

Copy of a letter from Mr Edmund Heller to H. E. the Governor of Uganda, dated
10.1.26¹

On receipt of your kind permission to secure a specimen of the long-haired mountain gorilla for the Field Museum of Chicago we proceeded to the Virunga Volcanoes in the Kigezi District of Uganda. There we established a camp in the bamboo zone between the Volcanoes of Sabinio and Mgahinga. We spent three weeks in this region hunting gorillas with the assistance of the Batwa, a forest tribe of pygmy stature. Gorilla hunting was carried out on both Sabinio and Mgahinga and in the middle between Mgahinga and Muhavura Volcanoes.

We found a troop of gorillas on nearly every day we went in search of them but the bamboo and giant heather cover was so dense that for some time we obtained no proper view of the actual gorillas. The loud screaming roar of the old males was heard and we saw traces and feeding places only. Due to asthma I went out to track gorillas on only four days; on three of these occasions I met a troop of the animals. Two days after Christmas we found a troop in the thick bamboo cover. The old male of this troop charged me and the Batwa and their dogs that accompanied me, but the cover was too dense to get a clear view of the ferocious screaming beast, although he charged within twenty yards of us. Mrs Heller was in camp at the pass three miles away at the time and heard the gorilla's roar of rage distinctly! So great is the volume of sound emitted.

We followed after this troop as they retreated over the ridge through dense bamboo thickets. On reaching the next deep ravine we heard the gorillas moving below us, and finally as they climbed the opposite slopes where the bush was less dense we saw four of their rear guard, all large adult males; three of these animals were without much greyish colour on the back or dorsal region. The last of the troop and eldest was grey-haired, and at this I fired a single shot at 300 yards across the ravine, and on sending the Batwa across to look for him he was found dead, shot through the lungs. This was the only shot fired by us at gorillas. With the old male killed were three other adult males, so he could easily be spared as a breeding male.

Regarding the number of gorillas occurring on the Virunga Volcanoes in Uganda territory our Batwa guides thought that the troupes we had met consisted of fifteen to twenty individuals and that there were about 100 gorillas on the Volcano Sabinio in Uganda territory. Mr Charley of Kampala visited Mgahinga for me in order to make an estimate of the gorillas living there and he reported they were quite as numerous as on Sabinio. Our Batwa as well as the natives who cultivate shambas on the lower slopes of Muhavura Volcano said the gorillas were many on that volcano. As three-fourths of Muhavura is in Uganda territory and it is the tallest of the three volcanoes, the gorillas there may be greater than the number than on the other two volcanoes in Uganda territory. The statements of the natives seem to me excessive, but to determine just how many separate herds or troupes of gorillas occur on the volcanoes would require several months of careful investigation by a competent naturalist.

I believe it would be well to give the gorillas on the Uganda Volcanoes as strict protection as possible until the Uganda Game Department are able to determine by their own observations the status of gorilla

¹ Natural History Museum, UK, Pitman Papers, C82; the copy was probably made by Pitman for their records, the Game Department had been set up the previous year, 1925.

within their territory. Females or young should at least be protected, but as there is always an excess of males an old one at times can be spared for science or other legitimate purposes.

The gorilla hunting I did on Sabinio was done on very steep slopes and the gorilla were only encountered high up the mountain at 10,000 feet altitude at the extreme upper edge of the bamboo cover which they haunt; the young shoots of bamboo form their chief food. I had as much hard climbing to do in hunting gorillas as I have experienced hunting bighorn sheep and ibex. I should consider it quite impossible to capture live young gorillas by running down the herds on such steep and rough slopes. The London Zoological Garden will have no doubt to rest content with exhibiting gorillas from the West Coast of Africa. As a show feature, however, in their native haunts, gorillas in Uganda will prove of immense interest to such British and other travellers and tourists as care to camp in the sodden rainy bamboos of the passes.

Many photographs were taken of the old male gorilla in the flesh, and the negatives have been developed and found to be excellent. As soon as we connect with our photographic paper we shall make prints and shall send you such as we feel will be of interest to you and your staff. I am informing the District Commissioner at Kabale, Major Tuffnell, regarding the gorilla we have collected, and shall inform him of such female antelope as we are collecting under your permit recently received through the Chief Secretary, Mr Jarvis. We are spending a few weeks more in Uganda Territory collecting small mammals near Lake Mutanda before crossing the border to the Belgian Congo.

I hope this letter will find you in excellent health and much improved since last October. Mrs Heller and I send best wishes for the New Year to you and to Mr Cavendish-Bentinck.