Gorilla Journal

Helping People. Saving Gorillas.

Fall 2026



THE NEXT GENERATION

Musilikale's group has a new infant! With this birth, the group now numbers 26 gorillas, becoming the largest in Volcanoes National Park.

DIAN FOSSEY GORILLA FUND · EST. 1967 ·

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Building a Future Where People and Wildlife Thrive Together

By Tara Stoinski, Ph.D.
President & CEO/Chief Scientific Officer

For nearly 60 years, the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund has learned a simple but powerful truth: conservation is ultimately about people.

Protecting wildlife and wild places requires science, dedication and sustained commitment. But lasting conservation success happens when people come together around a shared purpose. It is made possible by local communities who are the stewards of the forests they call home, by scientists and educators who dedicate their careers to understanding and protecting nature and by donors and partners who invest in long-term solutions and believe that a future where people and wildlife thrive together is possible.

Earlier this year, I had the opportunity to attend the Skoll World Forum in Oxford, England which brings together social entrepreneurs, impact investors, policymakers, philanthropists and nonprofit leaders from around the globe to discuss solutions to some of the world's most pressing challenges. While the conversations spanned many issues – from climate change and biodiversity loss to public health and economic opportunity – a common theme emerged: meaningful and lasting change happens when local communities lead the way. The strongest solutions are not directed from the outside; they are built from within – through collaboration, trust and a shared commitment to creating a better future.

That message resonated deeply because it reflects what we have seen throughout our decades of conservation work. Across Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), our staff and partners demonstrate every day that conservation is strongest when it is rooted in the people closest to the landscapes we seek to protect. That has been especially evident this year. The Ebola outbreak in eastern DRC has brought even more hardship and uncertainty to a region already reeling from 30 years of civil unrest, disrupting daily life and demanding extraordinary courage from the people on the ground.

Yet our staff have not stepped back. They have stayed, continued protecting gorillas and their forest homes and supported their community through a frightening time. Their resilience and commitment are at the core of the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund's work. You'll see it reflected in the stories that follow: the opening of a bakery in Nkuba to create economic opportunities for women and the graduation of 25 villages from our Village Vitality Project, both accomplished since the outbreak and a testament to the commitment of our teams and to the communities we support.



Our community engagement programs focus on addressing needs like food and water security, education and livelihood development, which can improve people's lives and lessen their dependence on the forests where the gorillas live.

This work would not be possible without you. We are extremely grateful for the many supporters who answered our call when Ebola first struck in May – your commitment is essential to our mission and our success , always, but especially in times of crisis. And we still need you. The challenges facing our planet remain significant: biodiversity loss, climate change and mounting pressures on natural ecosystems continue to demand urgent and sustained action. But what carries us through those challenges is people: the field staff protecting gorillas on the front lines, the students preparing to become the next generation of conservation leaders, the community members building more sustainable futures and the supporters around the world who stand with them to make it all possible.



The future of conservation will not be shaped by any one organization, scientist or donor. It will be built through people working together across communities, countries and generations.

Thank you for being part of this effort. Together, we are working to create a future where gorillas, ecosystems and people can thrive.

Read more about how a new bakery in the DRC will benefit gorilla conservation on page 5.



CHEST BEATS

Check out some of the latest accomplishments by our team!

We're in awe of the first cohort of Girls in Conservation scholarship recipients, who will graduate from secondary school next month! The girls will graduate from various boarding schools in the local area, and many are planning to continue on to post-secondary education. We are thrilled to see where their journeys take them next!

Congratulations to CEO Dr. Tara Stoinski, who was featured in Georgia Tech's "Alumni Making a Difference" series. In the article, Tara discusses her conservation journey and why she chose Georgia Tech for her Ph.D.!

We're cheering on Aime Bruce Nzeyimana Ngenzi and Jonas Antony – they are the first-ever Fasha Fund beneficiaries! Because of this investment, Bruce, a Fossey Fund biodiversity researcher, attended a training on invasive ants. The fund will also benefit Jonas, our data and operations coordinator, in his master's studies!

