

# NOTES FROM THE FIELD

— SPRING 2022 —

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**NOURISHING PEOPLE,  
PROTECTING MOUNTAIN  
GORILLAS**

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**SOARING NUMBERS FOR  
GREY CROWNED CRANES**

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**BUILDING HARMONY  
BETWEEN ELEPHANTS  
AND PEOPLE**

**20**  
**YEARS**

Wildlife Conservation Network

# Nourishing People, Protecting Mountain Gorillas



*Left: An infant mountain gorilla living in BINP. Right: Hope Karire, a beneficiary of CTPH's Ready to Grow Gardens program, standing next to her crops with her baby.*

**L**ocated in the southwestern corner of Uganda, Bwindi Impenetrable National Park (BINP) is a primeval rainforest dating back over 25,000 years. This lush ecosystem is home to nearly half of the world's remaining endangered mountain gorillas. As the most important stronghold for these rare apes, BINP is ordinarily a bustling draw, welcoming 40,000 annual visitors. But the COVID-19 crisis deprived the communities living around BINP of tourism revenue, increasing human encroachment into gorilla territory out of necessity. **To address the community's food insecurity and keep gorillas safe, Conservation Through Public Health (CTPH), a new WCN Conservation Partner, deployed a lifeline**

## **to benefit BINP's gorillas and neighboring villages.**

There are only about 460 mountain gorillas living within BINP and several hundred thousand people living along the park's borders. These communities are among Uganda's most vulnerable, depending on the tourism industry to survive. When the pandemic reached them, many people lost their main sources of income and turned to bushmeat poaching as an inexpensive food source. While gorillas are not poaching targets here, the snares meant to catch smaller animals can threaten them all the same. In rare cases, conflict can occur when poachers unintentionally cross paths with

gorillas, such as when a silverback named Rafiki was killed by a poacher in self-defense. But the greatest danger to gorillas posed by these incursions is the unwitting transmission of viruses, like COVID-19, to their already fragile population. As one of our closest genetic cousins, gorillas are highly susceptible to human viruses. To prevent human-gorilla contact and disease transmission, CTPH needed to discourage further bushmeat poaching by alleviating the food scarcity caused by the pandemic.

This aid came from CTPH's Ready to Grow Gardens program, which boosts food security for BINP's neighboring communities by providing them with perennial crop seedlings. Each grow

kit distributed via the program includes ten packages of low maintenance seedlings that need little space to grow and are harvestable within one to four months. CTPH worked closely with the Uganda Wildlife Authority and local council chairpersons to not only curb poaching, but identify which residents were most likely to turn to poaching out of desperation. These were among the first to receive grow kits.

Over 5,000 people from 1,000 households were part of the initial outreach in 2020. In mid-2021, WCN's Emergency Relief Fund helped CTPH expand the program to another 500 households, encompassing about 2,500 people. By reducing hunger, CTPH simultaneously reduced pressure on mountain gorillas since people are now less likely to venture into the forest in search of food. The response has been overwhelmingly positive, with household incomes rising as program beneficiaries sell surplus produce to other community members. Seeds are also being saved for future seasons, ensuring a continuous supply of food going forward.

Since unveiling the Ready to Grow Gardens program, bushmeat poaching has dwindled and no gorillas have contracted COVID-19 or

**CTPH's mission is to protect mountain gorillas and promote human-wildlife coexistence by improving healthcare and community livelihoods in and around Africa's protected areas. By educating communities about the importance of conservation and health practices, CTPH is also reducing the risk of disease transmission between wildlife and people.**

been harmed by conflict. As the pandemic begins to subside, CTPH is hopeful that tourism will return to BINP and life returns to normal for both mountain gorillas and the communities who live beside their forest. ■

# Soaring Numbers for Grey Crowned Cranes



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**In 2014, there were more captive grey crowned cranes in Rwanda than wild ones. They were kept in poor conditions and displayed as status symbols in the gardens of hotels and wealthy families, who were often unaware of the consequences to the species. RWCA spent years rescuing over 250 captive cranes, rehabilitating and releasing most of them in Akagera National Park. Thanks to RWCA's efforts, there are no longer any captive cranes on display in private homes or hotels in Rwanda.**

**T**he rhythmic din of helicopter rotors faded from Dr. Deo Ruhagazi's mind as Rwanda's beautiful landscape stretched out before him like a painting. Brief turbulence jostled the aircraft as his team continued their aerial survey 100 ft. above ground. Below, they spotted what they'd been searching for—a flock of grey crowned cranes decorating the sky, which they added to their tally. **The Rwanda Wildlife Conservation Association (RWCA), one of WCN's newest Conservation Partners, has conducted annual censuses of crane populations for the past five years.** Their recent findings are giving them hope for the future of these graceful birds.

It wasn't long ago that wild grey crowned cranes had nearly vanished in Rwanda. When RWCA was formed in 2014, the country's wild crane population was estimated between 50 and 300 individuals. Numbers had plummeted due to people keeping captive cranes in their homes as ornamental signs of social status. RWCA collaborated with the government on an extensive campaign to recover and reintroduce these cranes to the wild; once complete, the team's focus shifted to anti-poaching and population monitoring to

confirm these rewilded cranes were thriving. They conducted their first census in 2017, locating 487 cranes across the country. Nearly every year since, this number has grown. In 2021, RWCA's findings were remarkable—there were nearly 1,000 wild cranes in Rwanda, more than double the original population when their work first began.

