

# ”Journey of the Gorillas”

Subtitle: A Close Look into the Story of the Rugendo Family (Rugendo= travellers)



## The Particulars:

1. A historical exposure of the mountain gorillas, whose killing on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 2007 resulted in worldwide shock and horror.
2. Prominent protagonists (see ”The Protagonists”)
3. The first comprehensive HD production, over more than a three year period, about the mountain gorillas



## **The Subject:**

Hardly any other creature has fascinated man more than the gorillas. They are 98.4% genetically identical to us. Their survival is emotionally connected to, and is a symbol of, the future survival of our planet.



## **The Facts:**

There are only about 650 mountain gorillas left remaining on the planet. The most significant, and by far the largest population, are situated between the border triangle of Rwanda, Uganda and the Congo: an area, plagued by unswerving over-population and militant unrest, where peace is elusive. Already in the mid-eighties, it was proven that the mountain gorilla's only chance at survival would be, when possible, the establishment of environmentally-sensitive tourism. The Belgian conservationist Adrian Dyschrever, father of this idea, shortly thereafter started the first tries at habituation, or in other words, one tried to habituate the gorillas, in particular the silverback as leaders of the respective groups, to humans. Habituation lasted approximately about two and a half years. The second of the silverback gorillas to be habituated in the Congo was apparently a peaceful contemporary, for already after only six months he accepted human proximity. Thereby he was considered as the hope for the mountain gorilla protection movement and advanced to become the favourite of the Congolese gamekeepers. Despite increasing conflict in the Congo, he managed to keep his family's experienced silverbacks alive and to even lead the intentional force of 18 gorillas until 1998. In the same year his son Humba, now himself a mature silverback, left the family to become his own head of family with

several mates. In 2001 Rugendo was caught in a conflict between the Congolese and rebel armies and was shot. As luck would have it, things didn't turn out worse for his older son Sekwekwe took over as head of the family and hereinafter has apparently thrived. Everything until the evening of 22 July 2007. That evening the majority of the family, the Silverbacks, all the females, and a rebel baby were killed and accordingly a symbol for the gorilla protection movement was destroyed. What was left of the family mistakenly journeys thru the tropical forest of the Virunga Volcanoes, where the war bitterly broke out once again. Even the rangers since then haven't been able to reach the forests since 4 September 2007 in order to assure themselves about the situation of the mountain gorillas. Therefore the "Rugendo" legend is passed on to his son "Humba", the chief meanwhile of a 9-member gorilla family.

### **The Protagonists:**

1. **The Rugendo** family of mountain gorillas
2. **Matto Barfuss** – the artist and „Gepardenmann“ („Cheetah Man“). No other person in Germany has elicited such a high degree of emotion and is so eclectically informative, as well as having a graspable relationship to wild animals. Matto Barfuss lived for a total of more than 25 weeks as an accepted part of a family of wild cheetahs in the Serengeti. Since 2002 he has worked, together with his partner Kerstin Noack on a longterm project about the endangered mountain gorillas. In addition he is also an award winning UNESCO photographer. His fascinating books are bestsellers.



## The Film:

(Length: approx. 45 minutes)

The legendary Rugendo family were killed 22 July 2007, allegedly by Hutu rebels. The mountain gorillas were surprised in their sleep and six of the silverbacks were shot. Since the silver-backs, Rugendo's son and heir and all four females of the clan lost their lives, this horrific crime all but marks the



*The graves of the murdered gorillas*

end of the Rugendo family. Given that Matto Barfuss has regularly been in the Congo since 2005 under the auspices of his Gorilla Aid Fund in support of the gamekeepers documenting the life of the Rugendo family, the horrific news reached him already two days later by email. It is a shocking call for help. Four weeks later Matto, together with his partner Kerstin, set out for the Congo. In their luggage they had numerous pairs of binoculars, spotting scopes and night sensing equipment to facilitate their ranger friends in having an advantage over the well-outfitted rebels and poachers. The handover of the

equipment to one of the last remaining ranger stations is a small light at the end of the tunnel for the Congolese gorilla protectors. On the other side the scene sweeps over to a small cemetery. Here, the murdered gorillas have been buried. Immediately after the handover, Matto and Kerstin leave the ranger station for the capital city of Goma. What they don't realize: a short time thereafter the gamekeepers



*In October 2007, Matto Barfuss hands over relief aid to his ranger friends.*

became refugees given that the gorilla's forest has now completely become rebel territory. For a longtime thereafter the fate of the gorillas has been unknown. The round 3-4 minute film introduction ends with closeup scenes of the Rugendo family gorillas that, traumatized and wandering aimlessly, survived the massacre. After this film introduction, which, as it were, depicts the murder, the story of the Rugendo family begins with unique and unfortunately nonrecurring footage of the gorillas.

Screenshot – The year 2005. For the first time Matto meets the 11-member Rugendo family. It is surprising how near the gorillas linger to the edge of the forest and that it is, above all, the younger gorillas who first make contact with the white foreigner. Matto understands gorilla communication and allows the playful beating of the gorilla children. Little by little the artist advances into the virtual core of the gorilla family. In the first, but intensive meeting, Matto introduces the gorillas themselves and the individual animals, with their various peculiarities. All gorillas have been given names by the gamekeepers, taken usually from killed comrades. Ultimately, Matto manages to get the silverback as well to accept his presence. As the family leader eventually prompts the others to migrate, he pushes Matto gently to the side and makes off on his way.

