■ PEACE CORPS: CENTRAL AFRICA

Jungle love: Watching gorilla watching gorilla

By Steve McNutt
For The Daily Item

I was pulling my hiking boots from a muddy cat's cradle of vines when Prospere jabbed his right hand in the air like a bicyclist signaling a left turn.

A salute. A warning. Stop. Don't move.

Prospere was Congolese, and an expert gorilla tracker. He blended into the surrounding forest. Tan shirt. Black pants. Olive rubber boots. The casual sway of his machete in the crook of his arm reminded me of a country gentleman out for his morning constitutional.

In a way, he was doing that very thing. This was his world. Moving in his wake and watching him study a broken twig, I felt blind. Prospere was a man of few words, but by the end of the day, I would find out what makes him laugh.

There were three of us walking through the forest: Prospere, myself and Sarah Moore, a woman who — like me and her husband, Jake, Fawson — was a Peace Corps volunteer here in the Central African nation of Gabon.

Bisected by the equator and located in the Congo River basin, Gabon is a small country — about the size of Colorado — with a population of approximately 1.5 million people. French is the official language, but at least a dozen local languages are common.

Before Peace Corps suspended the Gabon program in August 2005 because of high costs, Peace Corps averaged about 40 volunteers working on health, environmental education and agriculture projects. In 1963, Peace Corps arrived in Gabon with a construction program that built schools in rural areas. I arrived in 2000 with 16 other trainees. Five of us finished our two-year stint as illness, injury, loneliness and an outbreak of the Ebola virus forced the early departure of 12 volunteers.

Many Peace Corps volunteers worked in Gabonese schools and hospitals, but Jake and Sarah's home was a camp in Mikongo, a 60-square kilometer thumbprint on the eastern edge of the Lope Reserve. The only way to reach the camp was by driving 90 minutes down a kidney-massaging road from the town of Lope, itself a four-hour train ride from the capital city of Libreville.

Most transportation in Gabon is slow and cumbersome, leaving much of the country isolated from itself. As I stood deep in the forest watching Prospere's raised hand, I appreciated the meaning of both isolation and dependence on those around you.

Neither Sarah nor I moved. Overhead, the sky was blotted out by a looming canopy of leaves.

"Did you hear that?" Sarah mouthed silently. She studied a color-coded trail map. A wire ran from a GPS sensor velcroed to the top of her head to the receiver jammed in a pocket.

I shook my head.

"Chestbeat," she whispered.

Then: "tok-tok-tok." The sound reminded me of knuckles on hollow wood. Somewhere in the unseen gloom, a male silverback gorilla was announcing his presence. Chestbeat.

My heart did a triple backflip as I realized how lucky I was. While preparing to graduate from Bucknell University in 1995, I flipped through a Peace Corps application, then, worried about the language requirements (I was a C student in French), I put it aside. I worked in offices. Became acquainted with cubicles. Matured (a little). One day I woke up, remembered that blank application and wondered if I had truly challenged myself.

I took a chance and ended up on the other side of the world. Funny where life takes you.

Sarah and Jake were involved with Projet Vision, a project funded by ECOFAC, a European Union conservation group attempting to habituate western lowland gorillas so that money earned from gorilla-curious tourists could fund the camp's research, anti-poaching and reserve management duties.

Unlike the mountain gorilla which is threatened in the hills of Rwanda, Uganda and Congo-Brazzaville (formerly Zaire), the western lowland gorilla maintains a population of around 100,000, an encouraging statistic that is threatened by the division of Gabon's vast forest into logging concessions.

I was in the forest because I begged and Sarah, and Jake relented. I lived close to Libreville and liked my town and my work (teaching art and environmental education classes and painting murals) but after much pleading, I was invited to spend a few days at the camp.

The forest was cool, but humid.

Five minutes into our hike, our shirts were soaked with sweat. Bees and flies arrived. The forest thumped and clattered in our ears. Cicadas formed a rhythm broken by the loud whoosh of a hornbill's wings and the gutteral clucking of monkeys. On either side of us a dense, leafy thicket reached our shoulders. Something stirred its surface and the brush undulated like waters on a green lake hiding a school of feeding fish.

I waved at Prospere and pointed at the wiggling leaves. I was a little alarmed.

Duiker, he explained. A forest antelope. Three feet tall. Cute. Decidedly harmless.

From the edge of the green corridor, Sarah pulled off a large, smooth oblong leaf that had yet to fully uncurl from the stem. Gorillas, she explained, pluck them, eat the stem and drop the rest, leaving behind what resembles a green cigarette butt. Sections of the forest looked as though a convention of vegetarian smokers had convened on lunch break.

"Try it," Sarah said. "It tastes like celery." I bit off the stem. Sure enough, it tasted like a leaf.

Thirty minutes after hearing the initial chestbeat, the forest exploded in shrieks and crashes.

Black shadows fell from the canopy. A tree twice my height was snapped in two by a leaping shadow, hopelessly fast and barreling over our heads, disappearing, having never truly appeared. A HOO-HOO-HOO barreled down at us from atop the hill. A triangular head with a tuft of reddish hair protruded above the brush.

The silverback was 30 yards away and had no intention of letting us get closer. He communicated this by standing and slamming his palms against the trees on either side of him. Silverback mountain gorillas are typically between 300 and 600 pounds. This one was a house, a two-car garage and a solarium added out back for reflection. He was not a mountain gorilla but a gorilla mountain. Size does matter. He was big.

Sarah explained the "HOO-HOO-HOO" was not a sign of aggression but curiosity, the equivalent of "Who are you?"

"This is a nice silverback," Sarah said. "He's like a big kitten."

Ah yes, a 500-pound kitten.

"We'll have to find you a mean one that roars."

Oh, let's not.

After a few minutes, we realized why he remained. A female sub-adult (a teenage gorilla) was high in a tree 30 feet away, so close we hadn't seen her.

An hour passed, then another. They lolled about. We watched. I was fiddling with the lens cap on my camera when a faint crackling of tree limbs was followed by hissing and yelling. Prospere waved his arms and pointed at something over my shoulder.

An elephant had wandered over the hill and spotted us. Tusks a-waggling. Ears a-flapping. Bad intentions on the brain. Fifty feet away and closing fast in the direction of, well, me.

Funny where life takes you.

Sarah ran past, knees pumping, and yelled, "IT'S GOING TO KILL US!" which won points for both clarity and brevity. Later, she would claim she had never said this and it is possible that what I heard was my own high-pitched screaming. In times of crisis, the facts suffer.

Prospere, the heroic tracker, hissed and waved valiantly at the elephant then raced heroically down the hill. Removing my camera lens, I stepped into a mass of vines that tightened around my left ankle. With each attempt to jerk free, they cinched tighter. As a representative of the United States of America, it was not my finest hour. I ripped my foot free, stumbled, and was running again–airborne really–my ears filled with the screech of splintering wood.

I ran for a while. Longer than necessary. Then found Sarah and Prospere upon a fallen log at the base of the hill. Confused by all the people running under the sub-adult's tree, the silverback roared repeatedly. Prospere pointed at my camera bag.

"Did you get the elephant picture?" he asked.

As I shook my head no, he bent over, and laughed.

■ *Steve McNutt is a 1995 graduate of Bucknell University. Between 2000 and 2002, he served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Gabon. He lives in Iowa City, Iowa, where he is co-editing an anthology of Peace Corps stories. He can be contacted by email at stevemcnutt@earthlink.net.*