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Green giants
Bwindi National Park remains the key habitat for the endangered silverback mountain gorilla

Uganda

GORILLAS IN OUR MIDST

Incredible work is being done to save the native mountain gorillas of south-west Uganda, and now visitors can spend even longer getting to know their distant ape cousins

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS **SARAH GILBERT**

Uganda

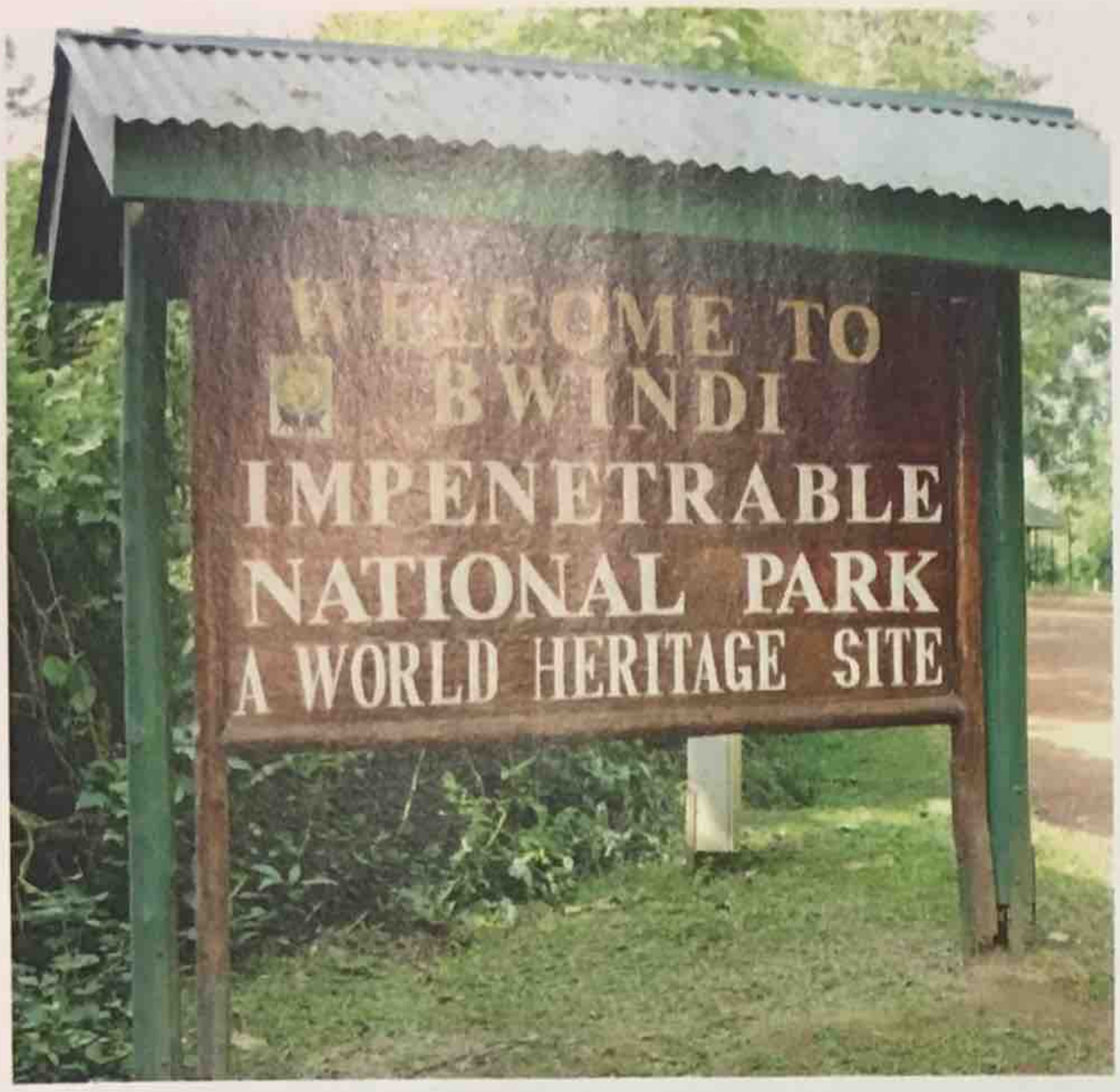
We heard him before we could see him. A rhythmic drumming rang through the forest, echoing my pounding heart. Then 250 kilogrammes of silverback came charging through the undergrowth, football-sized fists hitting the ground with thunderous bangs, vegetation flying in all directions.

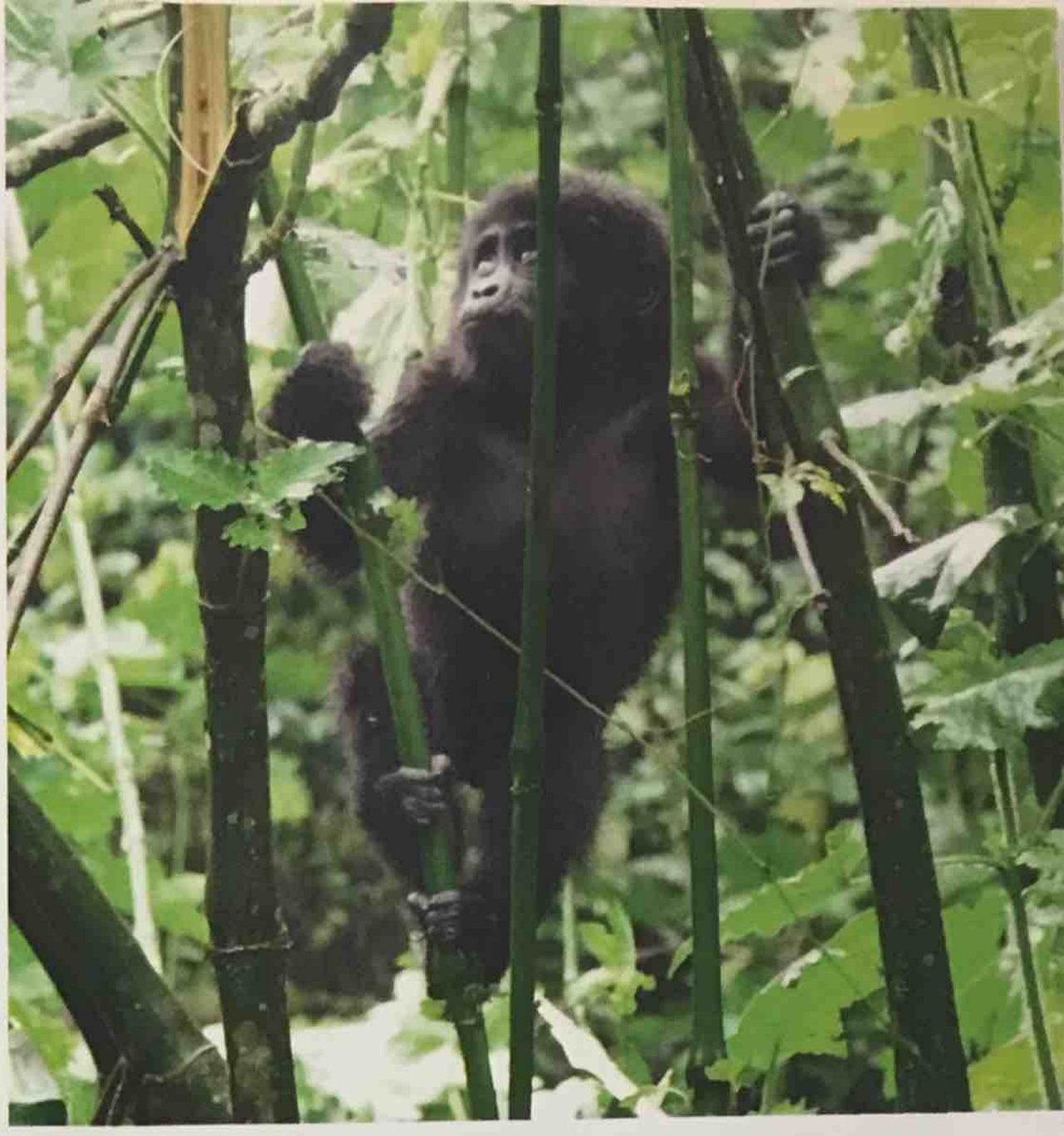
I'd been warned to ignore my gut instinct – which was to run as fast as possible in the opposite direction – and just duck down and stay quiet. But like a decidedly less glamorous, latter-day Fay Wray, I couldn't stop a short, high-pitched squeal escaping as I cowered in the bushes, head lowered demurely and eyes fixed on the ground.

