

## GORILLAS OF EASTERN NIGERIA

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A former chief of the Nigeria Forest Service once told me that a boyhood fascination for R. M. Ballantyne's book *The Gorilla Hunters* was one important deciding factor in his choice of tropical forestry as a career. I cannot claim any such romantic incentive in the choice of a career but nonetheless when I found myself in charge of a territory containing the habitat of one of the few remaining gorilla colonies in the Commonwealth, I was more than interested at the prospect of visiting the area and possibly observing these animals in their haunts.

The accepted haunt of these gorillas (sometimes called the mountain gorillas of Eastern Nigeria) was the Obudu plateau; but of recent years the establishment of a cattle ranch on this 6,000-ft. elevation grassland area has tended to dispossess the gorillas and drive them into the densely forested country south-west of the plateau, so that now the centre of their peregrinations is the eastern tip of Boshi Forest Reserve (see map). A preliminary trip through the area in 1955 produced evidence of this gorilla migration, also of the fact that they were not uncommon and unfortunately were still being "chopped" by local hunters.

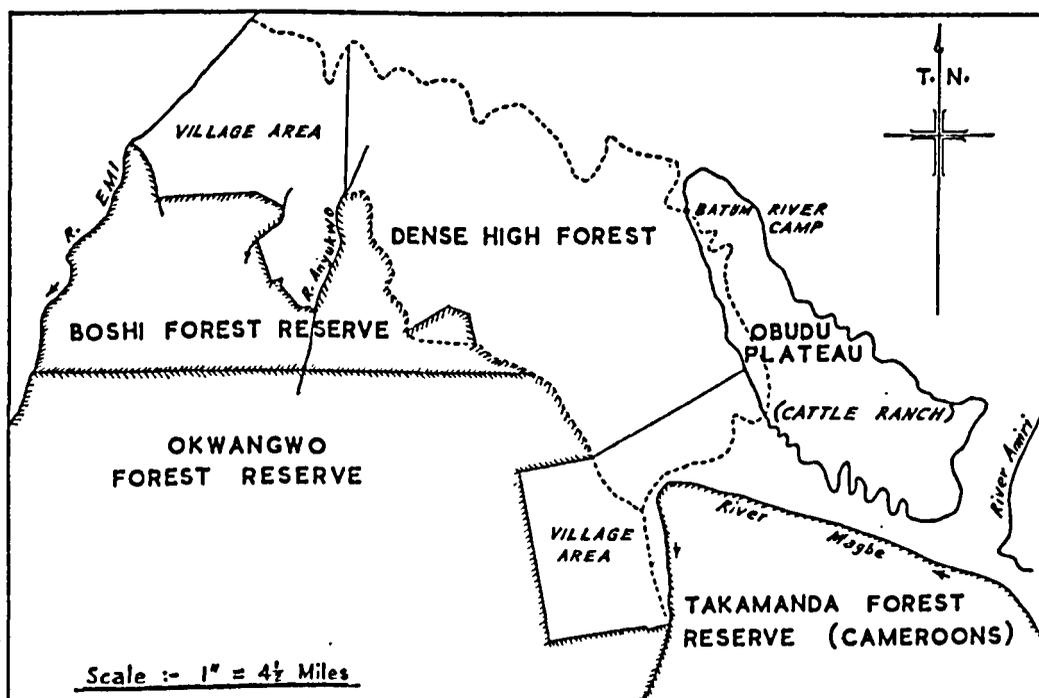
As a result of this visit and a study of available papers and literature, preliminary plans were drawn up for the establishment of a gorilla sanctuary, such plans being based in the first instance on a programme of extensions to the existing Forest Reserves. In February, 1956, I made a much more elaborately-planned trip to the area with the following objects in view:—

- (i) The examination of the 30 or 40 square miles of forest north-east of the present Boshi Reserve.
- (ii) The selection of salient points for the boundaries of a new reserve to include this area.
- (iii) An estimation of the number of gorillas moving in and about the area with the intention of eventually establishing a gorilla sanctuary in this and adjacent areas.
- (iv) To see gorillas if possible.

The first three objects were satisfactorily accomplished. The fourth was not.

Referring to the map, the area marked Dense High Forest was until recently too inaccessible to be worth including in the Forest Department's reservation programme, nor was it possible

to establish its boundaries without undue effort and expense. We knew from forest guards' reports and hunters' stories that bands of gorillas roamed through Boshi and Okwango reserves and occasionally crossed into the Takamanda reserve in the British Cameroons. In 1955 we were offered gorilla skulls in various villages adjoining these reserves. We had every reason to believe that most of their activities centred in and around this "blank on the map", an area which we now proposed to



explore. We chose Batum River Camp as our temporary headquarters. At an elevation of 2,500 feet this camp site adjoined a natural bathing pool and was remarkably free from insects of any kind. It was also conveniently situated for either visits to Obudu plateau or for high or low-level penetration into our objective.

