



**OFF**  
THE FENCE

# MY GORILLA DREAM

A 1 x 90' feature documentary

An epic observational documentary following award-winning cinematographer **VIANET DJENGUET** as he fulfils his lifelong dream to embed within a gorilla habituation...



# INTRO

For this special feature-length documentary, **Off the Fence Productions** has secured rare access to the gorilla habituation process at **Kahuzi-Biega National Park**, one of the most biodiverse regions in all of Africa and home of the largest primates on Earth - the critically endangered Eastern Lowland gorilla - the Grauer's gorilla. The park is home to 15 gorilla families, 2 are habituated and the rest are wild.

Taking us into this magical world is leading local cinematographer Vianet Djenguët, who comes from the Congo which neighbours DRC to the west. He will embed and film in the park across an extended period, which will allow him to build critical relationships with both the animals and humans who call Kahuzi-Biega home - enabling him to bring their stories to life as never before.

**And this is no ordinary project for Vianet.**

Vianet's passion not only lies with the park but with its most famous residents, the eastern lowland gorillas. A seasoned natural history cinematographer, he has filmed many species across his career but the connection he feels to this majestic animal has him hooked.

Now, he will get to live out this dream as he embeds in the park and follows the process of **HABITUATION.**







The first ever habituation of eastern lowland gorillas in the world began here in 1970 - a pioneering process which allows for the ecotourism, conservation and veterinary work that is critical in keeping this endangered species from extinction. The current work is overseen by earthshot finalist and "Grandfather of Gorilla Habituation" John Kahekwa Munihuzi.

**We have been given the special privilege of being able to spend extended amounts of time with the gorillas each day** as they are being habituated. As Vianet immerses himself in their daily lives, and gets to know each individual intimately, he will be able to capture extremely rare gorilla behaviour.

Vianet will witness their rich lives, with the potential to see behaviours such as family conflicts, infants playing around and on the adults, nest building, climbing, cleaning fruits to eat, termite foraging, grooming, rival groups squaring off, and possibly even mourning of their dead.

**Our film will build up to the heart-warming moment when one of the newly habituated gorillas reaches out to Vianet for the very first time.**





# HABITUATION

Habituation is a process through which wild gorillas get used to the presence and sight of humans - it is carried out by specially trained rangers and can take up to 7 years.

Without habituation, we would know little of gorillas' lives. It is a critical process, first pioneered by people like Dian Fossey, that allows researchers to observe the gorillas in their natural habitats, accurately identify individuals and study their behaviours. It also gives veterinarians access to the animals in case of disease outbreaks, and opens up the possibility of safe ecotourism, which benefits local communities, finances further conservation work and highlights the importance of preserving these types of habitats.

**There are strict protocols to follow when habituating gorillas to ensure the safety of the animals. Currently of around 2000 gorillas in Kahuzi Biega National Park, there are 60 gorillas either habituated or going through the habituation process.**

Normal natural history filmmaking follows habituated gorillas as crews can get close enough to film a full range of their social behaviours, unmasked by the fear responses that characterise interactions with unhabituated animals.

Habituated gorillas are still wild gorillas: they are not fed or collared, and they roam free. The habituation does not disrupt their complex social lives.

**However, the access we have secured at Kahuzi-Biega will allow us to follow 2 wild gorilla families as they are habituated for the first time.**

**There are three phases to the habituation process - and the families we have gotten access to are in phase 2 (60% habituated) and phase 3 (80% habituated).**

**Gorilla families live in dynamic groups so it's impossible to give exact percentages - completely wild gorillas may join a habituated group and vice versa.** Amongst themselves they see no distinction between a habituated and unhabituated gorilla.







The reason we are joining the process at this point is that these are the most interesting phases to film. Phase 1 largely consists of wild gorillas running away from the rangers so we wouldn't be able to get close to the animals. Phases 2 and 3 are the phases within which the gorillas start to slowly get used to the sight of humans and individuals are identified and the rangers get to know them.

But how the gorillas react cannot be predicted, from silverbacks charging to sub-adults attempting to play - it's a slow process with the safety of the rangers and the animals key.

The plan is that at the end of phase 3, the gorillas will be ready to accept the presence of the first non-staff humans.

