

## The Gentle Gorilla

Man's closest relation, contrary to popular belief, is a live and let live creature. Don't disturb him, though  
– he may use his ferocious strength

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“If you want to find out anything about gorillas, you'll have to talk to Colonel C E S Pitman”, I was told in Nairobi. “He's in charge of the gorilla reserve in Uganda, and he nurses those apes along as though they were his children. He's probably saved them from extinction, but he carries matters to extremes”.

Colonel Pitman's 'extremes' were illustrated by a story a Kenya game warden told me a few days later.

“I'd always wanted to see a gorilla,” the warden said, “and while I was passing near the gorilla sanctuary at Lake Kivu, I thought I would take a few days off and look about. I went to Colonel Pitman for permission. As I was in the game department he couldn't very well say no, but he told me I couldn't take any firearms. Later I thought it was a simple nonsense to go there without protection so I put a Colt .45 under my coat.

“I started out with some pygmy guides and damn if we didn't run into Colonel Pitman... waiting in ambush for me. He searched me and found the handgun. I've never had such a ticking off as he gave me. 'Don't trust you fellows', he told me, 'In case of a charge, you may easily have lost your head and shot one of the poor brutes'. Didn't worry about me a bit. His only concern seemed to be one of his blessed gorillas might strain himself while tearing me limb from limb.”

Unfortunately, Colonel Pitman was on safari while I was in Kenya, but two years later I telephoned him in London, when he had retired. When I gave my name, he said, “Of course, you are the American journalist who didn't insist on going to the sanctuary and disturbing my gorilla. Come over for tea”.

Colonel Pitman turned out to be a slender man with a close-cropped, military moustache. Over tea, he told me he had spent several years as a young man in the British Army,

“But I was always keen on animals. I collected for the Natural History Society while I was in India and Mesopotamia. In 1925, I had the chance to go to Uganda as warden, so I resigned from the service. Uganda is a big place – 94,000 square miles – and there were only three European wardens for the whole area. We had to reduce some species that were getting too numerous, such as elephants, and protect others, especially the white rhinoceros and the gorilla”.

The gorillas live principally on the slopes of three volcanoes – Mikeno, Karisimbi and Visoke in the extreme southwest of Uganda and the government has set aside a seventeen-square-mile sanctuary for the

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<sup>1</sup> Natural History Museum, Pitman Papers, C82-84: Typescript copy, probably from an article in *Holiday*, 1957 as it mentions the birth of Colo the previous December (Colo was a mother to three, a grandmother to 16, a great-grandmother to 12, and a great-great-grandmother to three when she died in 2017 as the oldest known gorilla in the world). Pitman possibly got it from Walter Baumgartel, who mentions sending it in a 1961 letter. Note that Baumgartel was critical of basic geographical (i.e. mixing up the volcanoes with Kayonza 'impenetrable' Forest) and other errors and asked Pitman if the interview was genuine or a journalistic invention. Note, also, if Pitman was interviewed two years after he retired, according to the text, it must have happened c. 1952. The article is a composite of the Pitman interview and west coast gorillas in zoos

great apes. On the west, the sanctuary adjoins the Belgian Albert National Park, and the gorillas wander back and forth at will.

“The gorillas in this area”, the colonel explained, are called the mountain gorilla and are a different species from the coast gorilla you find in French Cameroons and Gabon. When I arrived, there were only about eighty mountain gorillas left, and even this small group was being rapidly exterminated. They were protected but every sportsman wanted to say that he had shot a gorilla and I couldn’t possibly patrol the whole area with my limited staff. The situation seemed hopeless.

“Then I had a lucky break. It’s impossible to get into the gorilla country without the Pygmies as guides. The Pygmies know every gorilla family and approximately where it is. They don’t worship the gorillas as has been said, but they respect them. However, for enough money they would take a sportsman in to get a trophy. At that time the Pygmies had been stealing sheep and I was sent to deal with them. We struck a bargain: I’d forget about the sheep if the pygmies would promise not to take anyone into gorilla country without my permission. The arrangement worked very well. Really saved the gorillas, in fact.”

