

BY JOHN FALK

# Why the bonobos >>> need a radio... and other (unlikely) lessons from deepest Congo

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBERT J. ROSS

AN **ADVENTURE** EXPEDITION



**PLANET OF THE APES:**  
Our "closest" genetic cousin, in  
the Lola Ya Bonobo Sanctuary  
near Kinshasa, capital of the  
Democratic Republic of the Congo.  
Left: Salonga National Park.

**T**he footbridge gave way with the sonic punch of a giant walnut cracking, plunging two of our best porters and a vital load of French electronics into the Lula River, which was little more than a boggy rivulet at this point in the dry season. In a spot where a young woman had recently had her arm ripped off by a slender-snouted croc, they were lucky to make it out alive. The mishap, nevertheless, cost us a half hour of precious sunlight and, perhaps, the goodwill of our increasingly anxious porters.

Our 30-person campaign trekked the next seven hours in a silent trudge through Salonga National Park, a mostly unexplored lowland rain forest in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). For reasons that were beyond my comprehension at that early stage, we were led by a mysterious five-year-old boy wearing a tattered red dress who had somehow attached himself to our expedition. No one questioned our tiny guide, or needed to, as he was able to lead a team of porters, park guards, and one primate specialist through an undulating course of fallen trees, barrel-chested fire ants, and malarial swampland of ankle-deep slop. The rain forest around us was disturbingly quiet: no barks, calls, thumping, or cawing of creatures except the tinnitus of insects and tweeting of birds.

About 16 miles in, the boy mercifully steered us into a small clearing. We were not far now from where Belgian colonials in the Congo used to exchange prisoners with a near-mythic people called the Iyaelima, the same "lost" tribe we were venturing into this 14,000-square-mile rain forest to meet. Finding them, in fact, was key to accomplishing our two goals for this journey: to connect the long-isolated Iyaelima to the outside world via radio and, if we were lucky, to study the group's remarkable relationship with their equally reclusive neighbors: a popular, even fashionable, species of primate called the bonobo.

Achy and starving, I eased to the forest floor with the grace of an arthritic in an ice hotel, resting next to my host, Dr. Jo Thompson. Tall, thin, and bespectacled, the 51-year-old director of the independent Lukuru Wildlife Research Project looked more like a schoolmarm than a controversial grassroots conservationist, let alone one who had lived in a mud hut for 16 years, escaped from a psychopathic jungle warlord, and prompted a certain infamy for her Dian Fossey-like advocacy of the bonobo.

When Thompson began studying the rare apes in 1992, not much was known about them, and since then, due to their extreme isolation, relatively little has

changed. Studies portray bonobos, which share 98 percent of our DNA, as almost comic distillations of environmental idealism: a nonviolent race of proto-hippies who live in a matriarchal, highly promiscuous society, using sex to solve intragroup conflict. In a *New Yorker* article entitled "Swingers" (July 30, 2007), bonobos are characterized as "equal parts dolphin, Dalai Lama, and Warren Beatty." Reports on PBS and NPR depict a primate one might expect to find making artisanal cheeses off-the-grid in Vermont—while having a lot of sex. And because bonobos, along with chimpanzees, are our closest relatives, their behavior is said to instruct us in the fundamentals of human nature.

Research on the species in the wild, however, has been complicated by the fact that they are notoriously hard to find. The first bonobo primatologist managed to observe the cagey creatures for a mere six hours over a two-year span in the 1970s. Since then, poaching has halved the bonobo population (numbers vary wildly, with some estimates as low as 10,000). Their

flesh, reputed to strengthen children, is a hot commodity in the multimillion-dollar-a-year bush meat trade.

Thompson, however, has found one bright spot in this otherwise bleak picture: a near-symbiotic relationship between the Iyaelima—a people once described by Belgians in colonial reports as "fearsome cannibals" and "unconquerable"—and an uncommonly large group of bonobos in the Salonga.

