

My Daughter Is A Gorilla

Andre Bauma is a park ranger at Virunga national park. It is the oldest national park in Africa. For 7 years, he has taken care of orphaned mountain gorillas at a gorilla orphanage. He has formed an attachment to them and loves them as if they were members of his own family.

Even though he is a human - and a man - a particular gorilla named Ndakasi sees Bauma as her mother. Bauma is proud to be her mother.

"We shared the same bed, I played with her, I fed her ... I can say I am her mother," he says.



Bauma will never forget how he met Ndakasi. It breaks his heart when he thinks about it. Ndakasi was just two months old when her mother was shot by poachers. She was still hugging her dead mother when the park rangers found her. "When I picked her up, she was tiny. She only weighed a couple of kilos," says Bauma. Since that terrible day, he has dedicated his life to her.

Ndakasi wasn't expected to survive, but in spite of what people thought, she survived and flourished. She is now almost fully grown, she is healthy and weighs 65 kilos. She is very playful and acts like a kid. "Whenever she sees me she climbs on my back like she would with her mother," says Bauma. "But she's a big and strong girl and I'm not capable of playing with her like I used to. When she climbs on my back, every time I'm worried that I'm going to hurt myself - in fact at the end of the day I have a real backache."

The rangers communicate with the gorillas using a mixture of body language and spoken words.

"For instance there is the approaching call, we say this to tell them: 'Here I am, I'm coming, I'm going to stand next to you, there's no problem everything's fine,'" says Bauma - this sounds like a long, low grunt. "I can also forbid them something. I can tell them: 'This is not good, you mustn't do this.'" This sounds like a series of short uhs. (uh-uh-uh-uh)

Bauma says, "I find them very intelligent and I can understand anything. I can hear by their tone of voice if they're scared of something, if they're worried, if there's something wrong with the food, if they feel they're in danger. There are different sounds they make and because we've lived together for so long I'm quite good at recognizing their mood."

Bauma says that they aren't sure what to do with the orphans in the future. "Our goal was always to eventually release them into the wild," he says. There is a problem with this plan though.

"The way we fed them, it was mostly food that we buy at the market - fruit, carrots, apples - and it's not really food they can find in the wild. Also, they sleep inside the house at night - so there's a real concern. Now we've realized that if we were to release them into the wild they could have a problem with the food, and they could have a problem with the weather - they could die."

For now the orphans will stay in their sanctuary. This means that Bauma will continue caring for his gorilla family.

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