As warden of the district, Colonel Pitman felt that he should know the gorillas and their habits, and he got the pygmies to take him up the slopes of the volcanoes where the great apes live.

The home of the mountain gorillas is called the ‘impenetrable forest’ and deserves the name. Huge, twisted trees cover the mountain sides, and the branches are roped with great creepers, as big as a man’s thigh. Giant tree ferns form jungles so dense that a man can often see no further than the length of his gun barrel. Following his four-foot-high guides, Colonel Pitman crept through this grotesque fairyland on the trail of the most savage of all the great anthropoids.

After several exhausting days, they struck the trail of a gorilla family. Studying the spoor, the Pygmies said there were five gorillas in the group: an old male, his two wives and two babies – a typical family. They started trailing.

“A gorilla family moves slowly, so we were fairly sure of catching up to them. They stop to feed where there are fruits, berries or fresh tasty shoots. They are almost complete vegetarians although they occasionally eat bird eggs or grubs. They don’t travel at night. As soon as it grows dark, they climb a tree and build a bed. A gorilla simply sits down in a convenient fork, breaks off the surrounding branches and piles them around him, rather like a huge bird’s nest.”

After several hours’ tracking one of the Pygmies turned to Colonel Pitman with a smile and pointed upwards. There in a tree a great black shape, so huge that at first he thought it must be several gorillas. It was the old male.

“It’s impossible to describe adequately how I felt at that moment, I walked forward quietly until I was within ten paces of the tree. The old male was eating small tender leaves. Suddenly he happened to look down and saw me.

The old boy seemed genuinely astonished. He was used to the Pygmies but obviously realised that I was a different breed of cat. After studying me curiously for a few seconds, he climbed down to a lower branch to get a better view, and sat there swinging his legs and taking an

occasional mouthful of leaves like a small child in a zoo, staring at some curious animal and eating a bun at the same time. We watched each other with mutual curiosity until the Pygmies suggested we'd better be going. I left the old chap still sitting on the limb, craning his neck to get a last glimpse of me."

When I remarked that I had understood gorillas were ferocious, Colonel Pitman waved the suggestion aside irritably, he said bluntly

"Absolute nonsense. Perfectly gentle. There are a number of prospectors in the gorilla country. I'm sorry to say; we can't legally keep them out, but I sincerely hope they never find anything for that'll be the end of the gorillas. One of these men told me he was within four paces of a gorilla. The ape simply turned away. Another time, the pygmies were guiding a prospector when the man came suddenly on a gorilla. The Pygmies said it was the funniest thing they had ever seen. The prospector ran one way and the gorilla ran the other, both screaming in terror."

Colonel Pitman did admit, however, that under certain circumstances the gorilla can be a dangerous adversary

"An old silverback male doesn't like to be bothered and if you keep it up, he'll get a bit huffy"

I repeated to the colonel a story that a Kenya hunter told me. He was determined to get a photograph of a gorilla. After weeks of effort, he located a family but the male hurried them away before a picture could be made. The hunter followed them, while the male grew increasingly irritable.

Finally, the gorilla began beating his chest and giving an angry roar that means trouble. The hunter waited an hour to let the family quiet down before taking up the trail again. He finally caught up with them and saw the old male resting in the crotch of a tree, his feet against the trunk, quietly eating fruit.

"I crept up to within a few yards of him and focused my camera. When I pressed the shutter release, the noise sounded like a pistol shot. The old fellow leaped a foot in the air. Then he turned around and saw me. He hurled the fruit to the ground and started down the tree. I didn't wait for him. I knew he meant business."

Colonel Pitman agreed that this story was typical

"Exactly what I mean. Goad them so far and they'll turn on you. What generally happens is that some photographer sets out to get gorilla pictures. He begins annoying a gorilla family. The male loses patience and starts moving his wives and children away. He gives a short, sharp bark which means 'Let's get away from here'. The females obey but the youngsters lag behind. Naturally, the females are always running back to get the children. The photographer is hurrying after the family and sooner or later he stumbles on one of the females with her young. The female is terrified and screams for help. Then the male will charge. After that, it's your life or his and you have to shoot him. But if the business is handed intelligently the male will never make a true charge."

