

## The Primates of East Africa: Calling for More Respect for Mans Closest Kin



Primates are a category of mammals that include humans, apes, lemurs and monkeys. Covering over 185 species, they range from lemurs -with hardly any resemblance to humans- to chimpanzees, which are clearly our own kin. In size, they range from the tiny 60 g bush baby to the huge 200 kg gorilla. Primates are characterized by a complex brain, good binocular vision and means of grasping. In addition, they experience long periods in the womb, followed by slow maturation and elongated lifespan.

Africa has the privilege of hosting 51 primate species in habitats varying from forests to savannah woodlands. And new primate species are still being discovered. One of the latest additions is the highland mangabey monkey, whose domicile is the Udzungwa Mountains of southern Tanzania.

Scientists were delighted, but nevertheless puzzled when they reported the finding in May 2005; “This exciting discovery demonstrates once again how little we know about our closest living relatives, the nonhuman primates. A large, striking monkey in a country of considerable wildlife research over the last century has been hidden right under our noses,” said Russell Mittermeier of the IUCN- The World Conservation Union’s Species Survival Commission.

Sensing our fascination with nonhuman primates, artists have in response created fictional characters that have turned out to be immensely popular. The most successful of this genre is the story of “Tarzan of the Apes”. This romance features an orphaned English lord who was adopted by a female ape and brought up in the African jungle. The writer Edgar Rice Burroughs brought Tarzan -one of the best-known literary characters, to life in 1921.

Tarzan, an ape-man character has over the years generated over 40 movies, and numerous radio shows, television programmes and comic books. Primate characters reflect mans complex nature more closely than other animal characters in fiction and mythology. Come to think of it: in this respect, the naughty tree-swinging monkey is more deserving of our respect than haughty king lion.

Non-human primates are confined to the tropics, where 80% of them live in rain forests as the dominant mammals. East Africa has few patches of tropical forests where you find the great apes, but the entire region supports many other primate species. Only a few species are not dependent on trees and can survive in savannah and sub desert areas. These include baboons, vervet monkeys and chimpanzees. Not surprisingly, travellers to east Africa are most likely to come across these three species.

But most primates still depend on trees or cliffs for security. Only the two most intriguing primate species sleep on the ground- man and gorilla. We shall not discuss these two species in this article and shall cover them in separate features. For now, we shall only able to look at the four most common primates found in East Africa; bush babies, monkeys, baboons and chimpanzees.

Primates have complex social organizations and the majority live in female-bonded groups. Scientists speculate that this works as an alliance against aggressive males. Females stay on in their natal group even after maturity, while males exit the group. Feminist fundamentalists may perhaps take a hint in this arrangement? Chimpanzees make an exception to this rule. Very much like humans, female chimps seek an alliance with a male protector, which is recognised and respected by other males.

A common feature among primates is evolution of the “primate hand.” This is a prehensile hand that is used for climbing and eating, and tool making in the case of apes. Some primates- especially baboons and apes, have such well-developed dexterity of the hand that the tips of the thumb and forefinger meet at right angles. In apes, the dexterity of the hands is very close that of humans -and chimps are a good example.

Primates, just like humans, use social grooming as a form of contact communication. Travellers will witness this practice among baboons and vervet monkeys. Grooming is useful for social bonding and is effected by use of the mouth and hands. At a more practical level, it is also used to clean the body of parasites, such as ticks. Grooming underlines hierarchies; a junior member of a group will happily groom its betters.

Reproduction in primates is quite varied, but there is much in common with humans. Monkeys and apes, for example, actually do menstruate. A key difference however, is that many primates have distinct breeding seasons. The young are dependent on the mother, but less so than human infants. They enjoy the protection of a fur coat and are able to climb and reach the mothers’ teats and cling to her while being transported. Males generally play a marginal role in parental care.

Bush babies are a big group of primates, comprising about 18 species found Africa, and of which 11 species live in East Africa. This is one of the smallest but most successful of the primates. There are two main types: the lesser bush baby and the greater bush baby. Both are widely distributed and found in the forested national parks of East Africa. During the day, they hide to avoid harm from eagles and large snakes.

In lodges located close to dense forest, such as Shimba Hills in Kenya, bush babies are at night attracted to the dining rooms by sugar and sugary products. They otherwise feed mainly on tree gum and insects. Their technique of catching insects is either by leaping and grabbing or by creeping to within grabbing distance. They have distinct vocal sounds and the name bush baby originated from the piercing baby-like cries or advertising calls of the greater bush baby. Adult males advertise the most, especially in the mating season.

Bush babies are easy to like-perhaps on account of their baby-like cries and small innocent looking faces. They are active only after sundown. Extremely agile and sprightly, they use their elongated hind limbs to execute spectacular leaps between trees. Distended finger and toe pads enable them to cling unerringly, leap after leap, to even the most slippery branches.