Kudos to our many staff members who will be beginning advanced degree programs this upcoming Fall semester! Honorine Ihimbazwe, Aime Bruce Nzeyimana Ngenzi, Jonas Antony and Emile Mugabo will be embarking upon new studies, and all are supported by our scholarship funds!

Congratulations to Sir David Attenborough, Silverback Films and everyone who worked on *A Gorilla Story: Told by David Attenborough*, as the documentary is now Emmy-nominated! *A Gorilla Story* has been nominated for an Emmy for Sir David Attenborough's extraordinary narration, bringing the Pablo group's story to life!

Congratulations to Fossey Fund staff member and Ph.D. candidate, James Munyawera! James has received his master's degree, along with an award for academic excellence and leadership. James has focused his master's and Ph.D. studies on emerging research studies that are vital to gorilla conservation. He will now continue his Ph.D. program at the University of Oregon!

Advancing Conservation Through Community Leadership

For more than a decade, Urbain Ngobobo has worked alongside communities in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to protect one of the world's most endangered primates: the Grauer's gorilla.

Today, that work has reached an important milestone. The Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund is proud to celebrate Urbain, our Country Director in the DRC, on earning his Ph.D. in Natural Resources Management and Development from the University of Antananarivo. While the degree is a remarkable personal achievement, it also represents years of field experience, community partnerships and scientific inquiry coming together to help shape the future of conservation in one of Africa's most challenging landscapes.

Since joining the Fossey Fund in 2011, Urbain has helped pioneer a conservation model built on a simple but powerful idea: lasting protection for gorillas depends on the people who share their forests.

Under his leadership, our Nkuba Conservation Area was created and grew from an initial 700 square kilometers to more than 2,400 square kilometers, resulting in one of the most important protected landscapes for Grauer's gorillas and countless other species. Unlike traditional protected areas, these forests are managed in partnership with local communities, who play a central role in conservation decision-making.

"We work in full collaboration with communities because we believe that the future of these gorillas and forests is in their hands," says Urbain. "This is a long-term approach that benefits everyone – people, wildlife and the climate."

His doctoral research examined a question he has spent much of his career addressing in practice: how can conservation efforts best protect Grauer's gorillas while supporting the communities that depend on the same forests?

Drawing on data collected at various field sites with different management styles (e.g. national parks, community-run forests, nature reserves) across Grauer's gorillas' range, his research found that community-led conservation can be a highly effective strategy for protecting biodiversity while addressing the social, economic and security realities in the region. The findings reinforce what local communities and Fossey



For Urbain, conservation has always started with people. His newly earned Ph.D. builds on years of working with local communities to protect Grauer's gorillas and their forest home.

Fund teams have demonstrated for years – that when people are empowered to manage and benefit from conservation, both wildlife and communities thrive.

Urbain's impact extends beyond research. He oversees a team of 200 staff members, all recruited from Nkuba and neighboring communities. Many began with little formal education but have become highly skilled trackers, researchers and conservation professionals whose work is essential to protecting gorillas and other biodiversity every day.

His leadership has also helped elevate international attention to Grauer's gorillas and the Nkuba Conservation Area, strengthening recognition of the region's global importance for biodiversity conservation.

"This doctorate represents much more than a degree," says Urbain. "It transforms years of field experience into scientific knowledge that can help guide conservation decisions and policies. More importantly, it represents a contribution to the conservation of Grauer's gorillas and the protection of the forests on which local communities depend."

His achievement reflects the importance of African-led conservation science. By combining local knowledge, field experience and rigorous research, leaders like Urbain are shaping conservation solutions that are rooted in the realities of the landscapes they serve.

For the Fossey Fund, his success is a powerful reminder that investing in local leadership creates lasting impact not only for gorillas, but for communities, ecosystems and future generations of conservationists.

