

News

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Photo © Bob Campbell
Dian, Coco, & Pucker

Dian Fossey

1932-1985

Twenty years after her tragic murder, how do her friends remember her life and work?



Photo © Bob Campbell
Dian's research notes

In Her Footsteps

Liz Williamson

Dr. Williamson lived in Rwanda for eight years, and for six of these she was Director of the Karisoke Research Center. She is currently a Research Fellow at the University of Stirling in Scotland.

I never met Dian Fossey. However, having spent six years as Director of the Karisoke Research Center, I have often been asked what it was like to “follow in her footsteps.” There is no quick and easy reply, except that 90 percent of my job was difficult and unpleasant, but the gorillas were so utterly wonderful that they made everything else worthwhile.

I had been inspired by Dian’s book *Gorillas in the Mist*, which I read with intense interest

as a student studying western lowland gorillas in Gabon. Together with the director of the Lopé Research Station, Dr. Caroline Tutin, we hoped to emulate the successful habituation of gorillas and chimpanzees to facilitate research on their ecology and behaviour. But during the 16 months that I was working in the forest, collecting data for my thesis, I hardly ever saw a gorilla! Nonetheless, I was developing an inexplicable passion for these gentle giants.

I arrived at Karisoke ten years after Dian’s death, excited and knowing that I was in an extremely privileged position. Three research groups had evolved from the groups Dian and others had studied in the 1970s and 1980s. Group 5, known since the beginnings of Karisoke, had grown and split into Pablo’s group and Shinda’s group. Then in 1985, a few months before Dian’s murder, Beetsme’s group was formed from the remnants of Group 4 and Nunkie’s group.

It was overwhelming trying to recognise 72 gorillas by their noseprints,



Pablo, one of “Dian’s” gorillas, now a silverback. Photo © David Pluth

not to mention learning their names. Many—such as Umushikirano and Ubwigenge—were in the local language Kinyarwanda. Slowly, I came to know the gorillas as individuals, and each became increasingly fascinating as their characters took form in my mind. I flicked through the pages of *Gorillas in the Mist*, delighting in photographs of young Titus, Cantsbee, and “dirty data stealer” Pablo—all now impressive silverbacks. To this day, 15 of the celebrity gorillas named by Dian are thriving.

In the last chapter of her 1983 book, Dian wondered how Nunkie’s females would fare during the “next ten years.” She would have been more than happy to know that four of the six were going strong throughout the 1990s (two, Petula and her daughter Augustus, left the study population while Dian was alive). Three survived well into their thirties and became grandmothers: Fuddle (quite intolerant of humans and scary), Simba (mother of Digit’s sole infant Mwelu), and Pandora (who admirably raised her offspring

despite her terribly deformed hands). At over 40 years old, Papoose is the oldest “Karisoke” female still living.

Mountain gorilla conservation is not only a battle against poaching, habitat encroachment and other illegal activities, but at the end of my first year at Karisoke the situation in the northwest of Rwanda took a drastic turn when thousands of refugees returned from neighboring Zaire. Some invaded the volcanoes, since the rugged terrain of the gorillas’ forest

home provided a base from which the local population could be infiltrated. People living around the park suffered a great deal at this time. The houses of gorilla trackers were looted for boots, raingear, and other equipment useful to rebels hiding in the forest. We were forced to suspend field activities and retreat to the towns.

The national park was closed to tourists for most of 1997 and 1998, and Karisoke staff could not monitor the gorillas for 14 months. Although I rarely felt in personal danger, the trackers were terrorized and many lost wives, children, or their own lives. Especially tragic were the murders of the head of anti-poaching Vaturi, Beetsme tracker Nshogoza, and Group 5 tracker Banyangandora—all trained by Dian. It was a frightening period, and we worried terribly, not knowing what was happening to the gorillas.

To combat danger, the field staff underwent paramilitary training to better protect both themselves and the gorillas. In late 1998, we negotiated with the military to be allowed to check on the research

groups. Slowly we were able to recommence visits and regular anti-poaching patrols and were hugely relieved to find most of the gorillas alive and well, although the elderly Pansy had disappeared.