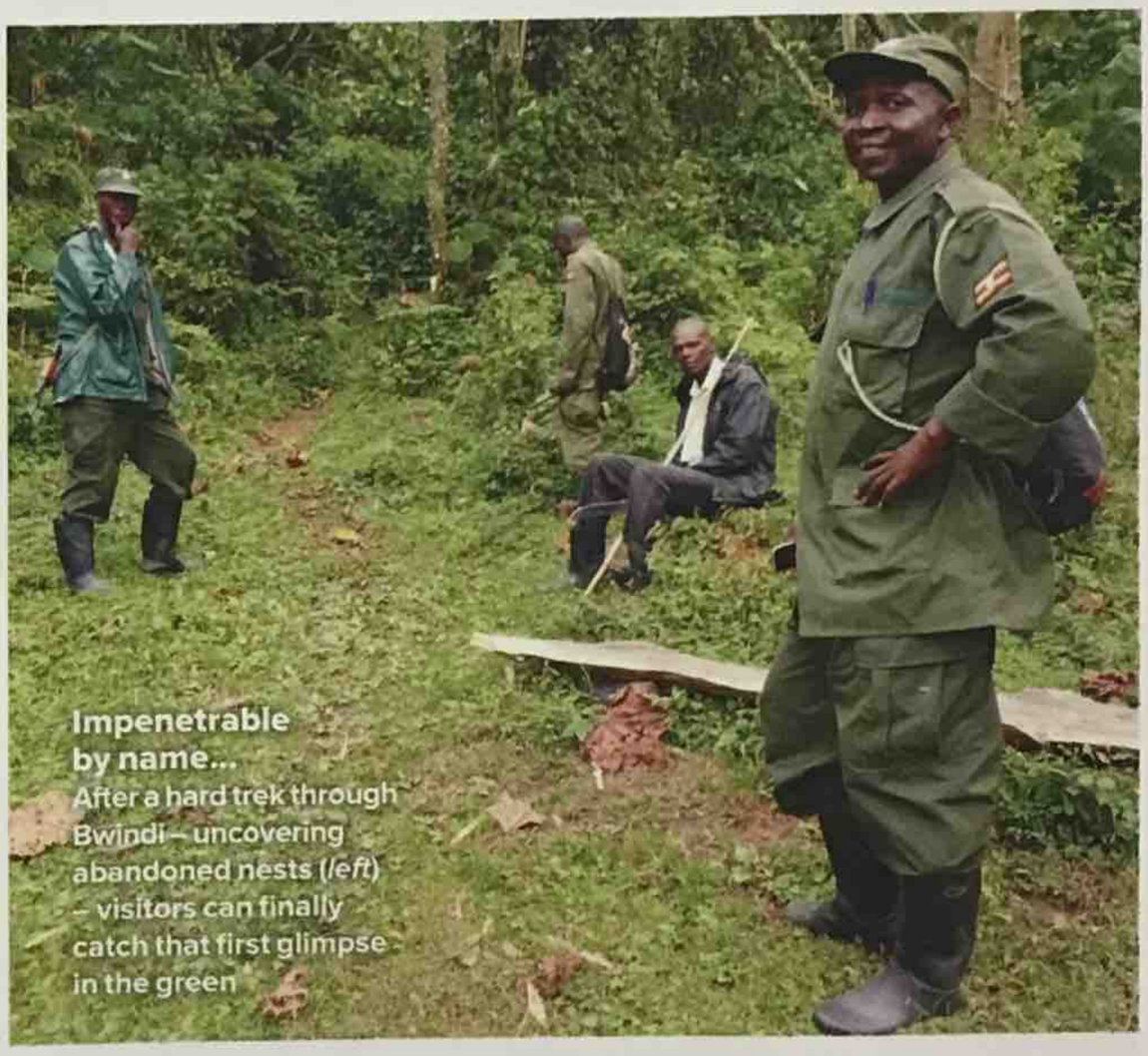
But Bikingyi stopped short of our small posse of Homo sapiens and, power order established, turned on his heels with a disdainful backward glance. When I dared to look up, I saw the breadth of his retreating back, streaked with a band of silvery-white hair below the silhouette of his conical head and distinctive bulging brow. He was a familiar sight from wildlife programmes but, in the flesh, his sheer size and primordial power still took me by surprise. "He's enormous!" I gasped, much to the amusement of my guide, Augustine.