The exact speed of progress is never predictable - individual gorillas habituate at their own pace taking their lead from the silverback. Gorillas have different characters, so it is hard to give an exact figure on how long it will take a group to be habituated and this is why it varies from group to group. The silverback, or alpha male, is very much the boss of the group, taking responsibility for the group's decision-making, defence and safety. If his individual character leans towards caution or suspicion then the habituation process will take longer.

**This access - to follow the habituation of the Eastern lowland gorillas on a daily basis - is incredibly rare:** We will have an exciting and gripping process to embed within as we move through the film building up to the 'pay off' at the end where the gorillas see non-ranger humans for the very first time.

The actual process of habituation is scientifically based with everything, from how many families get habituated to how close tourists can get, rigorously controlled. The method in DRC differs from that pioneered by Dian Fossey in neighbouring Rwanda. Here rangers stand their ground to charging silverbacks – meeting them with eye contact to gain their respect. Rather than displaying submissive behaviour. As such there are usually a number of charges per day that Vianet will be witness to.

It's success relies on the knowledge, experience and instincts of the local rangers, and is adapted to the particular family. There is always a strict balance of numbers maintained between habituated and non-habituated gorilla families.

While this is all going on, the rangers must stay vigilant to protect the gorillas from the numerous threats that face the park – including bushmeat poachers and armed militia. The rangers themselves are incredible people – often surviving without salaries (they went 10 months without being paid during the pandemic) and having to work without coats and even boots. Their dedication to the conservation cause will be truly inspirational.



## EASTERN LOWLAND GORILLAS

Most gorilla filmmaking focuses on another sub-species, the mountain gorilla, of which more than half the wild population has been habituated. The proportion of eastern lowlands that have been habituated is much lower and they are much rarer on screen, making this a truly unique and special experience for Vianet and the viewer.

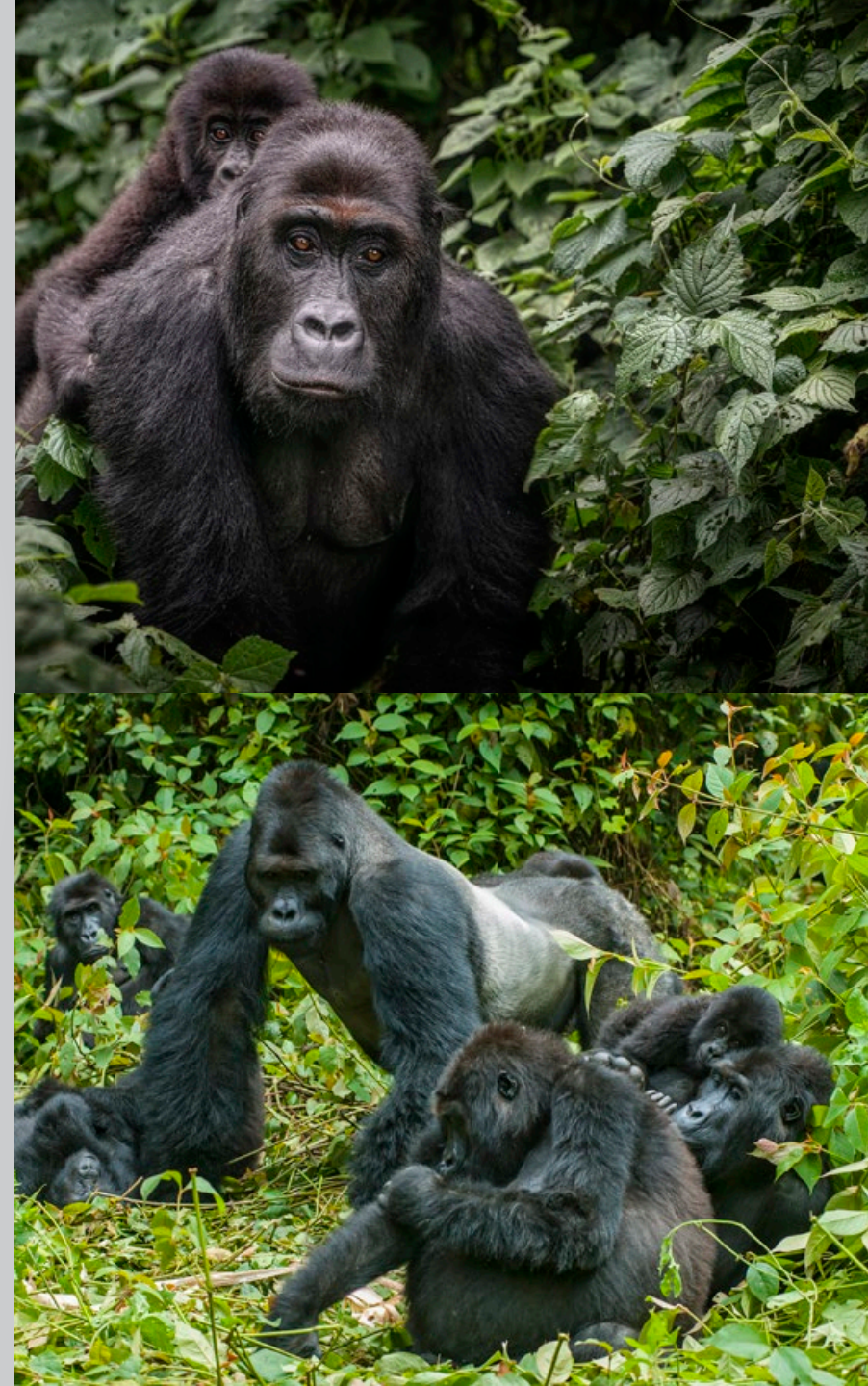
Eastern lowland gorillas are a subspecies of eastern gorilla based in the mountainous forests of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. They live in groups of 2 to 30 individuals, comprised of a silverback male, several females, and their offspring. Occasionally you will see groups in Kahuzi-Biega which have two silverbacks: a father and his maturing son.