The other small primates like bush babies are pottos. Being small and nocturnal, you will hardly ever see them. Only one species is found in East Africa -in south and west Uganda, far northwest Tanzania and western Kenya in the Mount Elgon and Kakamega forests. Pottos wear a woolly brown jacket and have large protuberant eyes, small rounded naked ears, short muzzles and short stubby tails. They weigh between 0.8 - 1.6kg.

Monkeys are a category of dog-shaped primates. They stand and move horizontally on four legs, with head directed forwards and downwards. Consequently, the form and movement is also doglike,

particularly for the more terrestrial ones like baboons. Their bottoms are padded with bare “scars” that may appear like wounds. These are called callosities, and their colouration varies with the reproductive season. The phenomenon is most prominent among baboons and is quite puzzling to many travellers.

There is a clear distinction in form and structure of the genders in monkeys. This is especially so among baboons, in which females are clearly smaller in body size - by as much as 50% compared males. The posture and movement of monkeys is often a reflection of their social status. The confident monkey appears relaxed and walks with its limbs extended and back level. It surveys its realm casually and is at ease while resting. On the other hand, subordinates walk with back hunched, limbs rather bent and tail low or curved downwards.

Dominant males are known to exaggerate their status by walking with a swagger and squatting with obvious ostentation. This behaviour is the subject of many metaphors in African folklore. Monkeys are generally social, though they exhibit occasional rivalry. When attempting to intimidate a rival, a monkey stands at its tallest, with the effect that it looks bigger than it really is-, which of course is precisely the point. “Filling yourself like a male monkey” is a common teenage statement in Africa, and originates from this practice.

Many travellers will have noticed that adult male monkeys like exposing their genitals to impress or maybe intimidate other males. Baboons are especially notorious for this rather unwholesome exhibitionist behaviour. Do not be offended when you find a dominant male, sitting apart on high vantage point, facing away from the troop as he scans the surrounding with legs spread apart to expose the penis. This is a particularly noticeable thing about baboons, or perhaps it is what humans cannot avoid noticing- being so well trained to look down upon such immodest displays.

Among the monkeys species found in East Africa are the blue or syke monkey, the vervet monkey and the colobus monkey.

Sykes are dark, stoutly built and have round facial disk and no beard. They weigh up to 12kg, with males larger and heavier than females. The body is covered by thick long fur with a brown patch of bristling hair. Sykes are quite widespread in East Africa and can generally be sighted in all forested national parks. But as they are not aware of park boundaries, you will also see them in thick forests and forest reserves outside the parks. They are however slowly being confined to national parks due continuing degradation of protected forests. Sykes mostly feed on fruits and leaves and occasionally insects and flowers.

The vervet monkey is light coloured with a black face; males have a pale blue scrotum. This monkey weighs between 5 and 9kg. The vervet is adapted to practically all woodland habitats, outside equatorial rain forests. It does not venture very far from the safety of trees, on which it also depends for food. You will commonly find it on forest edges and is typically associated with riverine vegetation and acacia trees. These monkeys are very friendly to people and almost serve as de facto receptionists in most national parks.

When a vervet hops onto your car as you arrive at park gate, it is looking after its own interests. Humans like to feed monkeys and it hopes to save the lots of energy and the risk involved in natural foraging in the bush. However, it is illegal to feed monkeys or any wildlife in all parks in East Africa. Also be warned- these monkeys can bite if scared. Their teeth and claws can inflict serious injuries and you should therefore avoid close bodily contact.

Vervet monkeys are omnivorous and consume a wide range of plant materials like fruits, seeds, sap,

and flowers. They also feed on invertebrates and have sometimes balance the vegetarian fare with vertebrates such as lizards and nestling birds and their eggs. They are often found in the same areas as baboons with which they share many foods, water holes and sleeping trees. The baboon is however not good company for vervets; it is without mercy for its smaller relative. When they compete for food, vervets are supplanted and baboons will occasionally feed on young vervets.

Vervet monkeys are territorial and live in troops of between 8-50 members. Their troops are organized in a hierarchy of families whose members sleep, forage and rest together. Males move out as they reach maturity at about the age of 5 years, while females remain in a female-bonded society. They pass on hereditary privileges: a mother's rank predetermines that of the daughter.

The baboon is the other very common primate in the savannahs of East Africa. It is a large, terrestrial monkey with a dog like head. Indeed its scientific name is, *papio cynocephalus* -here cynocephalus means "dog-headed." They weigh up to 50 kg, with males reaching up to twice the weight of females. Their limbs are sturdy, nearly equal in length while hands and feet are short and wide with stubby digits. The females have very prominent sexual swellings.

Baboons in East Africa appear in two common species - olive and yellow baboons. Next to humans, baboons are the best adapted of the terrestrial primates. For this reason, they are the most widespread African primate- to be found from savannah to arid habitats, so long as there is water and trees or just cliffs. Most travellers will see baboons on the highways, in many places across the region. They live well enough outside protected areas, such as national parks. They are serious crop pests and are even classified as vermin -not wildlife- but in parts of Kenya.