We were deep in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in south-western Uganda. After hours of tracking, we'd caught up with a family of mountain gorillas undergoing 'habituation' that gets primates used to limited human presence. Taking up to five years, this process will allow them to be observed at close quarters by researchers, as well as by those in search of one of the planet's ultimate wildlife experiences.

Normally, face time with the gorillas is limited to just an hour but, thanks to the Uganda Wildlife Authority's (UWA) new Gorilla Habituation Programme, I was allowed to spend up-to four hours with a family just 18 months in to the process, an exciting variation on the standard permit that enables researchers – and a limited number of travellers – to spend more time observing the gorillas. I'd also get the opportunity to spend an hour with a group more used to humans, but – as I was discovering – the longer alternative offered a very different experience from conventional gorilla tracking.







Impenetrable by name... After a hard trek through Bwindi – uncovering abandoned nests (*left*) – visitors can finally catch that first glimpse in the green

Hitting the trail

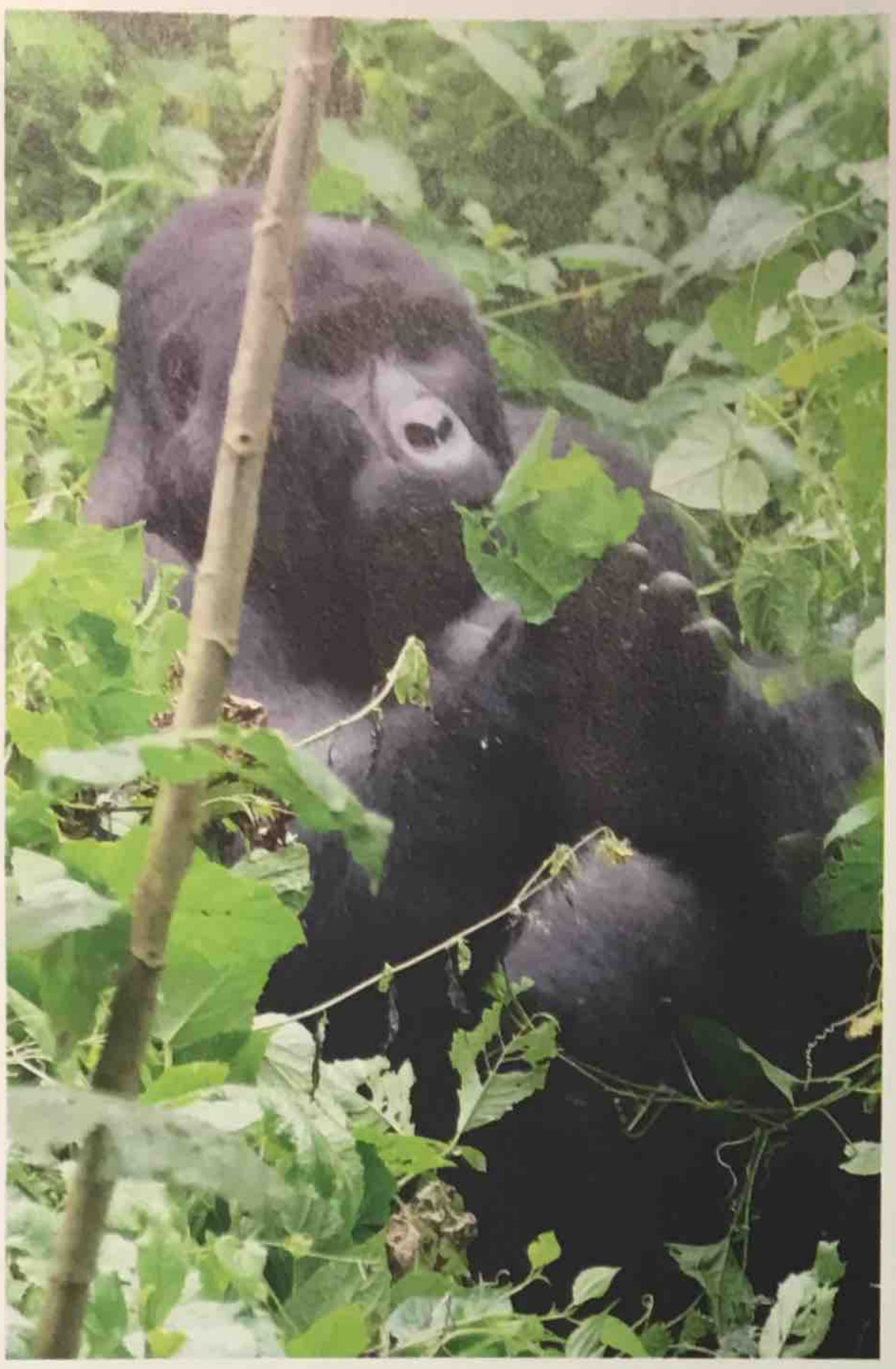
On trips to see habituated groups, usually the trackers go out at first light to find the gorillas' nests from the night before and, soon after, the location of the apes themselves, which they radio in to the waiting guides. But there were no shortcuts on this trek. I was helping Augustine and four machete-wielding trackers to search for nests, joined by two rangers – each dressed head to toe in camouflage, with rifles slung over their shoulders in case we bumped into any aggressive forest elephants – and Stephen, my well-dressed, long-legged porter.

As the sun rose, I was driven south from my lodge in Nkuringo to Rubuguri. To reach the area where we might find the Bikingyi Group, we first had to tackle the mountain that loomed over the small town. Hiking up the rocky pathway, I couldn't help but notice the contrast between the verdant forest and the patchwork of farmed plots that clung to the steep deforested slopes. Habitat loss created by humans is one of the mountain gorillas' main threats, but conservation initiatives, including habituating gorilla families for tourism, have meant that the number of these critically endangered animals is slowly increasing.

