

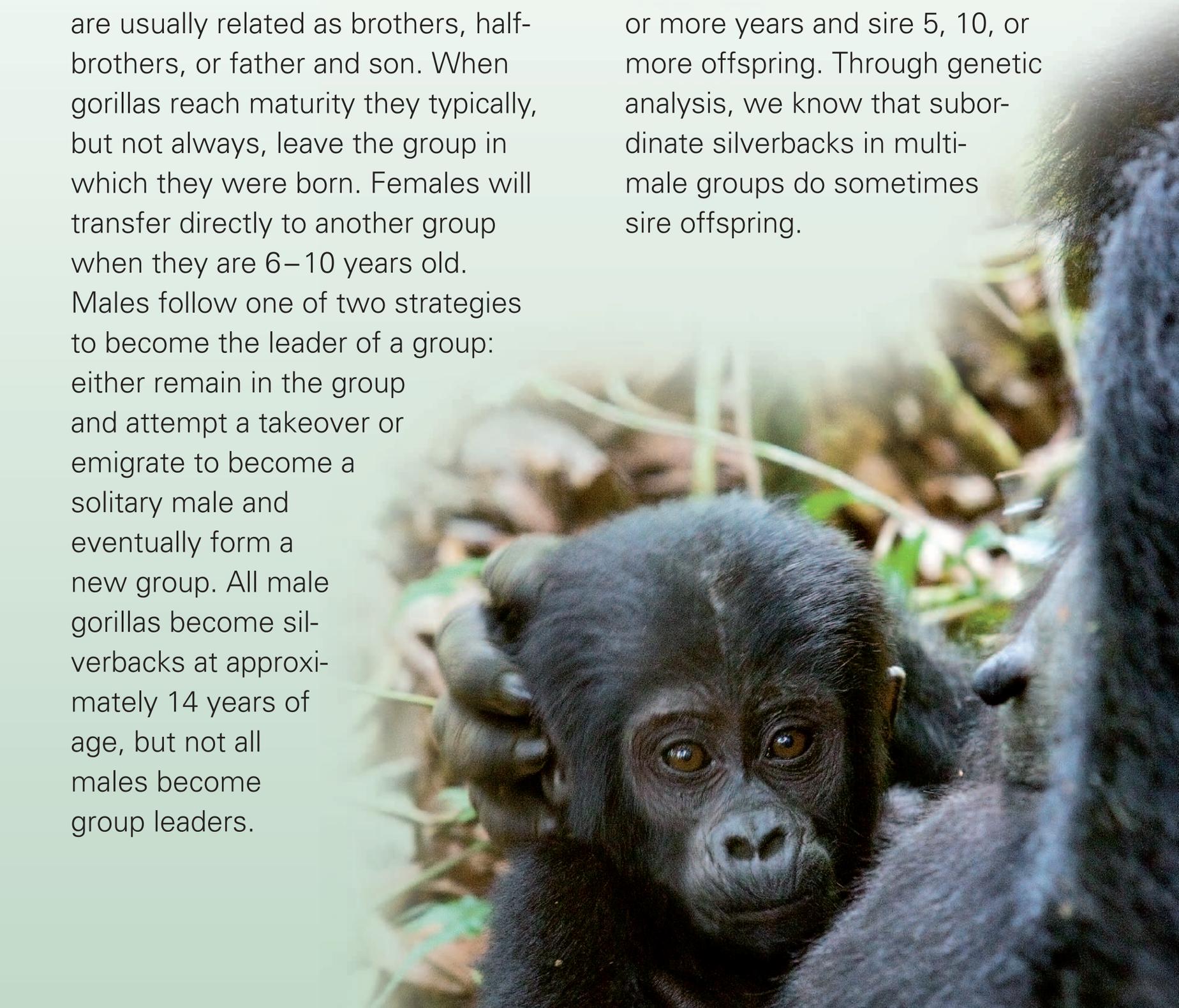
Getting to Know Gorillas

■ Family Life



A typical group of gorillas contains about 10 members: the dominant silverback, several adult females, and then immature offspring of various ages. However, there can be a lot of variation. Group size may range from 2 to 30 or more individuals. Groups may contain more than 2 silverbacks; in multimale groups the silverbacks are usually related as brothers, half-brothers, or father and son. When gorillas reach maturity they typically, but not always, leave the group in which they were born. Females will transfer directly to another group when they are 6–10 years old. Males follow one of two strategies to become the leader of a group: either remain in the group and attempt a takeover or emigrate to become a solitary male and eventually form a new group. All male gorillas become silverbacks at approximately 14 years of age, but not all males become group leaders.

Females have their first offspring at about age 10. Gestation is 8 ½ months. About 1 in 3 babies born do not survive past age three. Gorillas may live into their early 40s. Because females have babies only every 4–5 years, each female may have only 4 offspring that survive to adulthood. Silverbacks may be dominant for 10 or more years and sire 5, 10, or more offspring. Through genetic analysis, we know that subordinate silverbacks in multimale groups do sometimes sire offspring.



Getting to Know Gorillas

■ Social Interactions



Gorillas are very social, with all group members cohesively coordinating their daily activities. A typical day consists of alternating between several hours feeding and moving through the forest and then resting for a few hours. Usually interactions among individuals are peaceful, but occasionally conflicts may arise over feeding spots, with individuals giving

aggressive 'cough grunt' vocalizations, screaming, or even fighting. Silverbacks are dominant over all other group members. Dominance hierarchies exist among adult females and among silverbacks in multimale groups. Males may compete intensively for access to females both within multimale groups as well as between groups. Intergroup encounters occur about once a month; this is the only opportunity for females to transfer between social units and hence the time for males to out-compete their opponents and appear the most impressive to attract females.

Friendly interactions among gorillas consist of resting together and grooming. Infants and juveniles have endless energy for playing.