Males reach sexual maturity at 12-15 years old, gaining that iconic streak of silver on their backs. It is at this point that they leave the group. A bachelor will roam around alone, sometimes for months or even years, trying to entice females to leave their group and start a new one with him. Very rarely a son will inherit the title of leader after the death of his father, but conquering of a group by an outsider has never been observed. The silverback protects the group, resolves conflicts, has exclusive right to mate with females, and is responsible for all the decision-making: where and when the group travels, sleeps, and feeds. Silverbacks compete for females and will fight to secure them for their group.

Females give birth around 9-12 years old, transferring groups slightly before that. Gorillas have one baby at a time – twins are extremely rare. Their offspring are considered infants, relying on breast milk, for three years, and the gap between births tends to be around 4 or 5 years. A female might expect to produce 3 to 5 offspring that survive to reach adulthood in total.

Eastern lowland gorillas spend most of their time foraging for food, travelling around 1 km every day in the process. They are mostly vegetarian, eating fruits, leaves, stems and bark, with a quarter to 40% of that taken up by fruit. They also occasionally eat ants and termites. Each individual has a nose region which is very distinctive in terms of the shape and pattern of wrinkles and researchers use these to distinguish between them.

This subspecies is larger than the mountain gorilla and does not have as long or thick fur. Mountain gorillas live at higher altitude, do not eat as much fruit, and have more groups with 2 or more silverbacks. Only 1% of gorillas are eastern lowland – the vast majority are another subspecies called western lowland – and the number of eastern lowlands has plunged by 75% in the last 20 years and it is critically endangered..





## KAHUZI-BIEGA NATIONAL PARK

Kahuzi-Biega National Park is named after the two 3000m-tall dormant volcanoes which dominate the landscape: Kahuzi and Biega. **The stunning and unique scenery here** covers both mountainous ranges and lowland territory, cut through by the Luka and Lugulu rivers. It is unusual to see so much diversity within one park, with a rare mix of swamps, peat bogs, mountainous rainforests, bamboo and subalpine heathers.

**No park in this area can boast so many species of mammals** including primates in a spectacular array of colours: golden monkeys, red and black-and-white colobus monkeys, blue monkeys, black monkeys, owl faced monkeys, olive baboons and eastern Chimpanzees.