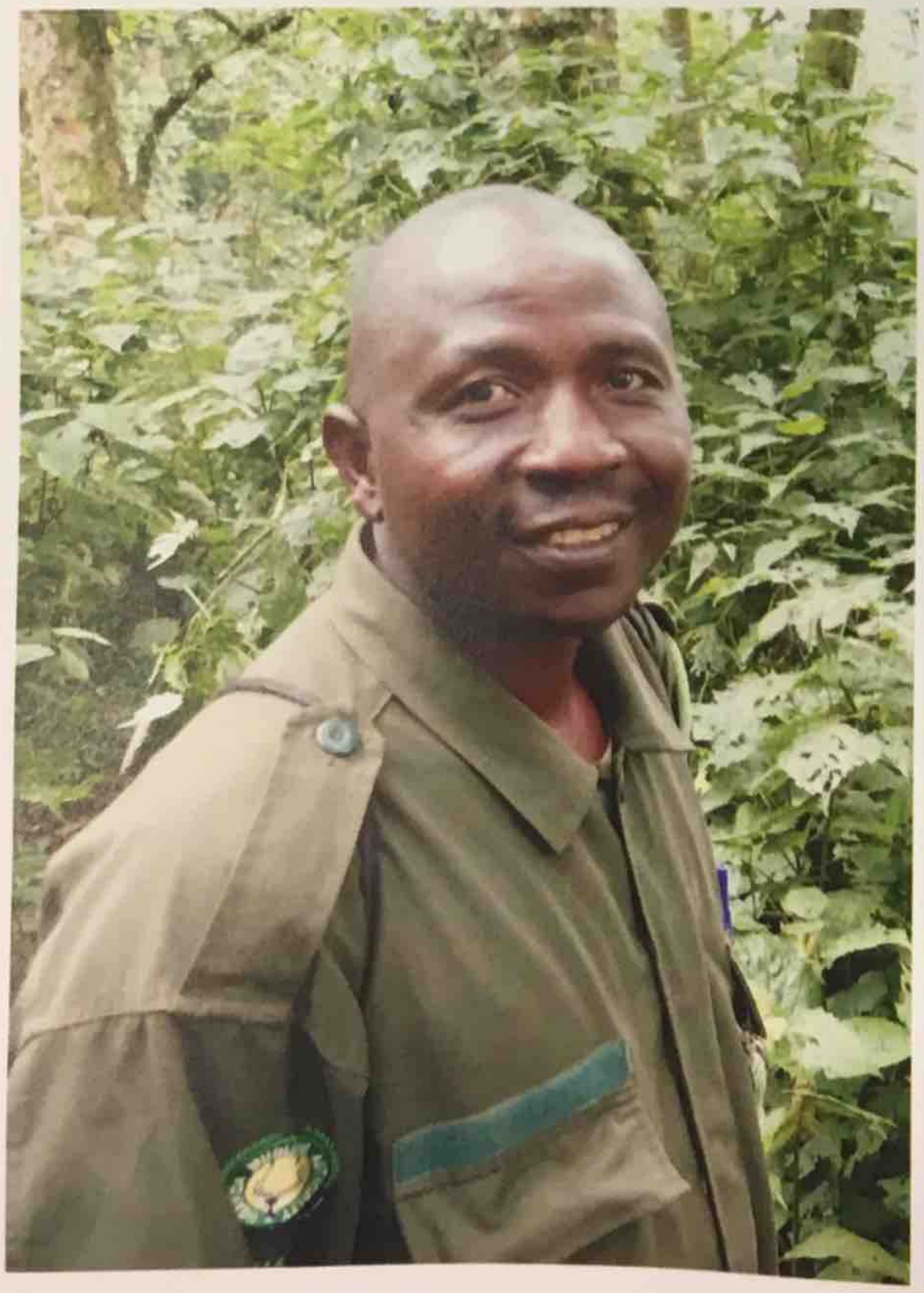
'Huge dragonflies hovered above puddles that had formed in an elephant's footprints and vociferous chimps hooted in the distance'

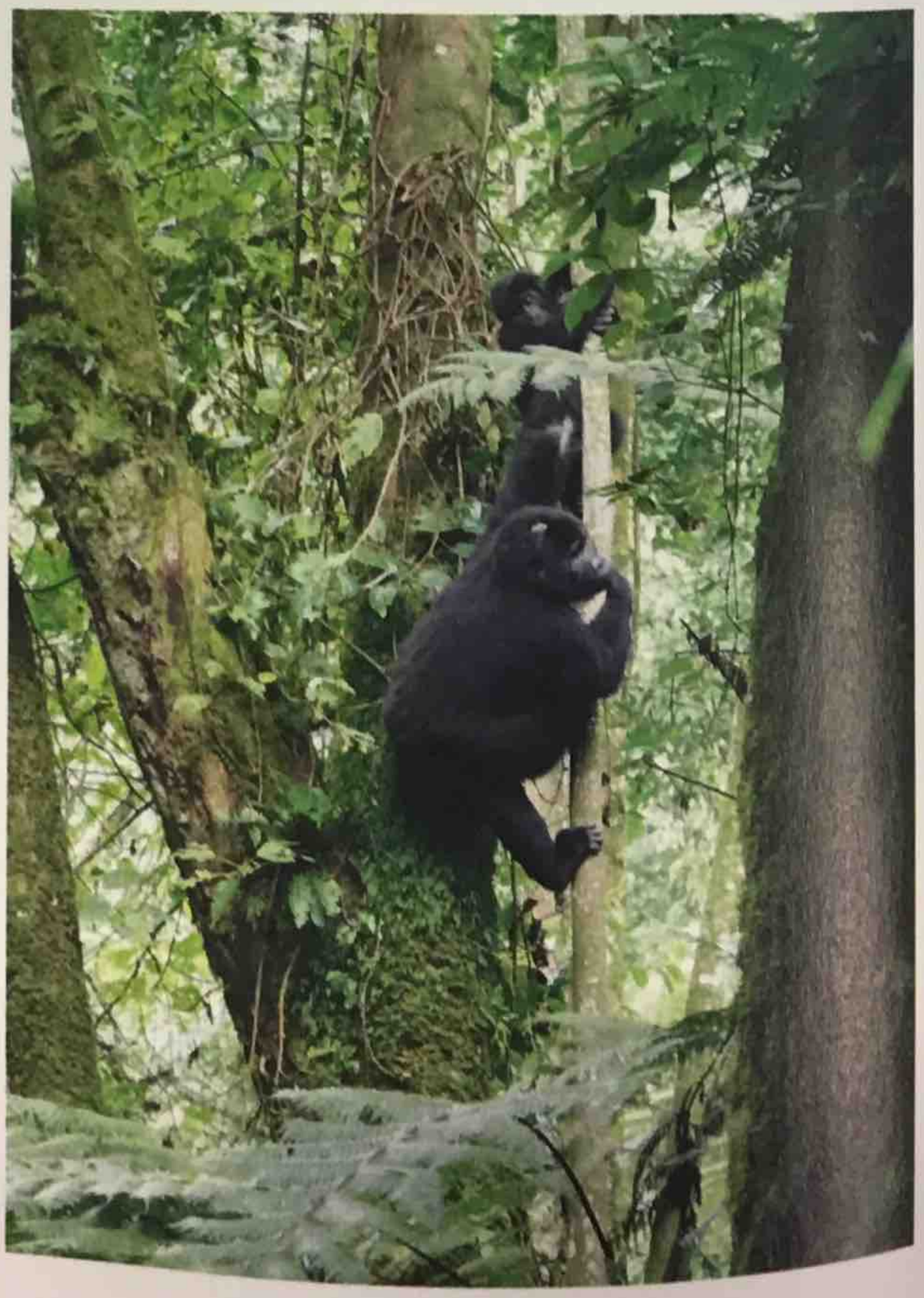
Reaching the mountaintop, there was no park gate or fence – the farmland simply ended and Bwindi began. This ancient, UNESCO-protected forest spreads around 320 square kilometres and is home to almost half the world's remaining mountain gorilla population, an estimated 360 at the last census, as well as 120 other mammals. It's known in the local language as the 'dark place', but it has become a shining light to primatologists over the years.