Getting to Know Gorillas

■ Diet & Ranging



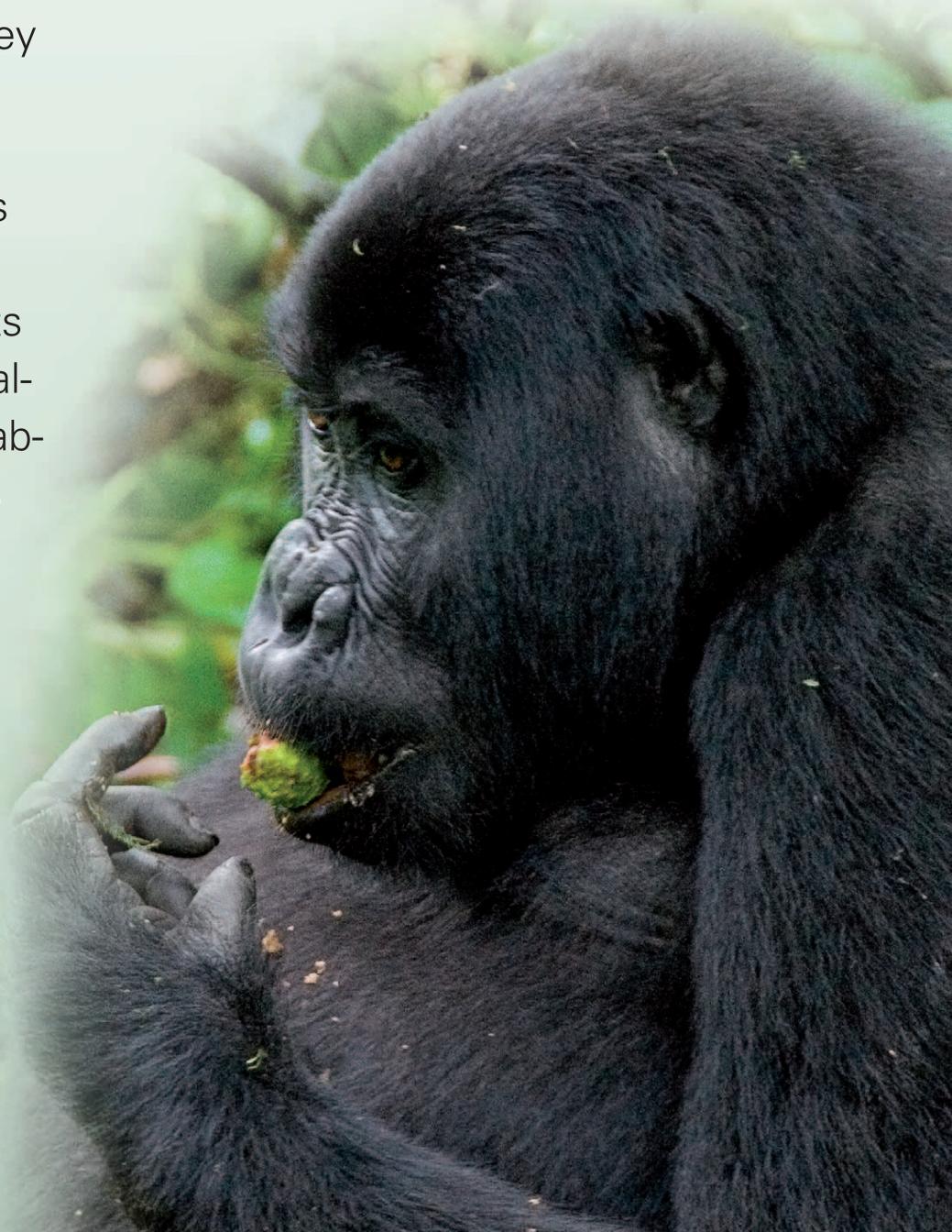
Gorillas are vegetarians. Their diet consists of leaves, stems, and fruits from the wide variety of vegetation found in the forest. Most people are surprised to learn that gorillas don't eat any meat, with the exception of the occasional ant or termite. How is it possible that gorillas are so big and strong, but do not eat meat? Imagine spending 5–6 hours a day eating only salad or green vegetables – that is how they get enough to eat. Gorillas' stomachs are so big not because they are fat, but because they are digesting all that vegetation.

The diet of mountain gorillas varies quite a lot, depending on what is available. For example, some plants that are quite common in the low altitude area of Buhoma are rare or absent from the higher altitude areas of the park, such as Ruhija. The gorillas also select foods that are high in proteins and carbohydrates, but relatively low in fiber.

Bwindi gorillas enjoy fruit and they will not hesitate to climb 20 meters or more to eat it, but it is

