



GCSE

4171/01-A

**ENGLISH/ENGLISH LANGUAGE
FOUNDATION TIER
UNIT 1 (READING)**

A.M. TUESDAY, 5 November 2013

Resource Material

Gorilla spotting from a wheelchair

Frank Gardner, a BBC journalist, was shot and disabled reporting on the war in the Middle East in 2004. Here he writes about his trip to Rwanda in Africa, in 2012, to see mountain gorillas.

We had flown into Rwanda from London, an exhausting 15-hour journey. When the chance for me to go on a three-day gorilla trek came up unexpectedly, my wife said, "Go on, you've always wanted to see the mountain gorillas." Back in the dark days in hospital after I was shot and disabled eight years ago, I remember thinking, "Damn! I wish I had gone to see them before I lost the use of my legs." I had read somewhere that a survey in 1989 reported there were only 620 left in the wild, and I thought I would never get to see them. But here it was, a wonderful chance to see them in their natural habitat, and we had managed to find a tour company that said they could cope with my disability. "We'll get you up there, no problem," I was assured by their email. I was curious to see how.

The fun began at the airport, where an embarrassed woman from ground staff confessed that there was no access into the terminal building for someone in a wheelchair. Would I mind waiting outside while she went and got my passport stamped? I was only too happy, watching small birds flit among the flowers and enjoying the African sun on my face.



In the late afternoon we drove into the hills, bouncing and jolting rather uncomfortably along a track to reach what must be one of the most beautiful views in Africa. 2,000 metres above sea level was Virunga Lodge, where we were staying in surprising luxury.

Tomorrow was the big day, the trek up into gorilla country. I knew we were in for an early start, yet I lay awake with questions. What if we didn't find them? I mean, imagine coming all this way and having to admit defeat. What if the porters dropped me, or if the vegetation proved too thick and everyone else but me got to see them? What if ...

At 5am a knock on the door woke me. "There are 24 gorillas in the group we will be tracking," announced our guide, Augustin. "The males are only called silverbacks at 12 years old. They feed on over 200 species of plant. They are vegetarian animals but they will also eat red ants which gives them protein. They spend their time resting and feeding, then the silverback leader decides where to make the nest for the night, usually on the ground. This group has three silverbacks – perhaps today we will be lucky?" He told me that mountain gorilla numbers have increased but they still remain an endangered species with fewer than 800 left in the wild.

We headed uphill through open farmland until the track gave out. It was time to leave the Land Rovers and start trekking. A stretcher complete with padded cushions had been prepared and I lowered myself into it, to everyone's amusement. Four wiry porters began to carry me uphill like some pampered emperor.

Soon Augustin made another of his announcements. "From here on," the guide said softly, "we must be very quiet. The gorillas are very close."

At that point I had to be lifted from the stretcher to my wheelchair. With difficulty, I then had to be pushed, pulled and hauled through the thick undergrowth by the good-natured porters. And then the most exciting moment of the whole trip arrived. I hardly dared to breathe. In a clearing of bamboo I caught that unique musty smell and then, from 10 feet away, came a long, low growl. A huge silverback was sitting facing me, slowly chewing a bamboo shoot as he watched my clumsy progress. I know everyone says it but it really is an incredible privilege to stare into the eyes of a wild yet docile creature.



Strangely, I felt no fear, even though I knew that if the silverback chose to charge at me my lifeless legs would give me no chance of escape. Instead, we watched spell-bound as baby balls of black fur tumbled and frolicked, then stopped to eat the wild celery growing around them. Some were curious and came close to my wheelchair while the silverback simply stretched out and yawned as if on a sunlounger. It was an enchanted hour of perfect peace, a magical end to a wonderful day.

Frank Gardner