alone and unarmed, he literally lived among the free-roaming gorilla tribes for weeks at a stretch.

Day after day, he observed gorillas at close hand; he saw them feeding, playing, sleeping, mating, and caring for their young. He describes their ways of expressing anger, curiosity, fear, and affection—and their reactions to him. He came to know them as individuals and was permitted to approach them closely and even to bed down in their sleeping area at night.

Out of this experience he has created a book that is certain to become a classic of the new science of ethology—the study of animal behavior in the freedom of the natural environment. Remarkable both for its delightful description of gorilla characteristics and for its marvelous close-up photographs, **THE YEAR OF THE GORILLA** tells us more than has ever previously been known about these animals—and much about ourselves.

*From the reviews of this book:*

"Absorbingly interesting. His book deserves, and should get, wide attention . . . a classic study of animal behavior that will give us new insights into ourselves as well as the gorillas."

—Marston Bates, New York *Herald Tribune*

"His probing eyes seem to miss nothing, and his descriptions have the ring of 20th-century, scientific accuracy . . . . Whether the author is tracking gorillas, slipping past elephant herds on narrow jungle paths, avoiding poacher's deadfalls, or routing Watusi invaders, this is an exciting book."

—Irven DeVore, Department of Anthropology,  
Harvard University, in *Science* magazine

"This is one of the best animal books in years—and I am not forgetting *Born Free*, *Rascal*, or Gavin Maxwell's other book, *Ring of Bright Water* . . . a vastly engaging close-up of these wonderful creatures."

—Walter Hogan, *San Francisco Chronicle*

"Reading this book is to know the gorillas almost as well as the author did. His was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, which he has graphically and charmingly placed on record."

—John Barkham, *Saturday Review Syndicate*

# THE YEAR OF THE GORILLA

By **GEORGE B. SCHALLER**

*with line drawings by the author*

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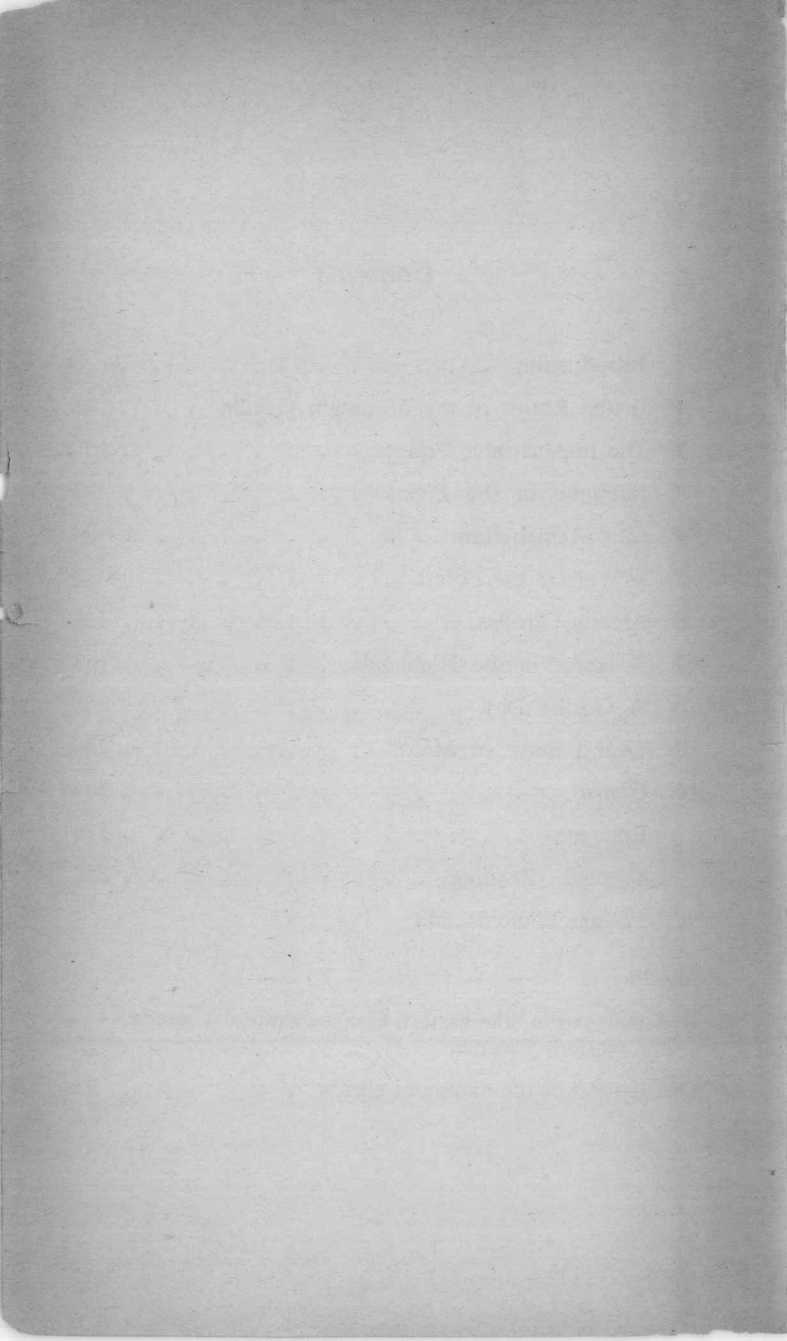
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To KAY