As Vianet moves out of the rainforests he will discover that the lowland grasslands are grazing grounds for elephants - his second favourite animal. And, if that wasn't enough, as he explores the park Vianet will find that it is also home to leopards, hippos, and buffaloes, tiny treasures such as needle-clawed bushbabies, and rare, endemic birds like the Albertine owlet, and much, much more.

**Bringing these stories to life is Vianet's ultimate dream and it couldn't mean more to him. This passion, combined with rare access to one of the most captivating parks in the world will make this an epic and standout feature documentary.**







## THE HABITUATION PROCESS

**Across the film we will follow gorilla families being habituated, which is crucial for the conservation programmes at the park as well as for tourism - vital for the park's survival.**

Eastern lowland gorillas used to form family groups of 30 individuals, but since the war this has changed and the largest groups are 14/15 members.

**There are two groups of eastern lowland gorillas currently going through the habituation process which we have been given special access to film.**

The first group undergoing habituation has 6 members and is led by silverback 'Nabirembo'.

The second group is led by silverback 'Mpungwe' - and the family is made up of around 14 members.

There is an additional group called 'Bonana' that could be good for Vianet to embed with. This group is made up of 12 individuals with one very dominant silverback, plus females, males and infants – all very characterful with fascinating dynamics. This is a group that needs to be re-habituated due to lack of human contact.

As Vianet embeds within this process he will witness the incredible techniques and methods John and the other **"Gorilla Whisperers"** employ in order to

fully habituate the gorillas to the sight and presence of humans, such as:

- Identifying each gorilla and giving them a name.
- Giving the gorillas a "family name" – traditionally named after the dominant silverback within the group.
- "Speaking gorilla" - using various gorilla vocalisations to reassure the group that they come in peace.
- Spending hours each day with the gorilla family, imbedding themselves in their territory and observing their daily activities and getting to know the temperament of each gorilla.
- Imitating 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.
- Standing their ground (and judging it is safe to do so) when the silverbacks test them by charging at them.





## THE KEYS TO THE PARK'S SUCCESS

Kahuzi-Biega wouldn't be what it is today without the tireless work of its dedicated rangers. The area has seen its fair share of conflict and the rangers here are risking their lives every day to protect the park and its inhabitants. As Vianet gets to know them he'll gain even more respect for their work.

The park is threatened not only by poachers, but by prospectors looking for gold and coltan to mine, by armed groups fighting in conflicts that have raged for decades, by illegal forest clearance and by land disputes with local indigenous communities.





## ABOUT VIANET DJENGUET

Vianet's love of gorillas, passion for the park and his fascination with technology will give us a unique opportunity to capture some truly astonishing footage, using a range of innovative and specialized camera technologies - from cameras rigged up between trees to drones attached to telescopic poles.

Based in Bristol, in the UK, award-winning wildlife cameraman Vianet Djenguét grew up in the Brazzaville, Congo. He has filmed for major international broadcasters, including the BBC, PBS, Netflix and National Geographic, in some of the world's most remote and hostile environments, ranging from tropical and equatorial jungles and swamps to deserts, mountainous regions and tropical islands.