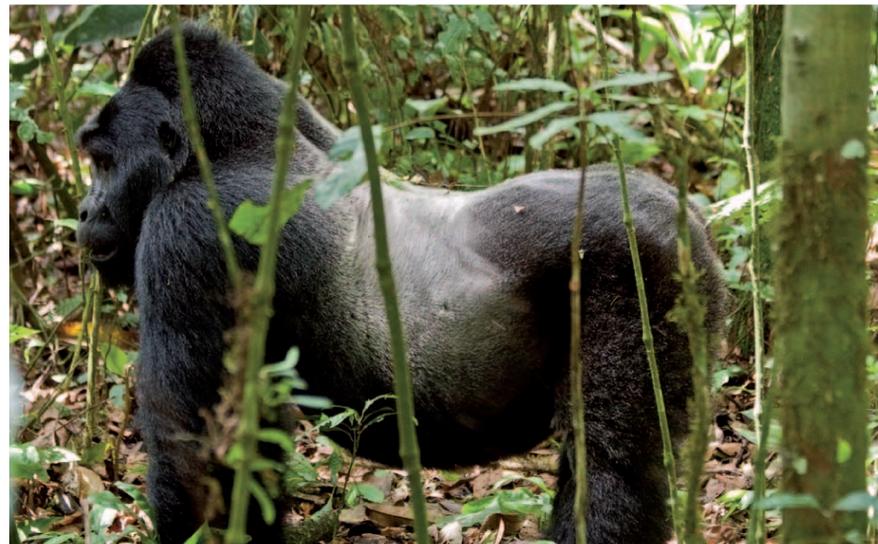
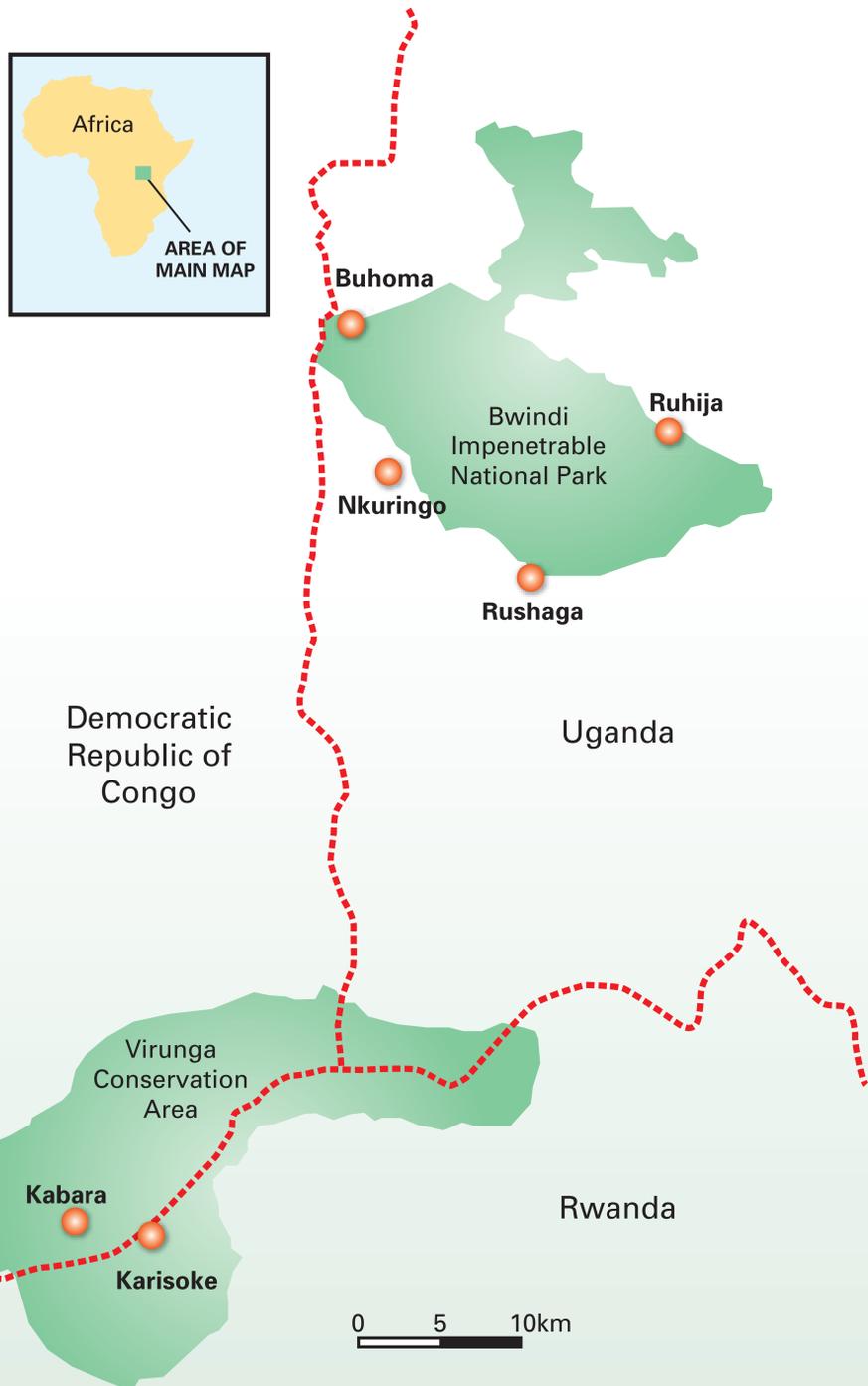
available only at certain times of the year. Also, as altitude increases, fruit availability declines, so the gorillas in Buhoma have more fruit than those in Ruhija and the mountain gorillas in the Virunga Volcanoes consume almost no fruit at all.

