

RWANDA

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by Mattia Altieri

After many travels to worldwide destinations, I finally decided to pay a visit to our closest relatives: the African Great Apes. Having no more than one week holidays, Rwanda was the best option. Although Chimps seem to be not as reliable as in Uganda, the local form of Eastern Gorilla is, in my opinion, the most impressive.

The trip was perfectly organized by Amahoro Tours www.amahoro-tours.com, with two full days in Nyungwe National Park (searching for Chimps and other monkeys) and three days in Volcanoes National Park with Gorillas as main target. I trekked Gorillas twice, and dedicated one day to Golden Monkeys. On Lake Kivu, between the two Parks, I had a nice surprise in form of a Spotted-necked Otter. Rwanda is one of the friendliest African countries and is easy to travel, with good roads and infrastructures. I strongly recommend Amahoro Tours, a quite cheap company, compared to others. My driver/guide, Edmund did his best, and in only one week I managed to see and do everything I wanted.

Rwanda is really the place for Eastern (Mountain) Gorillas: the hikes are nothing special in term of steep slopes and length. In September, at the end of the dry season, mud is not a nuisance, but maybe if you come during the rains it's another story! The first Gorilla group I visited, named Uganda (with "e"), required no more than a one and half hour hike. This group was very calm, eating leaves and plants, and we managed to stay with them for one hour at extremely close range, watching the social interactions between group members. A very intimate experience, because we were just three people and not the usual number of 8. The second Gorilla group was very different: after just 40 minutes of walk we met the big Hirwa group, with a huge Silverback (220 kg and 25 years old), named Munynya. Hirwa group is "the most happy of all", said the guide, and indeed we admired intense plays between Gorillas of all ages (including three babies), wrestling, mock-fighting, rolling over the ground, climbing: a series of very funny and interesting behaviours! The Silverback wanted to court a female, but he had to cope with the youngsters that wanted absolutely to play with him! For us an unforgettable experience! Maybe these behaviours were the side-effect of eating too many bamboo shoots, or maybe they were really "happy". Who knows...

Chimps are always a "hit or miss" in Rwanda. With fig trees fruiting, as in summer, they are a bit easier to find, and we were lucky to watch for more than one hour (the guide was not so strict as the Gorilla ones) the sociality of 15 Chimpanzees. One individual built even a platform in the lower branches of a tree and sat there to eat figs. We had Chimps on the ground, walking on the path, and saw four individuals hunting a Dent's mona Monkey on a high tree, with extremely loud call. The Monkey managed to escape, but the sequence was very special, like something coming from our forgotten past. Chimps are not the most beautiful mammal in the world, but you never get tired seeing them. And their "pant-hoot call" is the most thrilling wildlife sound I heard.

The mammal list is short, I didn't search for rodents or bats, but Rwanda offers more quality encounters than quantity:

1. Chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes*) - 15 in Nyungwe NP;
2. Eastern (Mountain) Gorilla (*Gorilla beringei beringei*) - two groups in Volcanoes NP, a total of 25 individuals seen;
3. Golden Monkey (*Cercopithecus kandti*) - a troop of 20-25 individuals in Volcanoes NP, seen on a dedicated walk organized daily by the National Park;
4. Silver Monkey (*Cercopithecus doggetti*) - one adult near Gisakura, in Nyungwe NP, and others in the forest;
5. **L'Hoest's Monkey** (*Cercopithecus lhoesti*) - the most common, and terrestrial, primate of Nyungwe NP, seen easily along the main road;
6. **Dent's mona Monkey** (*Cercopithecus denti*) - 3 individuals near the Chimps, one of them being the target of a Chimps hunt;
7. Ruwenzori Colobus (*Colobus angolensis ruwenzorii*) - this acrobatic monkey was seen in good numbers in the Gisakura Tea Estate forest patch;
8. Ruwenzori Sun Squirrel (*Helosciurus ruwenzorii*) - one crossed the road in Nyungwe NP;
9. Spotted-necked Otter (*Hydricteis maculicollis*) - one swimming and fishing on Lake Kivu was the unexpected bonus of the trip.

I had no time for Grey-cheeked Mangabey, and, regarding Owl-faced Monkey, infos are quite confusing: some guides said they can organize tours searching them on request, other that they are impossible to see. I think that, since very few people know this monkey, National Park doesn't put much effort in habituating a troop and organizing tours.

Birding was good, even if done just by chance, with 10 ARE endemics, 4 Turaco species and 8 Sunbird species. The colourful Regal Sunbird, the strange Ruwenzori Turaco and the delightful Ruwenzori Batis are the birds of the trip. Nyungwe NP is an excellent place for wildlife, and well worth to spend there 4-5 full days searching for endemic birds and mammals. Nyungwe is also interesting for bug-enthusiasts: butterflies are as big as birds and most colourful! The Volcanoes NP, world-famous for the wonderful Gorillas, is quite poor in comparison. But you really need to pay a visit once during your lifetime to the peaceful giants!

The last mention goes to Ruwenzori side-striped Chameleon. I found two of them on a spiny bush near the village of Kinigi (Volcanoes NP).

Thanks for reading, and sorry for my poor English,

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