*I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so  
placid and self contain'd,  
I stand and look at them long and long.  
They do not sweat and whine about their condition,  
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their  
sins.  
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,  
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the  
mania of owning things,  
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived  
thousands of years ago,  
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.*

*"Song of Myself"*

WALT WHITMAN

## INTRODUCTION



Chance remarks and luck have often played an important role in my life, and the way in which I came to study gorillas was no exception. In January, 1957, I entered the office of Dr. John T. Emlen, professor of zoölogy at the University of Wisconsin, to ask a question. At that time I was one of his graduate students working in bird behavior.

Doc leaned back in his chair and somewhat jokingly asked: "Would you like to study gorillas?"

"Sure," I replied impulsively.

Dr. Emlen told me that Harold Coolidge, of the National Academy of Sciences, was eager to launch an expedition to study the behavior of free-living gorillas. Coolidge is, I later found out, one of those exceptional scientists who is also a good organizer. The idea of studying gorillas had occurred to him in 1927, when, as a member of the Harvard African Expedition, he had visited gorilla country in Central Africa. Unable to study the animals himself, he was still looking for someone to do it. I went home and the same evening wrote him a letter.

The path from an office in Wisconsin to the forests of

Africa is not a straight one. Many letters had to be written, a sponsor had to be found, the help of foreign institutions had to be sought, and, most importantly, money had to be obtained. One of my first tasks was to learn what had been written about the creature I proposed to study.

Probably no animal has fired the imagination of man to the same extent as has the gorilla. Its manlike appearance and tremendous strength, its remote habitat and reputed belligerence, have endowed the beast with a peculiar fascination and stirred popular and scientific interest. It appears to possess some transcendent quality which inspires every visitor to its realm to put his experiences in print. I read through literally hundreds of popular books, articles, and newspaper stories, and I examined scientific papers and glanced through textbooks. If mere verbiage were a measure of knowledge there would be little left to study. Unfortunately, the serious researcher must discard most published information about the behavior of free-living gorillas. Much of it is sensational, irresponsible and exaggerated prevarications, with little concern for truth. The gorilla is usually pictured as a ferocious and bloodthirsty beast with an amazing array of human and superhuman traits, all basically treacherous. Another common piece of literature is the intrepid hunter's tale, which may contain useful information, but, since the ape is studied along the sights of a rifle, the value of the tale is curtailed. Such accounts usually include a photograph of a gorilla, shot through the head and propped against a tree with our hero squatting next to the huge cadaver. Then, of course, there is the innocuous adventurer, who, camera in hand, crashes through gorilla land with a long string of porters at his heels. The finding of a gorilla nest or perhaps the brief sighting of the ape itself makes him an expert on all aspects of the gorilla's life history. He writes a learned article or even a book, but to compensate for his lack of knowledge he includes native tales, rumors, and statements from older literature, no matter how dubious. Much of such questionable information about gorillas has been copied and

recopied so often that through mere repetition it has achieved the ring of truth.

As I first began to read, I did not know what was true and what was false, but early in my searching I became aware that, if I discarded all generalizations not based on supporting facts and all subjective interpretations, I had hardly any concrete information to go on. There were naturally some conspicuous exceptions, and from these I learned about the history of the discovery of the gorilla, its taxonomy, and the broad outlines of the ape's behavior. Yet, I thought, here is a creature, considered with the chimpanzee the nearest relative of man, and we know almost nothing about its life in the world. Does it live in small family units or in large groups; how many males and females are there in each group; what do groups do when they meet; how far do they travel each day; how long are infants dependent on their mothers? These and many other basic questions were unknown in 1957. In an age when man more than ever before is wondering about his origins and worrying about his behavior, in an age when he is reaching for the moon, he is just beginning to study his closest relations and himself. As the German dramatist Friedrich Hebbel stated: "It would be good if man concerned himself more with the history of his nature than that of his deeds."