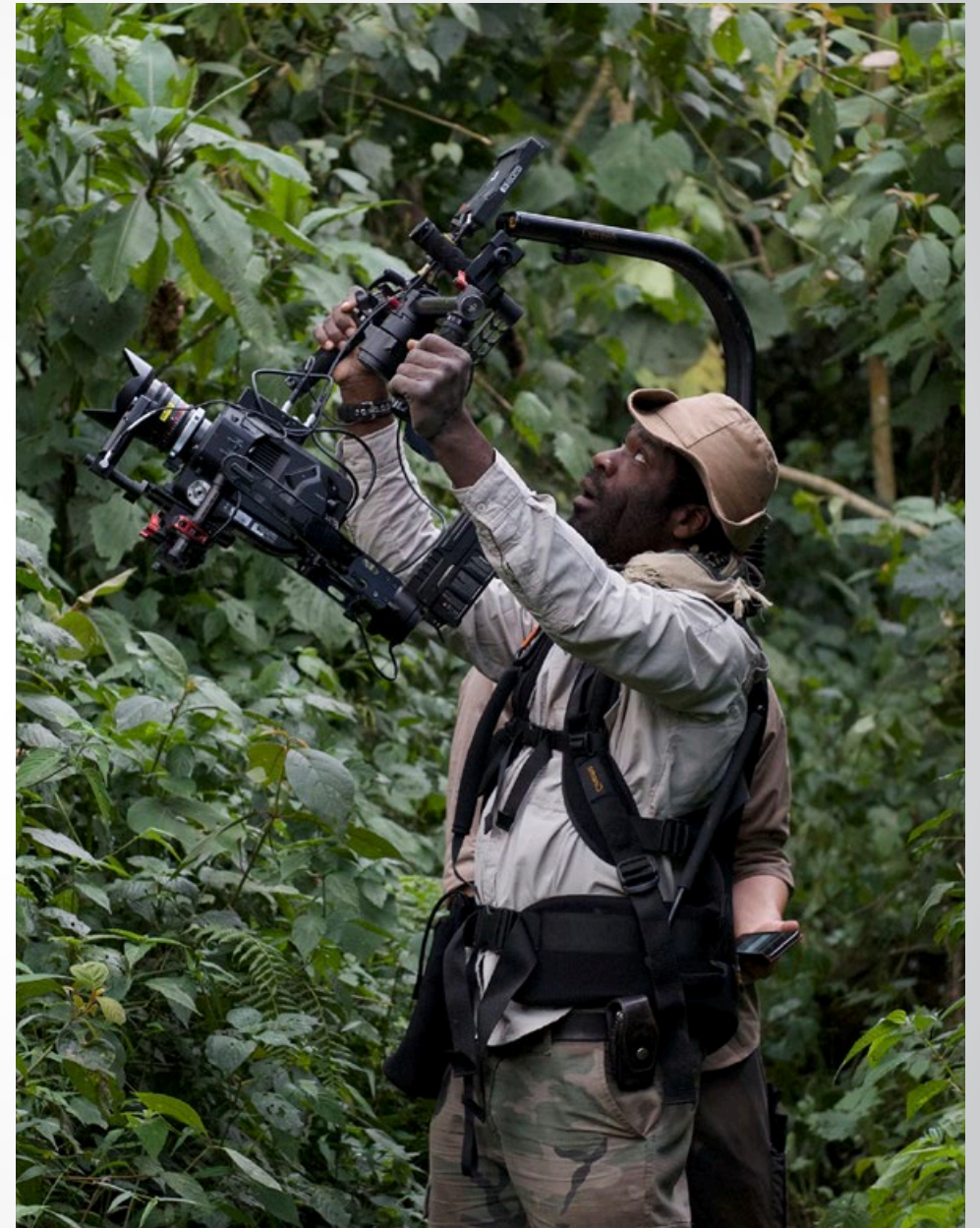
Projects include: "Attenborough – Life in Colour" for the BBC/Netflix, "Primates" for BBC and PBS. Vianet has also recently appeared as an on-screen host in BBC Two's "Animal Babies: First Year in Earth" (series 1 & 2) and in "My Congo", part of the BBC's Natural World strand, which saw him returning to his roots to reveal the beauty and majesty of his country and the wildlife and people within it.



## FILMING STYLE & TECHNIQUE

Vianet will be both behind and in front of the camera as he takes us into this special place. He will immerse himself in Kahuzi-Biega National Park for an extended period of time. At times alone and at other times with a director and crew. As he gets to know the rangers and the animals, it's through his eyes that this world is brought to life.

**The film will feel epic yet intimate. No other company has been granted this level of access before and to an ongoing habituation.**







# OFF THE FENCE



ACADEMY AWARD



BAFTA



EMMY



ROYAL TELEVISION



GREEN SCREEN



GOLD PANDA



JACKSON HOLE



GRIERSON

**Off the Fence Productions is an award-winning producer of factual television and theatrical documentaries.**

We have created more than 500 hours of television content for a wide range of international broadcasters including History Channel, MTV, BBC, Channel 4, Discovery, MSNBC, PBS, Netflix, National Geographic, A&E, Smithsonian Channel, The Weather Channel, ZDF, Arte, and France Televisions.

The creative team have been recognised by more than 80 awards, including Royal Television Society, Emmy, Golden Panda and Grand Teton.

**Our Netflix documentary 'My Octopus Teacher' recently won an Academy Award, BAFTA and Grierson Award.**