New from DRC: When Communities Thrive, Gorillas Benefit

In the eastern DRC, supporting sustainable livelihoods for communities living alongside critical gorilla habitat is an essential component of long-term conservation.

The Fossey Fund works in the approximately 2,400 square kilometer Nkuba Conservation Area, a community-managed forest that supports one of the largest remaining populations of critically endangered Grauer's gorillas. Because local communities own and manage the forest, conservation success depends on ensuring that people benefit from protecting the landscape while reducing reliance on its natural resources.

To achieve this, the Fossey Fund partners with communities to develop sustainable livelihood opportunities that improve household resilience, food security and local economic development. These investments complement conservation efforts by helping reduce activities that can destroy gorilla habitat, such as poaching and firewood collection.

One example is the FAEVU women's association in the village of Biruwe, where the Fossey Fund recently supported the establishment of a community-owned bakery. Prior to its construction, residents traveled up to 35 kilometers to purchase bread and other baked goods. The new bakery now provides reliable access to locally produced food while creating new economic opportunities for women.

The Fossey Fund supported construction of the bakery, supplied essential equipment – including ovens, mixers, baking molds and worktables – and provided technical training for 35 women in bread production, food hygiene and small-business management. The women now operate the bakery as a cooperative enterprise, generating income while improving local food availability.

"The training taught me how to make bread, and I will use this knowledge to support my family and pass it on to my children," said bakery participant Mauwa Marian Demba.

The bakery represents more than a successful small business. It illustrates how community-based conservation investments can strengthen both livelihoods and environmental stewardship. Across Nkuba, the Fossey



By baking fresh, locally made bread, this community bakery is strengthening food security and creating lasting economic opportunities for women.

Fund supports a range of locally identified initiatives – including sustainable agriculture, fish farming and small enterprises – that provide practical alternatives to activities that may place pressure on forest resources. This integrated approach recognizes that conservation outcomes are closely linked to community well-being. By improving economic opportunity and strengthening local capacity, these programs reinforce community commitment to protecting the forests that sustain Grauer's gorillas and the region's exceptional biodiversity.

The last year has been a particularly challenging one for the people of eastern Congo with rebel group occupation and the third Ebola outbreak since 2018. It is at this time that communities need us most, and our continued presence and support through initiatives such as Biruwe bakery demonstrate that investing in people is not separate from protecting wildlife – it is an essential strategy for achieving lasting conservation.



September 24 is World Gorilla Day

A global celebration of gorillas and a call to action to ensure their future in the wild. Join the movement to protect gorillas and their forests.

gorillafund.org/wgd26



Approximately 1,450 seedlings were distributed to beneficiaries of our Village Vitality Project, including in Gataraga Sector (above), to support nutrition, food security and environmental restoration.

Village Vitality Project Expands Community-Led Conservation in Rwanda

Protecting mountain gorillas requires more than safeguarding forests. It also means investing in the people who live alongside them.

That belief is at the heart of the Village Vitality Project (VVP), an innovative community-led development program that empowers villages neighboring Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park to improve livelihoods, strengthen social cohesion and advance environmental stewardship. By helping communities set and then address their priorities, the program reduces pressures on gorilla habitat while creating lasting benefits for families.

Built on a proven community-driven development model, VVP supports villages as they identify local challenges and design solutions that meet both community and conservation needs. Each participating village receives a two-phase microgrant totaling $10,000. Seventy percent of the funding is provided at the beginning of the program to support a community-selected livelihood initiative, while the remaining 30% is awarded later to the same village for a project with a direct environmental or sustainability benefit. These projects may include rainwater harvesting systems that reduce reliance on forest water sources, agroforestry initiatives or other community-designed conservation solutions.

Most importantly, communities lead every step of the process. Through regular meetings, residents identify priorities, set goals and select the projects they believe will create lasting change.