The eastern or lowland gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*) inhabits West Africa from southern Nigeria southward through Cameroun, Gabon, Rio Muni, and almost to the Republic of the Congo. From the coast, its range extends inland about five hundred miles to the vicinity of the Ubangi River, a tributary of the Congo River, a vast area of flatlands and hills densely covered with rain forest. Few Europeans penetrated these hot and humid jungles until the present century, with the result that the gorilla, the largest of the apes, was the last ape to become known to science.

In 470 B.C., Hanno set out from Carthage with a grand expedition consisting of sixty fifty-oared galleys loaded with colonists and merchandise. In the foothills of the mountains of Sierra Leone, the colonists met some hairy

sylvan creatures who, when attacked, threw stones at them. Three of the animals, called "gorillai," were captured. Pliny relates that at the time of the Roman invasion in 146 B.C., two of the skins were still preserved at Carthage in the temple of Astarte. Although this is the first historical use of the term "gorilla," the animals in question were probably baboons or chimpanzees.

In 1559, Andrew Battell, an English adventurer, was taken prisoner by the Portuguese. He was enrolled in their colonial troops in West Africa and spent several years near the Mayombe River. There he met two kinds of apes, and their description was published in 1625 in an obscure book entitled *Purchas his Pilgrimes*. One of the apes, the *pongo*, is undoubtedly the gorilla.

This Pongo is in all proportions like a man; but that he is more like a giant in stature, than a man: for he is very tall, and that a man's face, hollow-eyed, with long haire upon his browes. His face and eares are without haire, and his hands also. His bodie is full of haire, but not very thicke, and it is of a dunnish colour. He differeth not from a man, but in his legs; for they have no calfe. . . . They sleepe in the trees, and build shelters for the raine.

Although Battell was the first European to hear of the gorilla, his narrative was ignored. In 1774, Lord Monboddoo received a letter from a sea captain which described an ape, probably the gorilla: "This wonderful and frightful production of nature walks upright like a man; is from 7 to 9 feet high, when at maturity, thick in proportion and amazingly strong. . . ." Thomas Bowdich published in 1819 a book called *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashanti* in which he discusses several apes from the Gabon, among them the *ingenu*, which is generally five feet tall and four feet broad. And three years later George Maxwell mentions a great ape surpassing the chimpanzee in size. But the credit for the actual discovery of the gorilla belongs to two missionaries, Wilson and Savage by name. When Savage was visiting Wilson at the Gabon River in 1846 he saw in the house "a skull represented by the natives to be a monkey-like

animal, remarkable for its size, ferocity, and habits." Both men collected several skulls in the ensuing months and these they sent to the eminent anatomists Jeffries Wyman and Richard Owen. Savage included a description of the life and habits of the gorilla, an account which set the descriptive pattern for the next hundred years.

They are exceedingly ferocious, and always offensive in their habits, never running from man as does the Chimpanzee. . . . It is said that when the male is first seen he gives a terrific yell that resounds far and wide through the forest, something like *kh-ah!* prolonged and shrill. . . . The females and young at the first cry quickly disappear; he then approaches the enemy in great fury, pouring out his cries in quick succession. The hunter awaits his approach with gun extended; if his aim is not sure he permits the animal to grasp the barrel, and as he carries it to his mouth he fires; should the gun fail to go off, the barrel is crushed between his teeth, and the encounter soon proves fatal to the hunter.

Not to be outdone by this tale, the anatomist Owen, briefly abandoning science for mythology, wrote in 1859:

Negroes when stealing through shades of the tropical forest become sometimes aware of the proximity of one of these frightfully formidable apes by the sudden disappearance of one of their companions, who is hoisted up into the tree, uttering, perhaps, a short choking cry. In a few minutes he falls to the ground a strangled corpse.

In 1856 the American explorer Paul du Chaillu arrived in West Africa. He was the first white man actually to shoot a gorilla, and his colorful and highly exaggerated account, published in 1861 in his famous *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa*, attributed even greater ferocity to the gorilla than had his predecessors. Here he describes the climax of a gorilla hunt:

And now truly he reminded me of nothing but some hellish dream creature—a being of that hideous order, half-man, half-beast, which we find pictured by old artists in some representations of the infernal regions. He advanced a few

steps—then stopped to utter that hideous roar again—advanced again, and finally stopped when at a distance of about six yards from us. And here, just as he began another of his roars, beating his chest in rage, we fired, and killed him.

Du Chaillu popularized the gorilla with his accounts, but he was castigated by scientists because his descriptions were regarded as fantasy. This was unfortunate, for he was basically a competent and reliable observer. Rumor has it that the publisher returned the first draft of his book because it was not lively enough. In spite of the exaggerated descriptions, Du Chaillu's account of gorillas remained as one of the most accurate for a hundred years.