Thompson first learned of the Iyaelima in 2005, when two small men emerged from the jungle a hundred miles south of the Salonga and handed her a remarkable



letter written in French. It was signed by Chief Longanga Isako II, leader of the notorious tribe. Widely feared and despised by the villagers whose land borders the park, the Iyaelima have lived deep in the rain forest, in self-enforced exile, since their Bantu ancestors first settled this region, carefully cultivating their reputation by planting fables of their ferocity with itinerant traders. Chief Longanga's letter, however, requested that Thompson travel into Iyaelima territory to meet. The trip would make her the first non-African to lay eyes on the tribe since two American missionaries briefly passed through in the late 1940s. Why he wanted to open up now and why he chose Thompson, he didn't say.

Thompson's expedition began in January 2007, a time when the Iyaelima's right to remain in the park had been challenged by a group of the world's biggest non-governmental conservation organizations (known as "bingos" in the DRC). Backed by the Congo Basin Forest Partnership, an initiative funded by the United States that has pledged upwards of \$53 million to protect the Congo Basin and develop an ecotourist industry there, the NGOs have come to view the Iyaelima as a threat to the park and its wildlife. Led by the World Wildlife Fund, the bingos have challenged a DRC law that categorizes the Iyaelima not as human, but rather as "wildlife"—a statutory demotion that has so far allowed the tribe to remain in the park.

**INTO THE CANOPY** Clockwise from top: A pister, or bonobo tracker, in the Salonga; smoked monkey in Kinshasa; primatologist Jo Thompson at Salonga Park Headquarters.

After her three-month survey, however, Thompson concluded that, far from endangering the forest's plants and animals, the Iyaelima's unusually small ecological footprint, animistic spiritual beliefs, and ancient traditions made them ideal conservationists. This was especially true with regard to the bonobo, whose population was five times denser in Iyaelima territory than in the rest of the park. The feared Iyaelima and the peaceful bonobo appeared to live in perfect harmony.

"I remember meeting with a woman from one of the bingos who asked me, 'What's so special about the Iyaelima?'" Thompson said. "I said they were leaving a minimal footprint on their ancestral land and had nowhere else to go. She actually said, 'So? We've resettled people off their ancestral land in the past.'"

"Jo is a good primatologist, but she is not a trained socio-anthropologist or conservationist," said an official with the Wildlife Conservation Society in Kinshasa, the traumatized capital of the DRC. "And the problem is, she is giving the Iyaelima the impression that they have the right to live in the Salonga, and they don't."

Our expedition—and the now damp radio unit—was Thompson's answer to the bingos. On her last trip Chief Longanga had asked the researcher to return and bring his tribe a *phonie*, the short-wave radio network that connects the government, missionaries, aid groups,





**MAKING CONTACT**  
Clockwise from top: The Iyaelima welcome Thompson; a pre-hunt dance; an Iyaelima woman displays traditional tribal markings.

and the military throughout the DRC. The device, Thompson knew, would instantly alter the way of life for the 2,300 Iyaelima, providing constant news and a direct line to the outside world—not always a good thing. But it would also allow the Iyaelima to participate in the debate roiling in Kinshasa that would ultimately determine their fate. Not coincidentally, an outcome in the tribe’s favor would help preserve one of the world’s best bonobo sanctuaries. “I decided to go for it,” she told me before we left. “I bought the equipment for \$5,000 in Kinshasa. What else could I do?”

Back in the forest, someone called an end to the half-hour rest. Our group, led by the boy in the red dress, started up a hill just as the equatorial sun was making its eternal nosedive to the horizon. We had another eight miles to hike to our campsite, a park patrol post called Iyamba. Soon our porters, preternaturally fearful of traveling in the forest at night, began to sing to ward off the leopards and evil spirits surely lurking in the descending darkness. A wonderful, booming chorus of disembodied voices called out to ancestors in the spirit world for protection.