Building Livelihoods That Support Conservation

One example is Gacondo Village, where residents established a Village Capital Fund – a community-managed savings and lending program that provides affordable loans while building a revolving fund that continues to grow through modest 2% interest repayments.

For Charles Hakizimana, that loan became an opportunity to expand a small poultry business into a sustainable source of income. With financing from the project, Charles purchased additional chickens, increased egg production and strengthened his family's financial security. The steady income has helped cover school fees, healthcare and other household expenses while reducing economic pressures that can drive dependence on natural resources.

Charles' success is also benefiting his community. As the revolving loan fund grows through repayments, more families are able to access affordable capital to invest in their own businesses, creating a cycle of opportunity that extends well beyond a single household.

The savings and loan model has proven so successful that every village participating in the next cohort of villages has selected a savings and loan initiative as its first livelihood project, demonstrating the strong demand for locally managed financial systems that continue generating benefits long after the initial investment.

Women Leading Change

Women have emerged as some of the program's strongest leaders, representing more than 60% of participants.

For years, Seraphine Tuyishimire earned a modest income through small-scale potato trading but lacked the capital to expand her business. After joining VVP, she accessed a village loan that allowed her to grow her agricultural enterprise. Today, her income has nearly doubled, enabling her to provide food, school fees and health insurance for her children while continuing to invest in her future.

Just as importantly, Seraphine now serves as a community-based facilitator, helping guide village discussions and encouraging other women to build financial confidence and leadership skills.

"Small opportunities can create lasting change," she says. "When women are trusted and supported, they can lead, grow and transform their families and communities."

Other women are seeing similar success. Didacienne Nyinawumuntu expanded her boutique business through a low-interest village loan, increasing her inventory and investing in livestock that strengthens her family's long-term financial stability.

"When a woman is able to financially contribute, responsibility is shared, burdens are eased and the family finds balance and harmony," she explains.

For Beatrice Nzayisenga, improved access to financing and training helped transform her agricultural production through better seed selection, fertilizer use and crop rotation techniques that significantly increased both harvests and household income.

Environmental Solutions Designed by Communities

The second phase of each village's microgrant focuses on projects that provide lasting environmental benefits while improving quality of life.

To date, 22 villages have installed rainwater harvesting systems that collect and store rainwater close to households. These systems reduce the time families – particularly women and children – spend collecting water while decreasing reliance on water sources within or near protected forests.

Other villages have selected sustainable agriculture projects. Two communities have established avocado farming initiatives that improve soil health, reduce erosion and support agroforestry. Another village created a mushroom-growing enterprise that generates income while making productive use of agricultural waste. These community-designed projects demonstrate how conservation and development can reinforce one another, creating practical solutions that benefit both people and the ecosystems they depend upon.

Expanding the Program

The Village Vitality Project reached an important milestone in June when the inaugural cohort of 25 villages completed the full program curriculum. Together, these communities have spent the past two years strengthening local leadership, implementing livelihood projects and developing environmental initiatives that reflect their own priorities.

The next step is understanding the program's long-term impact. In August, the first cohort will participate in a post-program survey designed to evaluate changes in household livelihoods, community resilience, environmental stewardship and attitudes toward conservation. The findings will help guide future improvements as the program continues to expand.

Building on the success of the inaugural cohort, the Fossey Fund partnered with 35 additional villages in late 2025, bringing the total number of participating communities to 60. Throughout early 2026, these villages completed community planning sessions, selected local priorities and launched their savings and loan initiatives with support from trained community facilitators.





Seraphine Tuyishimire (top) and Didacienne Nyinawumuntu (bottom) share how VVP has transformed their lives.

A key strength of VVP is its partnership with local government. Memorandums of Understanding signed with district leaders outline government contributions to village projects, including providing 5% of each microgrant. These partnerships help ensure projects are locally supported and positioned for long-term success.