Colonel Pitman explained that gorillas will often make 'false charges' to scare off a persistent visitor.

"The old male or several young adolescent males stay behind to protect the females and young. If you get too close, they'll stage false charges to bluff you. In drawings, gorillas are always

pictured as charging upright like a man. Actually, they run bent over, supporting their weight on their knuckles. Go like smoke too. Often a gorilla comes almost within grasping distance before he turns away. I remember one chap who was determined to see a gorilla. Finally, I gave permission but refused to let him take any firearms. Then the Pygmies wouldn't go with him. 'With a clumsy white man there's no telling what might happen', they told me. 'Without a gun he'll get us all killed'. So I gave him permission to take a .470 to impress the Pygmies but wouldn't let him have any ammunition. The pygmies had their bows and arrows, but I told the little chaps positively not to use them unless the gorilla actually had the man in his grasp. What happened was rather interesting. A gorilla made a false charge at the man and didn't turn away until he was two paces from him. Now if that man had had a loaded gun, he would certainly have shot that poor gorilla."

But isn't difficult to tell the difference between a false charge and the genuine article, I asked

"A false charge is usually preceded by a lot of chest beating, roaring, and threatening poses. When an old silverback really has the wind up, he'll come straight for you without any preliminaries. But he'll do that only when he's convinced the females and young are in danger."

Of course there are exceptions. In 1929, a joint expedition from Yale University and the Carnegie Institute obtained permission to study the apes. The party struck the spoor of a gorilla family and began tracking them. The gorillas knew they were being followed and soon the expedition came on signs showing the family were growing increasingly frightened and irritable. The scientists turned off the trail at an angle to avoid pressing the family. Unfortunately, the gorillas turned off at the same angle to escape the scientists. The two groups met. A young male charged the party and had to be shot,

Colonel Pitman, although he has written several scientific papers and supplied the British Museum with records of the apes, believes scientists are another menace to the gorillas.

"Some years ago, a museum obtained permission to shoot one gorilla as a specimen. I sent them off with the pygmies. Later the Pygmies reported that every member of the party had a gun and as soon as he saw a gorilla he started blazing away. They'd wounded three gorillas and were afraid to follow them into the heavy cover. I promptly rescinded the permit and ordered the entire party out of the area. After that, I permitted only one member of a collecting party to carry a gun. If he wounded a gorilla, that counted as his specimen and he had to follow the animal and finish him off."

Gorillas are not prolific, and Colonel Pitman believes that the few that remain (probably only ten or twelve families of mountain gorillas are left) should be jealously protected.

"There was one large band of gorillas which was well known to the Pygmies, so I could keep track of their growth. A large group is most unusual. It was undoubtedly two or three families that had decided to live together, which is very rare. In 1935, this band numbered twenty-four. Ten years later, in spite of the most careful protection, the group had increased only thirty. During the same period, the white rhinoceros had increased from 150 to 450."

A gorilla's life span is thought to be half that of a human's. The female had only one baby at a time, and twins have never been reported. The young gorilla does not reach puberty until the age of twelve.

The gorilla has almost no natural enemies, although leopards may take a few of their young. But Colonel Pitman believes infant mortality among gorillas is high, due to respiratory infections and stomach disorders. Little is known about the home life of gorillas since keeping a family under protracted observation is almost impossible. Apparently the babies are nursed by the mothers for about a year, then they begin to crawl about and pick up tender shoots and berries for themselves. Judging from the other wild-animal groups, the old male probably drives off the young males when they reach puberty. The young males then wander in the forest, trying to coax a female away from another family group or hoping to defeat an old silverback and take his wives. Single gorillas, whether male or female, are extremely rare. The Pygmies told Colonel Pitman of a female gorilla that lived alone among some lava beds but judging from her erratic and unpredictable actions, the unfortunate animal was undoubtedly insane.