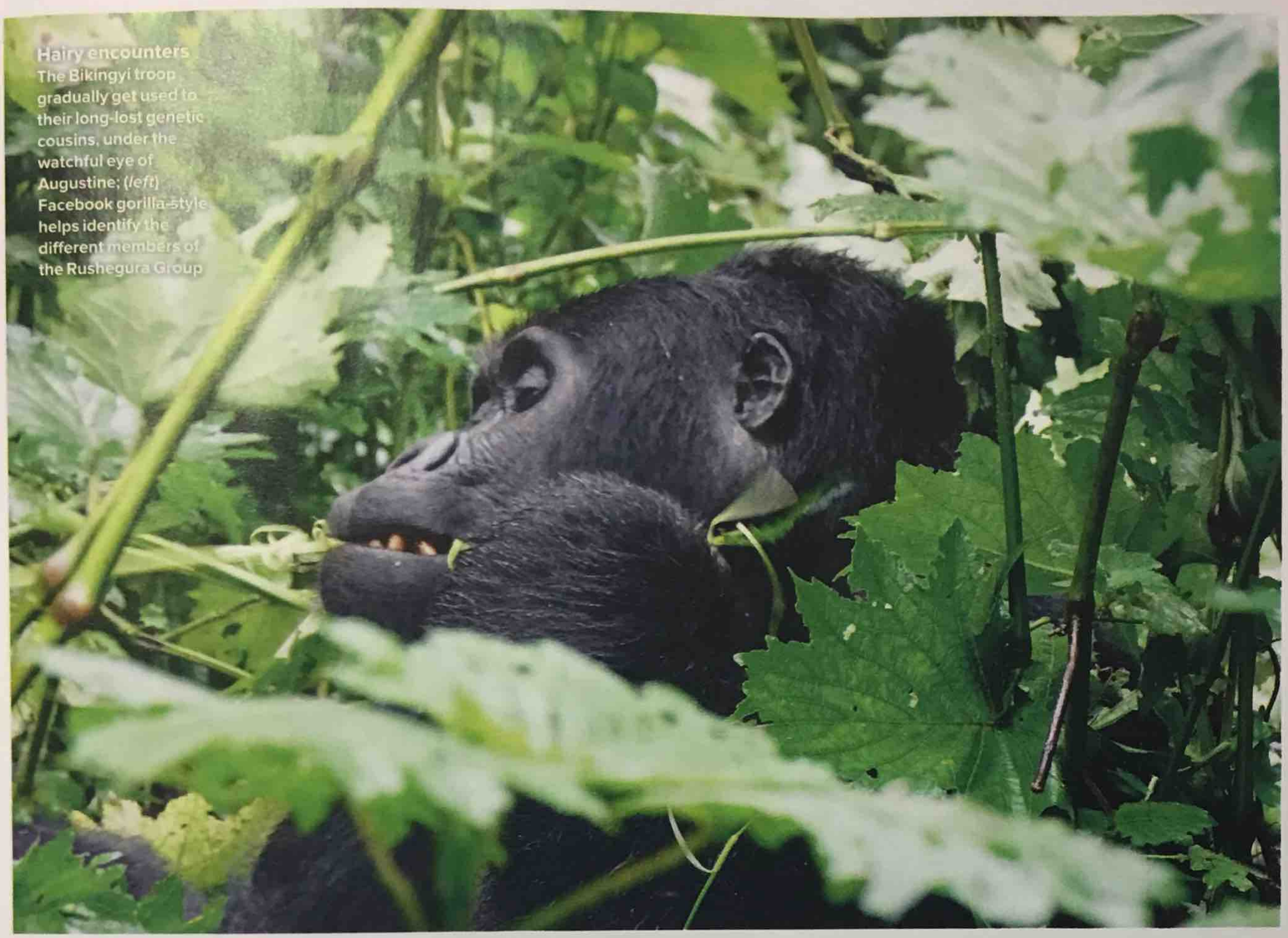
As we walked, a shy black-backed duiker – a small antelope – slipped by in a flash of russet. Dragonflies the size of small birds hovered above puddles that had formed in a forest elephant's ▶



Munyana (SadF)
Kamara (Karu







Hairy encounters
The Bikingyi troop gradually get used to their long-lost genetic cousins, under the watchful eye of Augustine; (*left*) Facebook gorilla-style helps identify the different members of the Rushegura Group

◀ footprints and vociferous chimps hooted in the distance. The deeper we went into Bwindi, the denser and wilder the forest became, until we finally left the comparatively open trail and began to make our own way with machetes.

It soon felt like I'd stepped on to a fantastical set from a *Tarzan* film. Everywhere was a maze of shifting greens, where vegetation dripped from towering hardwoods, thick lianas coiled and twined and delicate feather-like ferns came armed with vicious spiked trunks.

Before long, Stephen, who'd arrived wearing a black suit jacket, was carrying everything but me. When the going got vertical, he would hold out his hand as if he were inviting me to dance. Regardless, I pitched myself inelegantly down the precipitous slopes and scrambled back up, being whipped by wayward branches, planting my feet in seemingly bottomless tangles of roots and nearly losing a boot to the glutinous mud. But it was worth it.

'There were no signs of gorillas but then a muscular arm emerged from the foliage, extending a black hand to tug at a vine'

After several hours walking in a giant loop through the forest, we came across the gorillas' nests not far from where we'd started. A musty smell had led the trackers to a group of raised piles of intertwined leaves and branches, which each gorilla builds every night, sleeps and defecates in, then abandons the following morning – only infants sleep accompanied, camping in the same nest as their mothers. From these simple structures the rangers could tell how many gorillas were in the troop, and often their size and sex.

By this point in the trek, a twig bed was starting to look like an appealing spot for some much-needed rest. These primates have a wide eating range, so it was a relief to know that, nests found, there was a 90 per cent chance of discovering gorillas within the hour.