To further strengthen program evaluation, the Fossey Fund recently welcomed Confiance Niyonkuru as Monitoring and Evaluation Officer in Rwanda. This expanded capacity will help measure outcomes related to livelihoods, environmental stewardship and community resilience while informing future conservation strategies.

As the VVP continues to grow, it demonstrates that conservation is most successful when communities have the resources and authority to shape their own future. By improving livelihoods, strengthening local leadership and reducing dependence on protected forests, villages neighboring Volcanoes National Park are helping create a future where both people and mountain gorillas can thrive together.

An Inside Look at ‘A Gorilla Story: Told by David Attenborough’

When filmmakers from Silverback Films first arrived in Rwanda to create a documentary about the mountain gorillas, they expected to have to find a narrative. Instead, the gorillas had a story to tell.

The result is *A Gorilla Story: Told by David Attenborough*, the Netflix documentary that follows the remarkable Pablo family and captures one of the most dramatic periods in the group’s history. For the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund, which served as scientific advisors and field coordinators throughout the six-year project, the film offers a rare opportunity to share decades of research and observation with a global audience.

Where the Story Began

In 2020, Silverback Films – the producers of *Life on our Planet* and *Ocean with David Attenborough* – approached the Fossey Fund in search of a compelling gorilla story from Rwanda.

Fossey Fund scientists recommended telling the story of the Pablo family, one of the best-studied group of gorillas in the world. Founded by the silverback Pablo in 1993, the group traces its roots to the gorillas first studied by Dian Fossey in 1967. Over the decades, Fossey Fund researchers have documented the lives, relationships and personalities of multiple generations of gorillas within the family.

Initially, filmmakers envisioned a story centered on Pablo’s legacy and the extraordinary individuals who followed him, including Cantsbee, the legendary silverback who led the group to become the largest mountain gorilla family ever recorded.

“We suggested focusing on relationships, subtle behaviors and the kinds of interactions that usually require expert interpretation,” says Senior Advisor, Gorilla Program Veronica Vecellio, who served as a scientific advisor to the film. “Things like maternal care, grooming and the complex social bonds that hold gorilla families together.”

But almost immediately, the story changed. “On the very first day of filming, there was an unexpected aggressive encounter,” Vecellio recalls. “Young silverback Ubwuzu challenged the dominant silverback Gicurasi, and it escalated quickly. That’s not something you typically see at that intensity.”

What followed was a rare and dramatic power struggle. Over the months that followed, filmmakers documented Ubwuzu’s rise as he repeatedly challenged Gicurasi’s authority. The conflict grew increasingly intense as the younger silverback asserted his dominance while Gicurasi struggled to maintain control of the family.



Two years after filming, the Pablo family continues to evolve through loss, renewal and growth, now numbering 22 members.

“It became clear that this dominance shift was the story,” says Vecellio. “It wasn’t something anyone could have planned, but it was something we knew we had to follow.”

Dominance transitions are among the most important events in gorilla society. They can reshape family dynamics, influence relationships and determine the future of an entire group. Capturing one as it unfolded provided an extraordinary opportunity to document a pivotal moment in the life of the Pablo family. At the same time, the film remained deeply connected to the group’s history.

David Attenborough Joins the Project

That connection became even more meaningful when Sir David Attenborough joined as the narrator. Decades earlier, while filming the landmark series *Life on Earth*, Attenborough shared an unforgettable encounter with a young Pablo. During filming, Pablo famously climbed onto Attenborough and settled comfortably on top of him, creating one of the most iconic moments in wildlife filmmaking. Now, nearly 50 years later, Attenborough returns to tell the story of the gorilla family that Pablo created.

Bringing that story to the screen required extraordinary effort. The Pablo family is known for traveling through some of the most challenging terrain in Volcanoes National Park, often moving high onto the slopes of Mount Karisimbi through steep ravines, dense vegetation and thick mountain mist. “This was not typical wildlife filming,” says Vecellio. “The gorillas were going far beyond standard trekking routes.” Through special permission from the Rwanda Development Board, film crews camped for several nights in the forest alongside Fossey Fund staff and park officials, allowing them to capture rare moments that would otherwise be impossible to film. The result included breathtaking sunrise scenes, intimate family interactions and dramatic moments within the group.