A baboons' menu include grasses, flowers, fruits, seeds and shoots. In the dry season, they uproot grasses and feed on the underground stems, a niche they share with no other mammal except warthogs. Beware that baboons are fierce fighters and with group work can confront and scare off a sharp predator such as leopard. Because of their well-developed taste for fruits and other foods humans are partial to, baboons tend to stalk visitors in national parks. In some cases they supplement their diet with vertebrate prey: fish, lizards and young of ground nesting birds, and bird or crocodile eggs.

Baboons live in troops ranging from 8 to over 200 animals, but typically average about 40. Troops tend to avoid one another but may occasionally share resources. Their social organization is highly complex and variable; they are able to display emotion and can communicate motivation. Females remain in the troop, with a reproductive strategy grounded on male supremacy.

The colobus monkey is another common primate that is the subject of many parables in Africa. The black and white colobus are especially prized for their beautiful coat, which has traditionally been used as ceremonial attire. The colobus is found only in Africa and has a long tail and hairs. The body weight reaches up to 23 kg. Both the black and white species are well adapted and have inherited many kinds of forest woodlands throughout East Africa. They live up at the trees and rarely descend to the ground. This rather shy animal is not easily sighted in the open and you are more likely to see or hear them in thick woodlands and forested parks.

The apes are a category of primates represented in Africa by gorilla, chimpanzees and bonobo. Genetically, they are the closest primates to man. The apes have very advanced social and communication systems. They come close to humans in the use of facial expressions and body language; using both arms and hands. Apart from mother-infant contact, apes groom each other in the usual primate fashion- rank determines who grooms whom.

Apes are particularly adept at tactile communications; that is use of touch. They seek and give reas-

urance by touching each other - just like we do -on the most sensitive areas like hands, face and genitals. Apes are slow to mature, with the young reaching adolescence at about the age of 8 years. Females bring forth their first fruits in their early teens, much earlier than males who rarely start procreating before reaching 15 years. All apes build nests- in this case, a platform on which to sleep securely at night: chimps up the trees and gorillas on the ground.

Generally all the apes are endangered and vulnerable. The problem is that they occur naturally in very small densities and face immediate threat of habitat loss throughout their ranges. The situation is further compounded by the fact that they perpetuate themselves at a rather slow pace. The other risk is the bush meat trade that goes on in some parts of Africa, which takes them out in large numbers every year. The situation deteriorated after the 1980's, when many previously inaccessible tracts of rainforest were opened up for logging.

Although apes are not known to eat humans, there are reports of their killing human babies in western Uganda - especially in Bwindi and Kibale forests. This phenomenon is as yet unexplained and is very puzzling to primate researchers

Chimpanzees are large, hairy and tailless; females weigh between 30-40 kg, while males can reach 180 kg. They have big heads, flattened face with a small nose and forward facing eyes. They have same number and type of teeth as man. The chimp is indeed our closet living relative, sharing 98% of our genes and much of our behaviour. The chimp and mountain gorilla are the only great apes found naturally in East Africa. Seeing chimps in the wild is an exhilarating experience. And Uganda is the best country in the world to view chimps in their natural habitat.

In Uganda, you encounter chimps at Queen Elizabeth National Park and Kibale and Budingo forest. In Tanzania, you see them at Gombe National Park, to the north west of the country. Kenya has no naturally occurring chimps population, but at Nanyuki in the central region, there is a sanctuary for chimps rescued from the illegal trade going on in parts of central and West Africa.

Chimps are mainly found in rainforest and wet savannah. They are less robustly built than gorillas; their arms are shorter, reaching just below the knees and the hands and fingers are long with short thumbs. The feet are adapted for grasping, with long, stout opposable big toe. Chimpanzees feed mainly on fruits mostly gathered from trees and the young leaves of plants. They also feed on flowers, pith, and bark and also derive additional nutrients from insects and some meat too- young antelopes, goats, and other primates such as young baboons and colobus monkeys.

Chimps are articulate tool users- a clear sign of a hard working brain. They can pick up small objects between thumbs and side of the index finger. They possess the acumen to prepare and use grass stems and sticks to fish for insects. A female on heat may mate with several males. It gives birth to a single offspring, which is independent after about 4 years.

The chimps are individualistic and do not live in cohesive groups like gorillas or monkeys. They live in communities, with up to 100 animals sharing a common home range. But they never assemble in a single troop. Jane Goodall, in her book "The Chimpanzees of Gombe", has shown that chimps, in common with humans, engage in some very disagreeable behaviour. Males occasionally rape females and engage in internecine warfare. Dr. Goodall has reported that from early 1974, a brutal four-year war raged in Gombe between two chimp groups that resulted in the decimation of one group.

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