We spent eight days under canvas in this delightful spot, retaining only personal servants, one forest guard and six labourers for line cutting, specimen collecting, etc. During this time we covered most of our area, along streams, along ridges and sometimes along cut lines. We found two mahoganies fairly common, *Khaya grandifoliola* scattered through the area and *Entandrophragma cylindricum* in pockets; some stands of these latter would make any timber merchant's eyes water, but it is unlikely they will ever feel the axe. This country, whilst very

precipitous, has frequent grass-covered peaks emerging from the forest and it was comparatively easy to locate ourselves and fix tentative boundaries for a new forest reserve. Although game was fairly common, so dense is this bush that we actually encountered nothing beyond the occasional duiker and antelope. We did, however, see many tracks of elephants, bushcow (buffalo) and an occasional leopard. Guineafowl were numerous.

Meanwhile, what of the gorillas? In 1955 our servants with a hunter-guide had encountered a family party of three, judging by their description, a male, a female and a young one. On this occasion the morning after we were installed in camp, the party of carriers we sent back ran into a band of ten (?) half a mile from our camp. We ourselves neither saw nor heard gorillas, but we did learn much about them. Once we came across nests which from their condition and fresh dung had only been used the previous night; again, we found the plain footprint of a large male gorilla clearly stamped on some fresh ant workings. He had passed not more than two hours earlier.

One object of the expedition was to estimate the number of gorillas in the vicinity. One might call this a well-nigh impossible task with such an elusive animal in densely wooded country, and were it not for the gorillas' habit of making very obvious nests, generally in groups of seven to ten, one could probably explore these forests indefinitely and conclude that there were no gorillas or that they were extremely rare. Their nesting habits, however, are well defined and provide plenty of clues as to their numbers.

Gorillas' nests vary considerably in location, size and method of construction but they have one thing in common, they are invariably made from material found on the spot, generally living material; nothing is collected or brought to the nesting site. Some nests look rather like crows' nests and are perched at the top of slender trees—these are probably made by females or young males. Other nests are much larger structures, often 4 feet in diameter, usually located on the top of a small shrub and made by bending over and interlacing adjacent shrubs and creepers. These can best be likened to well-sprung mattresses and are said to be constructed by pregnant females or mothers with young. Yet again there is a very simply constructed nest on the ground formed by weaving grass and ground flora into something resembling the nest of some ground-nesting game bird; the local hunters claim that this type of nest is constructed by the leader of the band who is thus in a better position to sound an alarm. The accepted theory is that gorillas are

constantly on the move and camp in a fresh place every night and from my own investigations I am satisfied that this is correct.

On my 1955 visit I had been shown one or two sets of nests, and in fact found several myself. In every case they were found on the top of ridges, giving an impression that the gorillas preferred a ridge on which to spend the night. On this year's expedition, however, when much more territory was covered, including all types of terrain, gorillas' nests were found on all kinds of ground, sometimes in trees above streams, other times half-way up slopes as well as on ridges. In fact, there is little doubt that the gorilla bands camp just where they happen to have been feeding towards the close of the day. One's first thought on learning that gorillas are alleged to build a nest every night is that if there are any appreciable number of gorillas the whole forest must be full of nests. But, of course, it depends how long a gorilla's nest remains in existence. In fact, it disappears completely in not more than one year, for groups of nests which were possibly a fortnight old in March, 1955, were not in evidence in February, 1956. How many gorillas' nests did we encounter? A rough count was made on the various cut lines, streams and game tracks explored and it was found that one could expect to come across an average of eight gorillas' nests per mile. Assuming visibility restricted to a width of half a chain on each side, we have the very simple answer of one nest per acre. Carrying this analysis a little further and accepting the fact that the gorillas roam over an area of approximately 100 square miles we get a figure of 64,000 extant nests in their habitat. Proceeding further on the assumption that gorillas' nests are in evidence for exactly one year, which is extremely doubtful, but accepting the fact that they make a nest every night, we arrive at the conclusion that there are approximately 175 gorillas in and about this area.

Examining the above statistical hypothesis a little more one can argue that I was examining the known habitat and that my estimate of 100 square miles may be at fault; also that many of the nests probably only survive a few months. However, I feel reasonably confident that the number of gorillas in this area is not less than 100 and possibly as many as 200. The latter figure is probably much nearer the mark in view of the number of skulls which have been obtained by various visitors to the outskirts of the gorilla country during the past few years.

The only written account I have been able to find of a European actually seeing gorillas in Nigeria is that by J. G. C. Allen, of the Nigerian Administrative Service, published in

Volume I of the *Nigerian Field*, who encountered several bands on a visit to this same area in 1930. Another interesting account of the habits of the gorilla was published by F. S. Collier, a former Chief Conservator of Forests, Nigeria, in Volume III of the *Nigerian Field*.

What of the future of these gorillas? They used to be shot for food, and probably still are, but it is doubtful whether they were ever hunted deliberately. Their very habits tend to protect them and it is only when they are encountered by chance that they are likely to fall a prey. I think also that the old-time hunter who would face a gorilla is dying out. As a result of the 1956 expedition, plans are afoot to make the inspected area into an additional forest reserve and it is hoped to establish a game sanctuary roughly covering the area of the map accompanying this article. Preservation of their habitat will go a long way towards preservation of the species.