Throughout the process, Fossey Fund trackers, researchers and field staff played a critical role. Their ability to locate gorillas, identify individuals and interpret behaviors helped filmmakers understand what they were witnessing and anticipate what might happen next.

“Filming wild gorillas requires tremendous patience and coordination,” says Vecellio. “Our field teams know these gorillas and their behaviors incredibly well, which helped the crew be in the right place at the right time.” Each week, filmmakers and Fossey Fund scientists reviewed footage together, discussing the meaning behind behaviors and helping shape the story as events unfolded.

“They wanted to understand the ‘why’ behind everything they were seeing,” says Vecellio. “Our responsibility was to interpret those moments carefully and ensure the story remained grounded in science.”

For Vecellio, the experience reinforced an important lesson about wildlife storytelling. “You can plan and prepare, but in the end, nature decides the story,” she says. “The main credit goes to the gorillas. We are just observers. It’s a privilege to witness these moments and an even greater responsibility to share them truthfully.”

“We are thrilled to see the story of the Pablo family shared with a global audience,” adds Fossey Fund President and CEO Dr. Tara Stoinski, who also served as one of the scientific advisors to the film. “Our teams have studied this group for decades, and that long-term research was essential to understanding and interpreting what viewers see on screen. It’s a powerful example of how sustained scientific research can bring extraordinary animal stories to life.”

PABLO GROUP UPDATE

After the Filming

In the two years since filming ended, the Pablo family has continued to evolve through loss, renewal and shifting relationships that are reshaping its future. The group now numbers 22 individuals, up from the 17 members that were there at the start of filming–a promising sign for the future of the group.

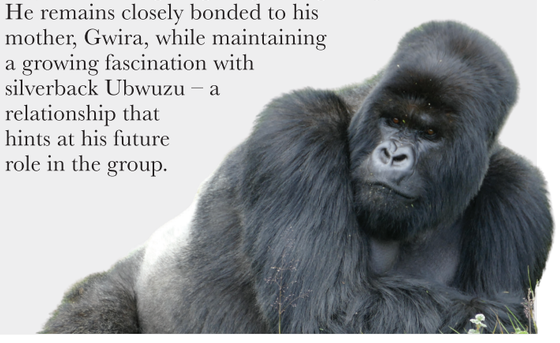
The most significant change came with the disappearance of former dominant silverback Gicurasi. After yielding dominance to Ubwuzu, he remained in the group, using his status to support Ubwuzu’s leadership. He vanished from the group on June 1, 2025, and despite extensive searches, he was never seen again. Given his declining condition, he is presumed to have died at around 30 years old, marking a natural but important leadership transition.

Imfura, the subordinate male who was seen being pushed out of the group at the end of the movie, remained a peripheral member until October 2025 when he departed with two females in an attempt to start his own group. Those females, however, soon returned to Pablo’s group, likely sensing he wasn’t quite ready to take on a dominant silverback role.

Two young females, Umwiza and Urungano, joined in late 2025. Interestingly, they have spent more time with the younger silverbacks than with Ubwuzu, subtly reinforcing emerging social bonds within the group.

For the females, Inyange has remained a steady presence despite early-life trauma, building strong social ties across the group. Dominant female Teta continues to anchor the family and gave birth to her third daughter in November 2025. Her daughter Mukundwa, featured in the film, now three, is increasingly independent.

And then there is adorable Ubi, now four years old, who is navigating his growing independence. He remains closely bonded to his mother, Gwira, while maintaining a growing fascination with silverback Ubwuzu – a relationship that hints at his future role in the group.



Thank you to our Partners for their extraordinary support in 2026

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