

Discovering the hidden animals at the heart of Africa

By Yntze van der Hoek, 16th February 2022

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is a country rich in biodiversity, including endemic gorillas and extensive rainforests, and home to conservation-minded communities. Unfortunately, this nation in the heart of Africa is more internationally renowned for illegal mining, deforestation and civil conflicts.

In 2012, the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International, a charity for the protection of gorillas, began collaborating with the local communities of Nkuba in DRC to set aside c. 2,600 km² of primary rainforest for conservation and sustainable resource use. To enhance ecological research and conservation efforts in Nkuba Conservation Area—vital habitat for both gorillas and chimpanzees—we started gathering information on the species that live in this forest. People from the local communities had a wealth of insights to offer, but we also needed to verify the presence of certain species by direct observation, especially those whose tracks can be easily misidentified. We were also hoping to capture footage of the great apes, to help better understand what their family structures looked like.



Left: As aardvarks only come out of their burrows at night, they are hard to observe other than with remotely triggered cameras. Right: A curious owl-faced monkey decides to give a camera trap a detailed inspection. Although we aim to record unbiased footage of completely undisturbed animals, these occasional interactions show us that any human intervention in these ecosystems leaves some sort of footprint. Photos: Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International

In order to capture images of elusive, forest-dwelling species, we deployed camera traps throughout the forest of Nkuba. This helped us determine which species inhabited the Nkuba

Conservation Area and gave us insights into their ecology and behaviour patterns.

Over 16,000 days of camera trapping later, we are pleased to write this effort was invaluable. We recorded 29 large mammal species, which included at least seven globally threatened species in urgent need of protection: Grauer's gorilla, eastern chimpanzee, owl-faced monkeys, giant and white-bellied pangolin, leopard, and African golden cat.



Left: Field staff of the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund trying to find suitable locations to install camera traps in the dense forest understory. Right: Local communities are the stewards and custodians of these forests. Photos: Yntze van der Hoek/Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International

These findings will help us guide future research and effective conservation actions. In the meantime, it was thrilling to discover which species roamed around our tents at night and which species we unknowingly crossed paths with. It also allowed us to learn new things about species that have been much better studied in other regions.

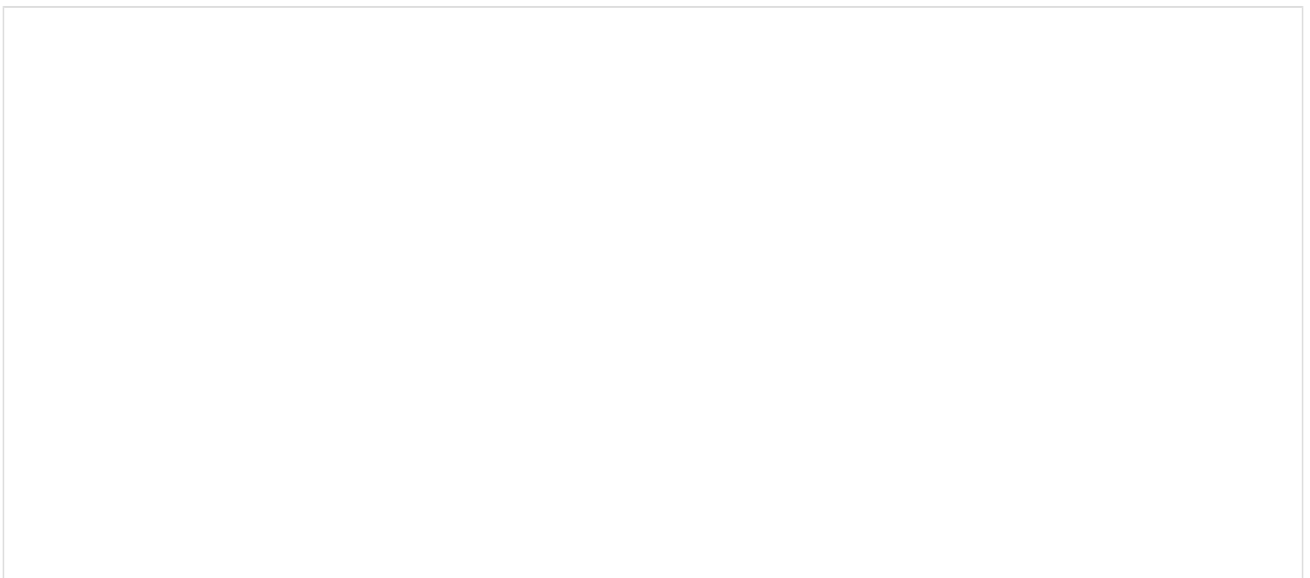
Doing research and engaging in conservation in the Congo basin, particularly in eastern DRC, has challenges that are second to none. Yet, it is here that these efforts can also be the most rewarding, and where there is vast but underfunded conservation potential. Our work emphasizes the value of the Congo basin as a region full of unique species. It is also a region of global importance for the buffering of carbon dioxide emissions. Although it faces a multitude of threats to both people and nature, it still provides hope for conservation. Biodiversity and forest habitat are declining, there are still largely intact ecosystems that can be saved—if we act fast.



No road in sight, yet. Although the areas surrounding the Nkuba Conservation Area are rapidly being converted or degraded, this partially flat, partially hilly, evergreen rainforest remains largely intact. Photo: Yntze van der Hoek/Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International

Visit gorillafund.org for more information about our work in DRC and Rwanda.

The article [Diversity and diel activity patterns of terrestrial mammals in the Nkuba Conservation Area, Democratic Republic of the Congo](#) is available in *Oryx—The International Journal of Conservation*.





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Yntze van der Hoek is a Biodiversity Researcher for the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. With a background in conservation science and ecology, he aims to provide scientific guidance to the conservation efforts of the organization, while also adding to our understanding of the ecology of species of various taxa occurring in the region.