In Bwindi, gorillas travel about 1 km per day. How far they move depends on the availability of food. They typically travel further when they are searching for fruit than when they are eating only vegetation. They may also travel a lot if they have had an encounter with another group – one silverback may be trying to move his group away from the other one. Each group occupies a 'home range' of about 10–30 km² and the home range of neighboring groups typically overlap with one another.



Getting to Know Gorillas

■ How many mountain gorillas are there?



Only about 700. They are critically endangered. Mountain gorillas are found only in 2 small populations: in the Virunga Volcanoes of Rwanda, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo and here in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. In Bwindi we have approximately 300 gorillas and the remainder are found in the Virunga Volcanoes. We monitor changes in the population size by conducting censuses of the entire park about every 5 years or so. To do this, we intensively search throughout the park for signs of gorillas, then we estimate group size and composition based on the number of nests per group. In 2006, we also used genetic analysis of gorilla feces to confirm the identity of groups and individuals.



Getting to Know Gorillas

■ Why are mountain gorillas so rare?



There are so few mountain gorillas remaining for several reasons. First, the size of their remaining habitat is rather small (Bwindi is only 330 km² and the Virunga Volcanoes are 450 km²). These two small islands of forest are surrounded by some of the most densely populated rural areas of the world (200–400 people per km²), where people make their living through subsistence farming. The main threats to the gorillas are habitat destruction, poaching, and disease.

The forest can be slowly degraded by people illegally harvesting trees or other forest products, which reduces its suitability for the gorillas.

People living around Bwindi and the Virungas do not eat primates as bushmeat. However, poachers do set snares to capture forest antelope and

the gorillas may get caught instead. In recent years poaching for the pet trade has been on the increase.

Diseases, either respiratory or parasitic, may be transmitted from humans to the gorillas. Being in close contact with the gorillas greatly increases the risk of disease transmission. The guidelines for tourists are designed to protect both the gorillas and you from getting sick – so please follow them!



Getting to Know Gorillas

■ Conservation Activities



The Uganda Wildlife Authority and several conservation organizations work intensively to protect the gorillas through a multi-pronged approach:

■ **Law enforcement:** park rangers routinely patrol the park to reduce illegal activities, cut snares, and catch poachers.

■ **Ecotourism:** the permit fees generate revenue to protect Bwindi. Additional employment is created for the local people working as porters, restaurant workers, artisans, and others in the tourism industry.

■ **Community development:** several projects aim to improve the livelihood of local people through improving agricultural practices and development of small business practices. Assistance is also given through construction of schools, roads, and health clinics.

■ **Research & Monitoring:** to conserve the gorillas we must understand their ecological and behavioral patterns. We must also have information to know how the gorilla population and their habitat are changing over time.

■ **Veterinary Medicine & Public Health:** Veterinarians are on stand-by to remove snares or treat gorillas for respiratory illnesses. They also regularly monitor gorilla health. Improving public health practices benefits both the local communities and the gorillas.



Getting to Know Gorillas

■ Why can we see gorillas so well if they are wild?

Gorillas are naturally afraid of humans and typically will flee or aggressively charge if people get too close to them. Gorillas that are visited by people have undergone 'habituation'. This refers to the process, where through daily peaceful contact with humans, gorillas have slowly lost their fear of humans and have



learned to view them as neutral beings in their environment. Habituating a group of gorillas usually takes about 2 years. The guidelines established for tourist visits have been developed to respect the special relationship that exists through habituation: the gorillas briefly letting us into their world.

