

---

## **Gorilla Fact Sheet (5/1/94)**

### **Gorilla** (*Gorilla gorilla*)

**Description:** The gorilla is the largest and one of the best known primates. A gorilla can weigh over 400 pounds, and its fierce brows conceal gentle brown eyes. This great ape can reach seven feet when it stands upright but it walks naturally using its knuckles and feet. Its hair is brown, grey or black, and in older males, the back turns silver-grey.

**Range:** Gorillas are primarily found in coastal West Africa in the Congo, Zaire, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon. There are three types of gorilla -- eastern and western lowland gorillas and mountain gorillas. The lowland gorillas are under the SSP; however, virtually no mountain gorillas are held in captivity and none are in American zoological facilities.

**Habitat:** Gorillas live in the rainforest. They primarily live on the ground, but may build sleeping nests either on the ground or in trees for the night. A new nest is built each night. Gorilla troops keep a 10 to 15 sq. mile range, which often overlaps the range of other troops. They have no natural enemies except for rare attacks from leopards.

**Diet:** Lowland gorillas are primarily vegetarians and eat fruit, leaves, stems, and other vegetation. Gorillas may occasionally eat meat, insects and eggs whenever they are easy to obtain but gorillas are not dependent on these food items.

**Social Organization:** Despite their fierce appearance and displays of chest beating, gorillas are actually gentle and intelligent animals. They live in highly developed social groups, led by a single older dominant male, the silverback, with several females and young. Females bear and raise only one youngster at a time. Gorillas reach physical maturity at between 12 and 15 years.

**Conservation Status:** The western lowland gorilla is listed as an endangered species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the IUCN Red Data Book and as an Appendix I species under CITES. Between 30,000 - 50,000 gorillas are estimated to remain in the wild.

**Threats to Survival:** Destruction of habitat and poaching are the two greatest threats to gorillas. The nations where they are found are poor and densely populated; land is in short supply. Parkland set aside for gorillas is encroached upon by agriculture. Wire traps set by poachers for antelope

often ensnare gorillas instead, and their heads and hands are prized as trophies. Often, there are too few guards to adequately protect the gorillas from poachers inside parks and reserves.

**Zoo Programs - SSP:** Until the gorilla's native habitat can be better protected, zoos are working to keep an adequate population of gorillas in captivity. There are presently over 325 lowland gorillas in North American zoos. Since the first gorilla birth in a zoo in 1956, tremendous amounts of research on both captive and wild gorillas have revealed the social structure, habitat and nutrition requirements for successful breeding. Under the SSP, zoos exchange gorillas so that suitable family groups can be formed. Zoos are also working to allow as many infants to be raised by their mothers as possible, instead of being hand-raised, so they can better learn natural gorilla behavior.

**Conservation:** While zoos have made great strides in breeding gorillas in captivity, they have also worked to help gorillas in the wild. Zoos have maintained a policy of not accepting gorillas caught from the wild, or "orphaned" gorilla infants so as to not promote the hunting of wild gorillas or the killing of mother gorillas in order to sell the infants.

**Education:** Programs have been developed in West African nations to educate people about the gorilla. The gorilla avoids conflict with man and almost never attacks a human. Well-managed and well-presented gorilla social groups in zoological gardens offer a first-hand experience to hundreds of millions of zoo visitors every year. There are few other animal species which so easily excite the human spirit and imagination and, in contrast, remind humanity of the tragedy of creating a world which has no room for wildlife.

**Reintroduction:** While there are no current plans to reintroduce captive-bred gorillas to the wild, gorillas in zoological facilities function as a reserve if their numbers should seriously diminish.

**rev. 5/94**