Meet the family

At the sight of the nests, the trackers quickly searched for clues as to the gorilla troop's location. They hunted for broken branches, half-eaten vegetation and piles of fresh poop, all the while listening out for vocalisations and even smelling for gas.

Suddenly we stopped. "Can you see them?" asked Augustine. I scanned the bushes, but to my inexperienced eyes there were no signs of gorillas. Then a shaggy, muscular arm emerged from the foliage, extending a black leathery hand to tug at a vine. This was followed by a loud chomping noise, then a long, lingering fart and a satisfied sigh, which had me giggling in delight.

Despite their fearsome power – gorillas are thought to be as much as eight times stronger than a man – these peace-loving giants spend much of their day searching for food. They're strict vegetarians, adding only an occasional sprinkling of termites for extra protein, and are happiest when they're chilling out *en famille*.

We were on the gorillas' turf, though. Adult males can behave aggressively towards any perceived threat, and, as I was learning, mock charges and chest beating are common among unhabituated ▶

◀ gorillas. Unimpressed, Bikingyi soon got up and wandered deeper into the forest. We followed slowly, and with considerably less grace, as he hauled himself up the mountain and into a thick cluster of foliage, before settling down to eat, casting us the odd sideways glance, and calling the group together with harsh grunts.

Silverback aside, I wondered how the rangers told each gorilla apart. "Their noses are very distinctive, and researchers use its shape and wrinkles to distinguish them," Augustine told me. "And spend enough time with them that their unique personalities begin to show."

A young male soon took on the mantle of protector, beating his chest and calling out a warning whenever we got too close. Even a woolly-haired eight-month old baby – the first to spot us – began imitating its elders by feebly beating its tiny chest with flailing arms before holding them out to its mother, who gently scooped him up and carried him off to the safety of a towering tree. The group was clearly still wary of people.

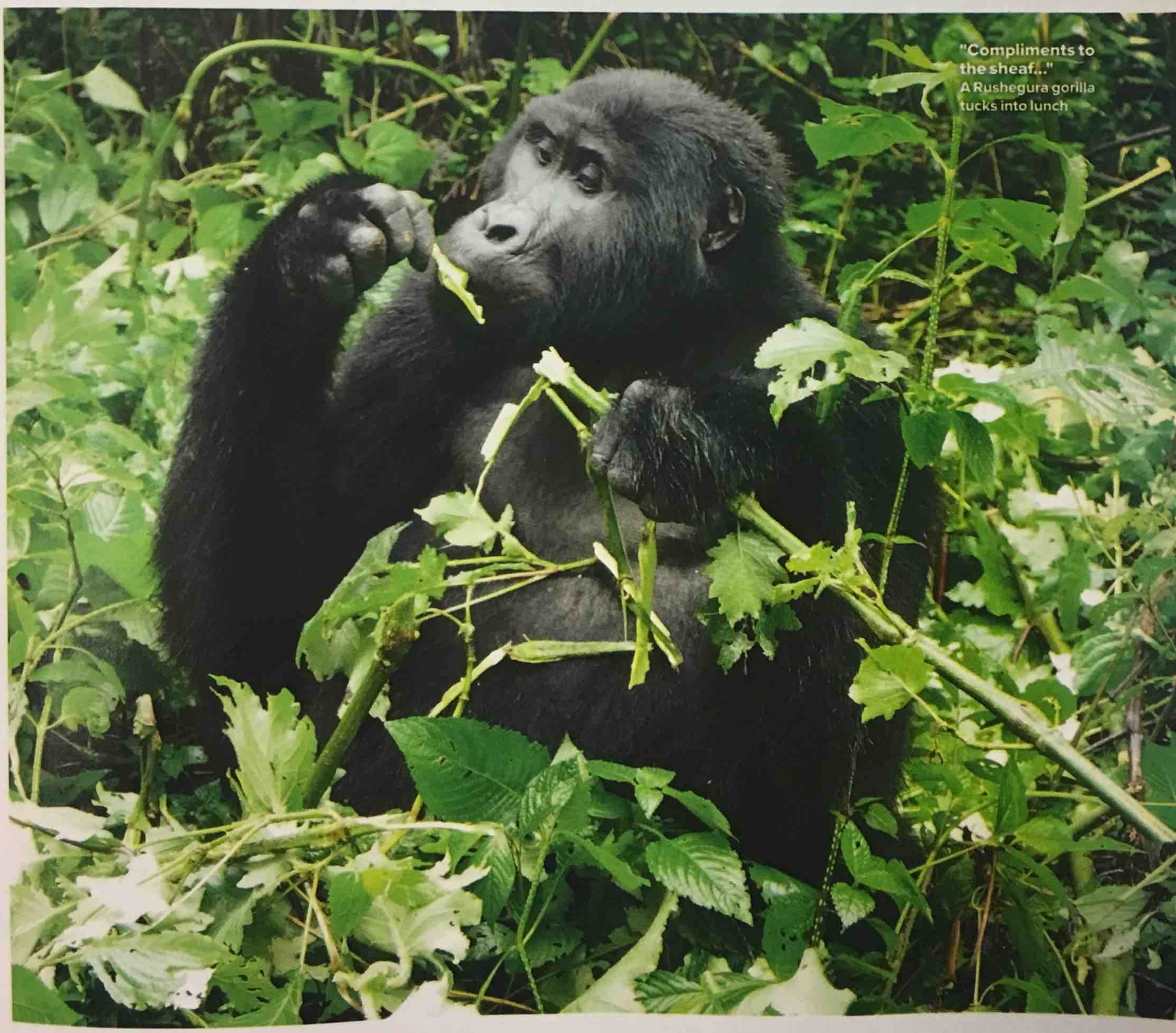
An ape like me

The legendary American primatologist Dian Fossey was the first person to 'habituate' a family of mountain gorillas, deep in the misty Virunga Mountains of Rwanda in the 1960s. The process remains much the same today, and for the animals it's a physically painless experience. But I soon understood the caution of my companions: rangers and trackers are often beaten, bitten and scratched on their first encounters with unhabituated troops of gorillas.

As we left the Bikingyi troop, Augustine explained that they'd all learned to mimic the gorillas' noises, especially the low, murmuring rumble used to keep the silverback calm. And during the start of the process, they even imitated the gorilla's gestures and behaviour, crouching down and munching on the leaves to demonstrate their friendly intentions, as well as walking on their knuckles.

Mountain gorillas depend on strong social bonds, living in groups of up to 20, all led by a dominant male. The family we'd encountered had 18 members, but they were still getting used to humans. At first, Bikingyi didn't want to be followed, and would disappear into the forest whenever he caught sight of the rangers, taking his family with him. But if the silverback were to accept them, the rest of the family would follow suit.