Unlike other apes, gorillas spend nearly all their time on the ground, and even when threatened do not take to the trees. The male relies on his enormous strength to defend the family.

“I doubt if even a lion would care to pick a fight with a full-grown male gorilla”, said Colonel Pitman

A big male may stand six feet high and weigh over 450 lbs., and his strength is far out of proportion to his great size. Gargantua, a coast gorilla, was once given one end of a rope while fifteen husky circus roustabouts took the other end; he used only one hand and easily pulled the men off their feet. A gorilla can snap a branch two inches thick as easily as a man can break a dry twig. Once a native, cutting bamboo, disturbed a big male gorilla. The gorilla grabbed him by the neck and groin and tore him in two.

“An animal that strong doesn’t need to climb trees in case of danger. However, if there’s a brush fire, the females will often put their young in the tops of trees where they’ll be safe, and then run for it. A man and his wife who were famous as wild-life photographers discovered this fact and started a forest fire to get pictures of the young. They got the pictures but if I’d ever caught them...”

Physically, the gorilla resembles man more than it does any other animal. The dimensions of an average male gorilla have been compared with those of Jack Dempsey, and the results are worth recording.

	Gorilla	Dempsey
Height	5’ 7½”	6’ 1”
Weight	360 lbs.	188 lbs.
Chest	62”	42”
Reach	97”	74”

A gorilla’s brain also resembles a man’s, but how intelligent the great apes are is hard to determine. Hunters have reported that gorillas, if they know they are being trailed, will deliberately cross an open space and then stop to see who is following them. There are reports of gorillas carrying off a wounded friend and then trying to staunch the flow of blood with leaves. Also, gorillas seem to have a wide vocabulary; Colonel Pitman told me of a family of gorillas that chatted together in a series of grunts, squeals and barks.

In addition to the ‘hurry up’ bark, gorillas roar (with anger), scream (in terror) and beat their breasts in challenge. “The old boy is saying, ‘I know you’re there... well, I’m here, too, if you want trouble’”, the

colonel explained. Captive gorillas will often beat their breasts because they like the noise. Baby gorillas, watching their father, may beat their breasts in imitation.

In a study of their mental capacities, Professor Robert M Yerkes, of Yale University, came to the conclusion that gorillas have poor mechanical ability but excellent memories. Congo, a female coast gorilla between two and three years old, learned to pile three boxes one on top of each other to reach a bunch of bananas suspended from the ceiling, but was completely baffled when the bunch was raised and she was given a fourth box. Once he gave the young gorilla a stick to see if she would knock down the bananas. Congo put the stick upright under the bunch and tried to climb it. When that didn't work, she grabbed Professor Yerkes, shoved him under the bunch, and climbed up on him until she reached the fruit. In another experiment Congo was offered several boxes of different shapes, with one shape always containing food, and did as well as a five-year-old child.

Until recently, captive gorillas were so rare that most zoos would not allow investigators to work with the creatures. Gorillas are still quite valuable; a healthy baby is worth \$5000. But comparatively large numbers of young coast gorillas are now exported every year from French West Africa, where the jungle is being cleared for villages and farms. The apes do not wantonly attack humans, but serious accidents are bound to occur. A native hunter stumbled over a young male gorilla, and was so badly bitten that he lost the use of his right arm. A family of five gorillas commandeered the only trail leading to a village and isolated the community for two weeks. Under such circumstances, the natives demanded that the adult apes be shot. The captured young are sold abroad.

On the west coast of Africa, gorillas are frequently hunted with dogs. While the parents fight off the pack, the men try to seize the baby. One collector tells of seeing a furious male standing with a howling dog in the one hand while striking at the raging pack with the other. When the gorilla saw the men seize the baby, he flung the dog down, breaking its back, and charged. Only quick work with a high-powered rifle saved the hunters' lives.