Matto and Kerstin set up camp in an old decaying ranger station not far from the Rugendo gorilla's vicinity. They spend their time between their return from the forest and the befalling evening with preparing food, maintenance of equipment and the documentation of scores of drawings depicting Matto's daily impressions. Given the war, the area is hardly populated and at every opportunity they have to bargain for food, whether at small markets or from mountain farmers. The necessities of daily life are arduous in the Congo. Day after day Matto and Kerstin set off for the Rugendo gorillas. Sometimes they have to search long in thick underbrush given that the „forest dwellers“ migrate quite a bit. Soon it is felt how the relationship between the two adventurers and the gorillas becomes closer. The silverbacks turned their backs toward them when they moved amongst family members. On top of it all the gorilla children were so curious about the scores of filming equipment that they frequently grabbed the camera lens making focusing impossible. The incredible film takes impart a yearning for the wish that the relationship bond between human and animal should never end. At the end of the expedition in 2005, the gamekeepers asserted that the Rugendo gorillas descended from the same ancestry as the first mountain gorillas to be discovered by German officer Robert von Beringe in the



year 1902 belonging to the 20 kilometer linear distance of the Sabinjo Volcano. Matto regarded this as unlikely even though mountain gorillas have a 4 – 8 square kilometers presence in the Virunga area.

Screenshot – Home in Germany: Matto solely and confidentially receives the long hidden private diaries of Robert von Beringe from his granddaughter including photos from the 1902 discovery expedition. He sits in his atelier and tells how the surprising discovery according to the diary occurs. He shows the pictures and the entirety goes from black and white sequences accompanied by the current scene. Robert von Beringe hid a message in a bottle for the ensuing ages not far from the location of his discovery. Matto tried to find this bottle.

Screenshot – the year 2006: Matto and Kerstin return to the Congo. They want to find the Rugendo troop again and also locate the son, named Humba, the ancestor of Rugendo. This time Matto finds the Rugendo family on the edge of the forest but near to the Bikenge ranger station. This is a good location and only 10 kilometers away from where Matto lived one year before with the gorillas. This is unusual and shows that the name "Rugendo", the "travellers" applies. Are the gamekeepers right and do these gorillas indeed have famous ancestors? There exists another reason why the gorillas are from a certain time and from now on settled there. There is a field filled with delicious tasting corn directly next to the forest. Gorillas love corn and constantly pilfer stalks. Matto and Kerstin spend the whole day with the gorillas. When they spend too much time pillaging fruit from the fields, they are repelled back into the forest by a bell. This is a long-term project in order to encourage acceptance by the mountain farmers for the gorillas. The idea is fruitful. The farmers feel a sense of fascination for the close living relative to humans.

First after several weeks Matto and Kerstin are able to free themselves from the Rugendo family. They return to their former starting point in Bukima. From there they mount their search for the troop of the silverback Humba. The endeavor is successful. Matto is surprised at the resemblance between the two brothers Sekwekwe and Humba. It is apparent that they not only have the same father but also similar preferences. As the two adventurers discover the silverback he is the only one sitting on the ground while the others of his 8-member clan forage for tasty fruit in the trees.

Families often differ from each other based on how they play. In the Humba family it is obvious that everyone is frolicking and persistently romping around. Indeed female gorillas are eager for such "fun". Occasionally parts of plants such as Liana serve as toys.

Matto became downright fond of the gorillas. The frustration is soon forgotten at having lost the trace for the Rugendo family. The



result is a true friendship which experiences yet another dramaturgical climax when one morning Matto returns and discovers the female Cato sitting there with an infant of only a few hours old. Matto is able to observe closeby, but refrains, as not to place the helpless creature in danger.

The gorilla infant is named Mascha. The first weeks after birth are closely documented. When Matto and Kerstin after 6 weeks and shortly before elections in the Congo leave, they are more than disturbed. This departure is difficult.

Screenshot- at home. The bad foreboding becomes certainty. Helplessly, Matto receives the horrible news about the increasing gorilla murders and attacks on ranger stations in the Congo. Then comes the 22 July, the day when the Rugendo family is annihilated and afterwards a vain endeavor to reach the gorillas (see beginning of the film). Additionally parts of the forest are bombarded by the Congolese Army, a horrible drama for the sensitive gorillas. Matto saves himself in his artwork and tries to bide his time waiting for news from his ranger friends, who have become refugees in Goma. His hope is at least that the Humba family gorillas have survived the atrocious conflict in order to sustain the "Rugendo" myth.

By the end of 2007, the news becomes a little more hopeful.

Screenshot\_ Matto and Kerstin return to the Congo: recently gamekeepers have succeeded in being able to return to western parts of the Virunga National Park. A significant number of the rebel troops were able to be defeated. Matto and Kerstin meet with a well known intermediary in Goma. He assists the two in overcoming multiple roadblocks in order to reach Bukima. There they receive good news. The Humba family is



*Mascha - two days after birth.*

alive! The elation is great upon hearing news of the return of the friends from Germany and the ease of tensions in the Virunga National Park. In the evening there is a cheery celebration. The next morning Matto and Kerstin leave. It is very dry in the forest and their path leads for hours to high altitudes in the volcanic mountains. Sure enough – there, the Humba family had withdrawn. It looked as though the gorillas still recognized the two Germans again, because despite all of their dramatic experiences, they showed great affection. Even Mascha is there, and more than doing well.

Full of curiosity they resume contact with the old family friends. The gorilla youth fondle the camera and friskily explore the strange hair of the close living relatives to humankind. Kerstin and Matto climb up again and again. They observe how and when the active little gorilla tries in his role as a later silverback.

A dramatic and aboveall exciting and little happy end, namely the entitlement of hope that the son of the famous Rugendo Humba manages to continue the deeply symbolic history of the Rugendo family. And Matto himself is convinced that Mascha, the grandson, will lead his family and thereby contribute to the survival of the mountain gorillas.



*Mascha – The carrier of hope and ancestor of the Rugendo family*

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