Today the habits of the lowland gorillas are still largely unknown. Hunters shoot them, zoo collectors catch them, and explorers take random notes on them in passing, but only one scientist has made a definite long-term attempt to study the ape. In 1896, Garner published a book on his experiences in West Africa. Apparently intimidated by the supposed belligerent nature of the gorilla, he built himself an iron cage in the forest, and thus protected sat day after day, waiting for gorillas to come to him. As might be expected, his success was as restricted as he. Fred Merfield, a guide, published in 1956 the best account of gorilla hunting since Du Chaillu's. A few scientists, too, have written short papers, but there is much we do not know. The lowland gorilla still awaits study.

At the turn of the century the focus on the gorilla shifted



from West Africa a thousand miles to the east, to the mountainous regions of the eastern Congo and western Uganda. In this area the Albertine rift stretches like a gigantic ditch, about thirty miles wide, from the upper White Nile to the southern end of Lake Tanganyika, representing, as it were, the backbone of Africa. A series of large lakes line the bottom of the rift valley, and these include, from north to south, Lakes Albert, Edward, Kivu, and Tanganyika. Two isolated mountain massifs project from the valley floor. Between Lakes Albert and Edward rise the fabled Mountains of the Moon or the Ruwenzories to an altitude of 16,730 feet. Just to the north of Lake Kivu, the chain of eight Virunga Volcanoes forms a huge dam across the floor of the rift valley. Both the Ruwenzori Mountains and the Virunga Volcanoes are at least partially included in the eight-thousand-square-mile Albert National Park. A chaotic jumble of mountains, reaching a height of ten thousand feet, borders the rift valley for much of its length.

It was in this spectacular and largely unknown area that rumors of the presence of a large ape reached the early explorers of Central Africa. In November, 1861, Speke and Grant traveled northward near the eastern border of what is now Rwanda and Burundi, the first Europeans to penetrate this region in search of the source of the Nile. They were told of man-like monsters, "who could not converse with men," living in the mountains toward the west. In 1866, Livingstone walked from Ujiji, an Arab slave trading post on the shores of Lake Tanganyika, westward to Nyangwe, a town which the Arabs had established on the upper Congo River in about 1860. Along the way he observed natives as they battled with creatures which he called gorillas, but which were undoubtedly chimpanzees. The explorer Stanley expressed his belief in 1890 that gorillas existed in the northeastern Congo. E. Grogan walked from Capetown to Cairo in 1898, the first man to span the continent in this manner. While hunting elephants in the Virunga Volcanoes he "came on the skeleton of a gigantic ape." In 1902, Captain Oscar von Beringe, a German officer, traveled from Usum-

bura, a town on the northern end of Lake Tanganyika, northward through Ruanda-Urundi, at that time a German colony. The main purpose of the trip was to impress the native chiefs and the Belgian border posts with the military might of the German empire. On October 17, 1902, Von Beringe and a Dr. England attempted to climb to the summit of Mt. Sabinio, one of the peaks in the Virunga Volcanoes. Just after making camp on a narrow ridge at an altitude of 9,300 feet, they spotted several apes above them:

We spotted from our camp a group of black, large apes which attempted to climb to the highest peak of the volcano. Of these apes we managed to shoot two, which fell with much noise into a canyon opening to the northeast of us. After 5 hours of hard work we managed to haul up one of these animals with ropes. It was a large man-like ape, a male, about 1½ m. high and weighing 200 pounds. The chest without hair, the hands and feet of huge size. I could unfortunately not determine the genus of the ape. He was of a previously unknown size for a chimpanzee, and the presence of gorillas in the Lake region has as yet not been determined.

This paragraph lies buried in a thoroughly uninspired account of Von Beringe's trip in *Deutsches Kolonialblatt*, a colonial newspaper. Von Beringe sent the skeleton of one of the apes to the German anatomist Matschie, who was known for "creating" ape species and subspecies with wild abandon, often on the basis of one skull alone. True to form, he noted that the gorilla collected by Von Beringe was different from the West African ones. Known today as the eastern or mountain gorilla, the subspecies has been named *Gorilla gorilla beringei* in honor of its discoverer.

The mountain gorilla resembles the lowland gorilla so much that, if only one animal is at hand, even an anthropologist would have difficulty in deciding to which race it belongs. The anatomist A. Schultz has listed thirty-four morphological differences between the two, most of them minor. For example, the mountain gorilla has longer hair and a longer palate than the lowland gorilla.