Until recently few of the captured babies survived. Some of the little fellows succumbed to colds or perished because of incorrect feeding. Others died of loneliness. One collector tells of capturing a baby male who collapsed a few days later, apparently of heat stroke. A young female, perhaps nine months old and weighing only thirty-five pounds, adopted the desperately ill infant. She carried him about with her, trying to make him eat and crooned over him like a girl with a doll. One morning the collector found the little mother asleep after an all-night vigil. The baby was dead in her arms. When the collector tried to remove the corpse, the female resisted fiercely, but soon discovered that her charge was dead. "She gave one long sobbing cry and sat with her face buried in her hands", the man reported.

Until 1917, you could count on the fingers of one hand the young gorillas brought back to America or Europe who lived more than a few months. The few that survived were hand-raised by women who virtually adopted them, lavishing more care and affection on the creatures than most humans receive.

The first baby gorilla raised successfully in captivity was a male coast gorilla named John Daniel, the property of Miss Alyse Cunningham, who bought the young ape in 1917 when he was a few months old. She later wrote

“For a long time, I couldn’t leave John Daniel alone at night. As soon as I turned out the light and left the room, he’d scream with fear”

Miss Cunningham called the dealer, who assured her that the baby had screamed every night while in his store. “What did you do? Asked Miss Cunningham anxiously. “I let him scream”, replied the dealer.

Miss Cunningham slept with the baby every night and although John Daniel improved, he never overcame his fear of darkness, and before entering a dark room would always turn on the light. For a long time Miss Cunningham was unable to discipline the gorilla; at a cross word, the baby fell into a fit of hysterics. Gradually he learned to go to the bathroom at night and return to bed without disturbing Mss Cunningham. He learned to turn on faucets when he wanted to drink. His playmate was a little girl to whom he was fiercely protective. John became so upset if the child cried, that even Miss Cunningham dared not to go near him. Although he never became vicious, John Daniel had no conception of his enormous strength, and as he reached maturity, Miss Cunningham was forced, reluctantly, to put him in a zoo. He died a few years later of pneumonia.

Last December twenty-second the sensational news was flashed of the first gorilla born in captivity, at the Columbus Zoo. Weighing about four-and one-half pounds at birth, the infant gorilla named Colo, was discovered by a zoo attendant, who kept he alive by breathing into her mouth until oxygen could be administered, A day after her birth, Colo was fed from a bottle and was able to clutch objects and distinguish light. As this is written, mother and child are both doing well.

The most famous gorilla of all time was Gargantua<sup>2</sup>, who was captured as a baby on the west coast of Africa and shipped to this country. On the ship, a discharged seaman threw acid in the gorilla’s face leaving him with a scar which became Gargantua’s hallmark. The disfigured baby was purchased by a Mrs Gertrude Lintz who managed, miraculously to raise him. But Gargantua soon became too dangerous to keep and Mrs Lintz sold him to Ringling Brothers circus, where he became the star attraction. The circus valued him at \$1,000,000. A glass-enclosed, thermostatically controlled cage costing \$20,000 was built for him, but as soon as he was put inside he became morose and amused himself by trying to think of ways to murder his keepers. He died in 1949 of a stomach disorder not yet identified.

In 1927, the Philadelphia Zoo acquired an infant male coast gorilla named Bamboo, who is now thirty years old. He is six feet tall, weighs 450 pounds and is in perfect health. Frederick Ulmer, curator of mammals at the Philadelphia Zoological Gardens, told me how the zoo accomplished this seeming miracle.

“We realised that a baby gorilla needs companionship, so we gave Bamboo a young chimpanzee as a playmate. Also he has to be protected from people, for gorillas may quickly succumb to human diseases, so we kept a glass wall between Bamboo and the public. Most people who try to raise baby gorillas let them eat anything they want. Baby gorillas don’t know what’s good for them any more than human babies and will overindulge on sweets and fruit. Bamboo now receives a special formula made up by our research staff”.

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<sup>2</sup> Belgian Congo, 1929-1949 apparently of double pneumonia contradicting the article

Other zoos have followed this technique and have found raising gorillas reasonably simple. Today, there are fifty-six in captivity, forty-four in the United States and twelve in Europe. Only one is a mountain gorilla – Sumaili at the Bronx Zoo.

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