These encouraging results highlight the effectiveness of RWCA's interventions to protect the cranes. Each census lasts for three days, and to ensure all collected data is comparable, RWCA prioritizes consistency—same team, same route, same time each year. Deo's team takes to the skies and surveys remote areas with the highest concentrations of cranes, such as Akagera National Park, recording GPS coordinates for all sightings. Meanwhile, RWCA's ground teams use binoculars to count the birds and record data in a tracking app. They also employ over 80 members of surrounding communities to help conduct censuses and monitor cranes throughout the year, even providing them with bicycles to cover more ground.

Census data is essential to RWCA's efforts to monitor crane population health. In addition to the number of cranes, censuses inform them about the age of most wild cranes, their preferred habitats, and their behavior for nesting, foraging, and breeding. Their most recent census recorded 65 breeding pairs with 131 chicks—an increase from previous years, suggesting that RWCA's strategies are keeping

the population moving in a positive direction. Ongoing monitoring by the community also helps RWCA respond immediately to poaching threats, as they did in 12 cases last year. All data gathered through these activities is shared with scientists to deliver a more accurate and nuanced status of grey crowned cranes in Rwanda.



**Above: RWCA staff conducting the ground portion of the crane census. Below: Grey crowned cranes near a lake in Akagera National Park.**

RWCA hopes to expand their censuses into Tanzania and Uganda, since GPS data from tagged cranes indicates that they often venture between the three countries. Deo and his survey teams are partnering with these neighboring countries to design similar protective actions for cranes there. Above all, RWCA's censuses prove that cranes can successfully recover long-term when community-led conservation efforts are deployed. ■



# Building Harmony Between Elephants and People

*Right: Dominique Gonçalves. Below: From 1977 to 1992, over 90% of Gorongosa's large mammals, including elephants, were killed during the Mozambique Civil War. Since then, park management has worked tirelessly to bring over 100,000 wild herbivores back to the park.*



In addition to Dominique, WCN's Career Program is investing in five other conservationists working to protect wildlife across Africa:

Cecile Kayitanirwa - Rwanda - GREY CROWNED CRANES

Jessicah Kurere - Kenya - LIONS, HYENAS, WILD DOGS

Bridget Mayani - Zambia - LIONS

Aristide Takoukam Kamla - Cameroon - AFRICAN MANATEES

James Watuwa - Uganda - AFRICAN ELEPHANTS, FROGS

Through our Career Program and Scholarship Program, WCN invests in local conservationists who are shaping conservation in their home countries, ensuring we have a greater and more sustainable impact for wildlife.

The morning light draped across the plains as Dominique Gonçalves sat in her vehicle, searching for elephants. She always appreciated the still mornings in Gorongosa National Park, over 1,500 sq. miles of picturesque wilderness in Mozambique's Great Rift Valley. As manager of the park's Elephant Ecology Project, Dominique closely monitors over 500 elephants as they move through and outside of the park. **A significant aspect of her work is reducing human-elephant conflict, and as a participant in WCN's new Career Program, she now has additional support to improve her project's impact and help elephants and people to thrive together.**

Born and raised in Mozambique, and currently practicing community-based work with The Gorongosa Project, Dominique is one of six conservationists supported by the Career Program in 2021, its inaugural year. This initiative provides financial support, skills training, and mentorship opportunities for career growth and to avoid attrition amongst local conservationists. Through the Career Program, leaders like Dominique can advance their roles as key decision makers in the stewardship of their country's wildlife. Dominique believes that the ongoing mentorship she receives will be essential to becoming

a self-sustaining, adaptive leader who can help protect Gorongosa's elephants and foster coexistence with its adjacent communities.

There were once over 2,500 elephants roaming Gorongosa, but a long civil war devastated their numbers. They were poached for food and ivory, and when the war ended in 1992, fewer than 200 elephants remained. Gorongosa staff have spent years restoring the war-torn landscape and translocating animals back to the park. Today, about 1,000 elephants have returned, and Dominique wants to ensure these elephants are not lost to further conflict. The buffer zones around Gorongosa are home to many communities, and elephants sometimes wander into farmlands looking for food. Losing a year's harvest to such raids understandably riles farmers, who use crop income for their families' education and healthcare. They look to park management for solutions.

Dominique investigates elephant movement and seasonal distribution, determining where they may clash with neighboring communities.

When elephants are spotted entering farmlands, a ranger team is deployed to scare them off with loud noises and fireworks. By safely warding off elephants and coming to the aid of farmers, Dominique's project is supporting other park departments to promote human-elephant coexistence. Her ecology work has also been crucial to understanding how human pressure changes elephant behavior. She and her research partners discovered that after the war, many female elephants in the region rapidly evolved to be tuskless, likely in response to rampant ivory poaching. Understanding the evolutionary consequences of wildlife exploitation are increasingly important for conservation planning.

As she spies a herd of elephants passing through the morning mist, Dominique takes pride in her role as a bridge between people and elephants. Coexistence takes time to cultivate, and with the Career Program investing in her growth, Dominique Gonçalves is eager to continue her Elephant Ecology Project, get practical training to expand her work, and find new ways to build harmony between her communities and elephants. ■



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**WCN protects endangered wildlife by supporting conservationists who ensure wildlife and people coexist and thrive.**

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