This peaceful war of attrition takes time, however, with rangers making contact for four hours a day, seven days a week until the ▶



"Compliments to the sheaf..." A Rushegura gorilla tucks into lunch

On the look-out
The young Rushegura gorilla is on the alert for trackers

◀ gorillas are ready to face their first *mzungus* (white people), and then – fully habituated – larger groups for up to an hour at a time.

Relative experience

The encounter certainly proved stark contrast to the more conventional tracking I'd undertaken a few days earlier, setting out from Buhoma, in the north of Bwindi, to meet another family of mountain gorillas. This area is home to three of Uganda's 11 habituated families and readily accessible to visitors, affording an opportunity to see the other side of the process.

After our obligatory briefing at the UWA station, our eight-strong group, plus rangers, trackers and porters, set off. But while there is a 99 per cent chance that you'll see gorillas here, the trek to find them can range anywhere from 40 minutes to six hours. Thankfully, we soon found members of the Rushegura (R) Group sitting comfortably astride some high branches, plucking at the tastiest fruit. Despite their bulk and weight, gorillas can shimmy up a tree with consummate ease, and I had to crane my neck to try and get a better view, while dodging the powerful jets of urine that splashed down on to the leaves around me.

Then our guide Herbert's radio crackled into life. It was a tracker reporting that three of the group were feeding in an open area down in the valley, so we zigzagged slowly down a vertiginous muddy slope to meet them, grabbing on to passing branches to steady ourselves.

The small clearing gave me the perfect opportunity to get up close to the group – so close I could see droplets of water resting on top of their thick fur. It had rained heavily during the night and, despite living in a rainforest, gorillas apparently don't like the rain. They would have spent a miserable night in their nests, and that morning, when the sun had shone again, would probably have had a well-deserved lie-in.

Not much was going on, but I was fascinated nonetheless. One gorilla was dozing, curled up in the foetal position, head resting on his arm. Another stared into the middle distance, chin resting on his hand. The third, Kanyawani, was sitting cross-legged and serene, like a hirsute Buddha, systematically stripping and chewing the juiciest bits from his favourite vine. I studied his unmistakable shape, tracing the outline of his large stomach, designed to digest bulky fibrous vegetation – no wonder they have wind – and his disproportionately powerful arms, far stronger than his legs.

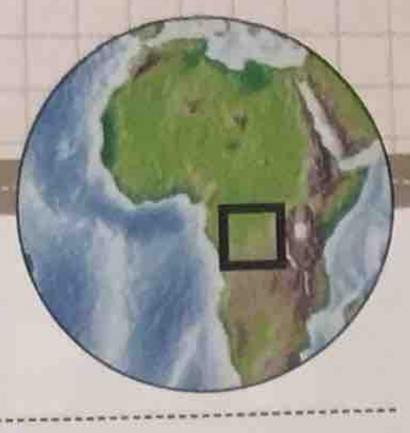
'With the unhabituated group, I'd had my own unique encounter with mountain gorillas that were as wild as it gets'

Whether sitting idly scratching their heads or examining their fingernails, the similarities between human and gorilla behaviour was striking. But it was their eyes that astonished me the most. As I stared at Kanyawani, as close as if we were across a dinner table, he tilted his head, and his hazel eyes seemed to hold an expression of curiosity that matched mine.

Our hour with R Group flew by. Then we left the forest and waited in line to cross a small river, taking it in turns to wobble precariously over the slippery stepping stones, I heard the crack of a branch behind me. I turned to see that a young male gorilla had joined the back of the queue and, unsure what to do and rooted to the spot, I looked towards Herbert. "Give him space," he called. I tried to move out of the way but I was surrounded by vegetation and so, thrillingly, this immense gorilla brushed past my leg on his way to the river.

It was only much later, back in Rubuguri, that I had time to reflect on both experiences. Tracking the habituated Rushegura gorillas had given me the chance to get within touching distance of some of my closest animal relatives in a way I'd never thought possible. But with the unhabituated Bikingyi Group, I'd had my own unique encounter with mountain gorillas that were as wild as it gets, and it felt like a less planned, more intense meeting.

In seeing both sides of the habituation process, I'd not only gained an insight into gorilla life, but the hard work, dedication and skill that goes into protecting these remarkable apes, and I felt privileged to have been even a small part of it. Whether seeing them for one or four hours, it would never be enough, but this was a trip that I'd remember for the rest of my life. W



Uganda Footnotes

VITAL STATISTICS

Capital: Kampala
Population: 38 million
Languages: English, Luganda and Swahili
Time: GMT+3 (no daylight savings in 2016)
International dialling code: +256
Visas: UK citizens can get a 30-day e-visa at https://visas.immigration.go.ug, currently US$50. The 90-day East Africa Tourist Visa (US$100) allows you to travel between Uganda, Kenya and Rwanda on the same multiple-entry visa. You must show a valid yellow fever vaccination certificate on arrival in Uganda.
Money: Ugandan Shilling (UGX), currently around UGX4,414 to the UK£. There are ATMs in all cities and major towns. You'll need cash for cheaper establishments, markets and tipping.

When to go

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec

■ **Dry season** – Uganda is a year-round destination, with max temperatures hitting a constant 26°C. Between Dec-Feb (hot and dry) and June-Sept (still dry but cooler) are best for gorilla tracking.
■ **Wet season** – April and May usually the worst for rainfall.

Health & safety

Be up to date on your jabs – hepatitis A, diphtheria, typhoid, tetanus and yellow fever. There's also a malaria risk, so contact your doctor beforehand for the recommended prophylaxis; cover up to avoid bites. Always drink bottled water.

Further reading & information

Uganda (Bradt Travel Guides, 2016)
visituganda.com – official tourism site
ctph.org – Conservation Through Public Health (CTPH)
dthomas.co.uk/singinggorilla – community projects around Nkuringo

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- **10 of the best places to see gorillas** – web exclusive
- **Gorilla watching in the Congo** – issue 134

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- **Uganda travel guide**

THE TRIP

The author travelled to Uganda with **Natural World Safaris** (01273 691 642, www.naturalworldsafaris.com). Their seven-night *Gorilla Habituation Safari* starts from £5,695, including international flights (and transfers) on Kenya Airways, a night at The Boma Guesthouse, three nights at Mahogany Springs with one permit to track the habituated gorillas; three nights at Clouds Mountain Gorilla View Lodge with one trekking permit for the Gorilla Habituation Programme.