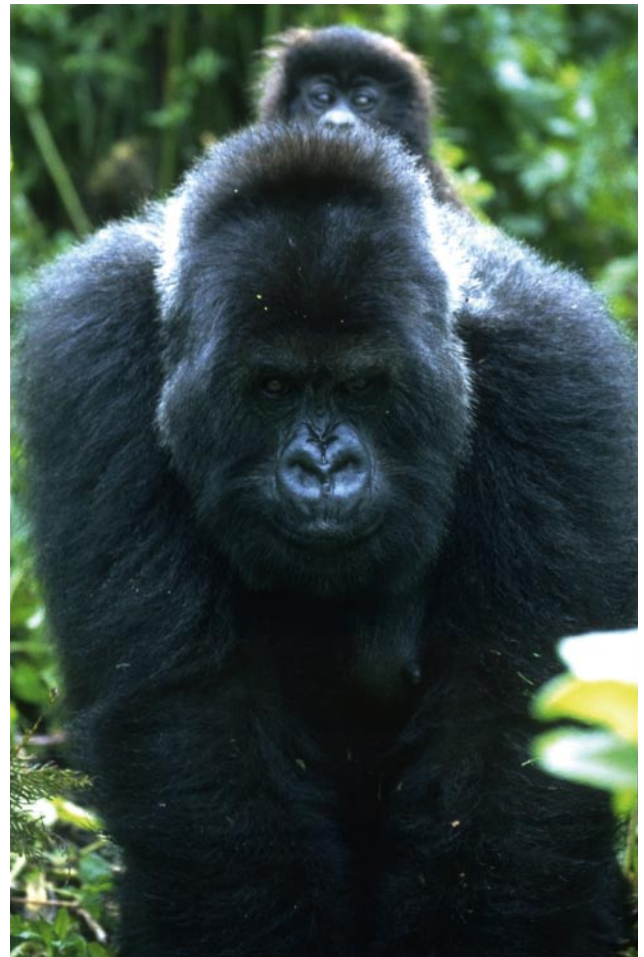
For Dian, without the support or understanding of the local authorities, the battle to protect the park and the gorillas must have been more difficult at some levels. Now we had to work in close collaboration with the Rwandese government and were only allowed to enter the park with the protection of military escorts. Dian's fear that the gorillas could mistake a poacher for a tracker was understandable, and led to her policy of not habituating gorillas to her African staff. Yet it is now clear that the gorillas "know" everyone who works with them and show it by completely ignoring them. In recent years, the invaluable trackers have been the constant human presence at Karisoke. The loyalty to mountain gorillas instilled by Dian has developed and grown during several decades of working as a team.

We began 2001 with great optimism, announcing an increase in the mountain gorilla population. Mercifully, we had not been confronted with the horror of gorilla killings for many years, but events took a turn for the worse in May as rebels once again entered the volcanoes. It was a great shock to learn of the killing for food of two silverbacks, especially as it is against Rwandese culture to eat primates. A witness to this event, scared by the level of desperation demonstrated by his companions, fled and surrendered to the authorities. Soon afterwards, we learned of the death of Beetsme. A broken bone in the old male's heel forced me to wonder



The silverback Cantsbee.

Photo © David Pluth



Puck and her baby.

Photo © David Pluth

if his group had been fleeing when he fell.

Security remained precarious for three months, and monitoring of the gorillas was again interrupted. The trackers were told not to enter the park if soldiers were unavailable to accompany them; however, on August 20th, they went to work without a military escort, having been assured that the area they were entering was safe. The trackers were on the gorillas' trail when surprised by a group of rebels. Mathias Mpiranya was shot and died instantly. We were devastated by this terrible loss, and shortly afterwards I left Rwanda.

Despite this adversity, the research population increased by more than a third during the relatively short time that I was able to know them. Babies were born, females transferred, young males matured into silverbacks, and their sometimes volatile social relationships made observing their lives addictive, like watching a new episode of your favourite soap opera. My favourite gorillas included a group of feisty sisters—daughters of Effie, who died in 1994. Effie's descendants now comprise one quarter of the Karisoke population. Poppy and Tuyscheme reside in the Susa tourist group, while Puck, Tuck, Maggie, and Mahane remain pivotal members of the research groups, with more than twenty sons, daughters, and grandchildren between them.

Dian would be terribly proud.