Getting there

There are no direct flights to Uganda from the UK. **Kenya Airways** (www.kenya-airways.com) and **KLM** (www.klm.com) fly from London Heathrow to Entebbe via Nairobi and Amsterdam respectively. Flight time to Entebbe is approximately 12 hours depending on stopovers; return fares from around £500. **Ethiopian Airlines** (ethiopianairlines.com; 13 hours) and **Brussels Airlines** (etihad.com; 11 hours) also fly from Heathrow via Addis Ababa and Brussels respectively from £455.

Getting around

Roads can be chaotic and are normally unpaved outside towns and cities; **most visitors use a driver/guide**. Car hire is possible for experienced off-road drivers, with 4X4s available from US$49 (£37) a day from Roadtrip Uganda (roadtripuganda.com).

Bus is the most common form of local transport. Minibus-taxis run along fixed routes and are cheap but not recommended; larger coaches are safer; the Post Office's Post Bus (+256 41 255 511) travels daily from Kampala to Kisoro (for Bwindi) for around UGX25,000 (£5.50). Avoid travelling at night.

Domestic scheduled and charter flights cut out long road journeys; a flight from Entebbe to Kisoro costs from US$271 (£205) return with AeroLink (aerolinkuganda.com).

Cost of travel

Rates vary by season. You can get by on £20 a day by sleeping in budget guesthouses and using public transport. To upgrade your dining and accommodation, as well as factor in park entrance fees, tours and transport, expect to spend upwards of £100 per day, not including tracking permits. Tipping is standard practice for guides and rangers, and is expected in restaurants.

Accommodation

Uganda has accommodation to suit all budgets, from family-run guesthouses to boutique hotels and international chains.

The Boma Guesthouse (Entebbe; boma.co.ug) is set in tropical gardens and handily placed close to the airport. Doubles from US$165pn (£124) for B&B.

Primate Lodge (Kibale NP; ugandalodges.com/primate) offers a stay in a rustic lodge deep in the heart of the chimpanzee-filled Kibale Forest. Doubles from £280pn for full board.

Mweya Safari Lodge (Queen Elizabeth NP; mweyalodge.com) has incredible views over the Kazinga Channel, ideal for spotting its resident birdlife. Doubles from US$402pn (£307) for full board.

Mahogany Springs (Buhoma; mahoganysprings.com) offers some fine views, looking out over the slopes of Bwindi Impenetrable Forest. Doubles from US$240pppn (£181) for full board.

The stylish **Clouds Mountain Gorilla View Lodge** (Nukuringo; wildplacesafrica.com) lies in a great location, overlooking the mist-wreathed Virunga mountains. Doubles from £590pn fully inclusive.

Wildlife

Gorillas aren't Uganda's only wildlife draw. You can **track habituated and semi-habituated chimpanzees** in Kibale NP or visit Ngamba Island Chimpanzee Sanctuary (ngambaisland.org), which lies just 23km south-west of Entebbe in Lake Victoria. Alternatively, join a drive with the **Uganda Carnivore Program** (uganda-carnivores.org) in Queen Elizabeth NP to track big cats and learn more about their conservation.

UGANDA HIGHLIGHTS

1 Bwindi Impenetrable National Park
A verdant home to almost half of the world's surviving mountain gorillas.

2 Kibale National Park
This tropical rainforest has a high primate headcount, including habituated chimps.

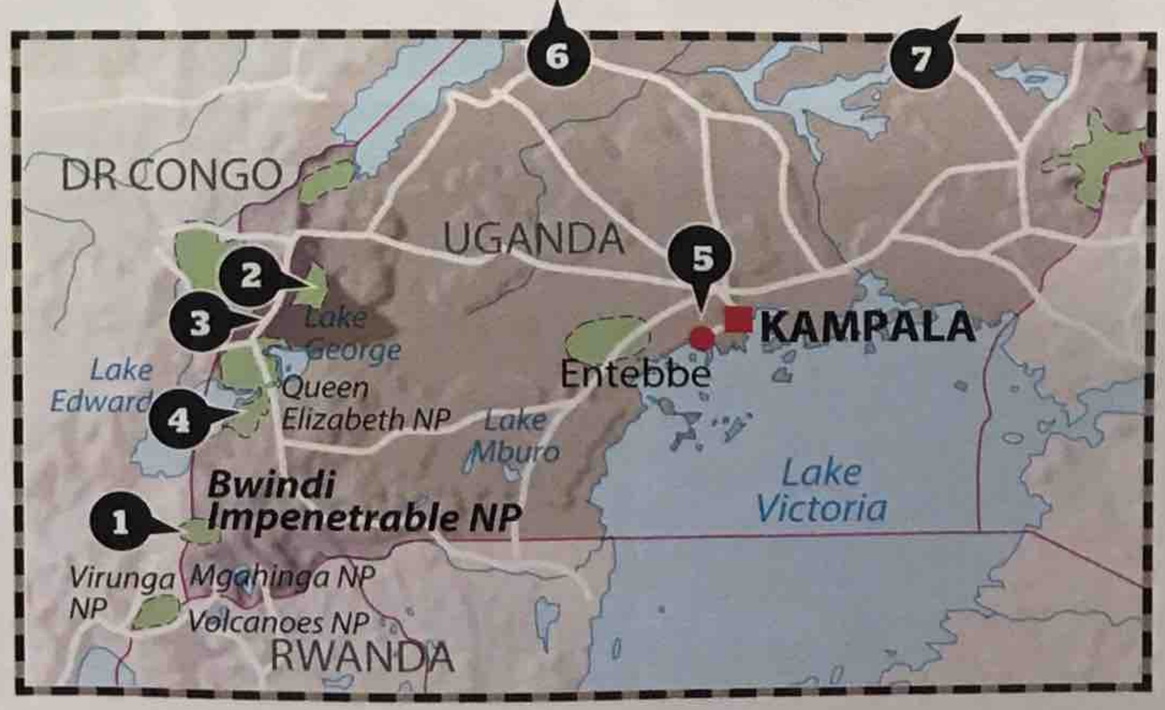
3 Rwenzori Mountains National Park
Hike the legendary and spectacular 'Mountains of the Moon'.

4 Queen Elizabeth National Park
This scenic safari park is famed for the tree-climbing lions of Ishasha (above).

5 Entebbe
The former capital makes for a relaxed first stop.

6 Murchison Falls National Park
These spectacular falls are a highlight of Uganda's largest national park.

7 Kidepo Valley National Park
A truly remote and impressive African wilderness.



Digital Mapping (Co.Uk), Dreamstime