**THOMPSON AND I** had arrived in the dead center of the DRC’s interior three days earlier after a short bush flight from Kinshasa. We were joined by our photographer, Rob Ross, a former real estate investment banker from New York who had chucked it all, and Thompson’s consigliere, Lubuta, a high official with the DRC’s national parks department (ICCN). Touching down in a grassy field in the village of Anga, home to ICCN’s Salonga National Park Headquarters, several hundred villagers ran out to greet us in the searing heat, shouting over the roar of the prop, “Ya-yo, ya-yo Madame Jo!”

Salonga Park Headquarters is little more than a cluster of a dozen mud-and-thatch hovels set off behind bamboo fencing. The compound houses half of the

Salonga’s 120 guards, each one paid \$3 a month to protect the wildlife from poachers in a park larger than Belgium. The plan called for us to sleep here for two nights, arrange porters to haul our half ton of gear—a good portion of it Ross’s camera equipment and extensive array of foodstuffs and designer toiletries—and begin our 110-mile trek into Iyaelima territory.

As we neared the huts, an officer goose-stepped before 15 guards aligned in matching green fatigues, all provided courtesy of Thompson. In fact, most everything the guards wore—boots, laces, belts, socks, bush hats—had been purchased by Thompson, using money from grants, small fundraisers, and her husband’s already depleted retirement account. The officer drilled the group hard in stentorian French, marshaling them right, left, and at arms—the latter being the most difficult maneuver, as only three guards had weapons, and those were rusted-out AK-47s. The most senior men wore old-lady eyeglasses that Thompson had bought at a Walmart in Colorado, making them look like a strike force of aging librarians.

As three handpicked guards hoisted the DRC

flag in a dyslexic masterpiece, flying the colors upside down and backward, Lubuta stepped forward. The lanky 50-year-old officer has served as Thompson’s official government liaison, travel companion, and translator since 2005. As a sign of their friendship, the DRC native and ex-boxer named one of his newborn twins Jo-Jo (the other was saddled with “Don King”). Cutting an imposing figure, Lubuta exhorted the group with the gruesome details of a Salonga guard who had been butchered by poachers and of five rare mountain gorillas machine-gunned by Rwandan Hutu rebels in Virunga National Park in the eastern DRC. “So have courage for Salonga!” Lubuta commanded in Lingala, the DRC’s common language. “Have courage for the bonobo! Have courage for Madame Jo!”

“Courage!” the guards shouted, apparently up for the challenge. “Courage!”

Watching Lubuta, Thompson never saw the stubbly old poacher slip out from behind a banana tree and sidle up beside her. Like a hustler moving Rolexes in Times Square, he peeled open his tattered windbreaker to reveal the dangling pelt of an endangered Congo clawless otter. The moment neatly summed up the *Alice in Wonderland*, down-the-rabbit-hole quality of working in a place like the DRC: Here was a poacher peddling the pelt of an endangered species to a rabid conservationist in front of 15 park guards. Thompson confiscated the skin, poking a finger through one of its dime-size bullet holes, and said, “Welcome to my world.”

**JO THOMPSON IS A** living testament to the power of dreams—specifically one conjured by a seven-year-old girl in Columbus, Ohio, with a love of Dr. Seuss. Thompson can still recall the moment in 1963 when she turned to a photo of Kakovet, a bonobo, in a Seuss imprint entitled *I Was Kissed by a Seal at the Zoo*. “I remember knowing right then that I was going to spend my life working with bonobos,” she said. “I still have that book with me.”

After attending graduate school at the University of Colorado for biological anthropology, Thompson landed in the DRC—then called Zaire—to study bonobos in 1992, at the age of 36. (She would eventually receive her doctorate in primatology from Oxford.) When Thompson arrived, the DRC was just slipping into a war that wouldn’t formally end until 2003. The bloodiest conflict since World War II, it killed an



estimated 3.9 million people. Thompson, however, had heard reports of bonobos living far south of their known habitat in the Congo Basin, and she moved into a mud hut on the border of the Bososandja forest to investigate. “She must have been one of the few researchers to remain in the Congo during the war,” says Dutch primatologist Frans de Waal, professor of primate behavior at Emory University, who helped kick off the bonobo boom with his best-selling book, *Our Inner Ape*. “It’s remarkable that she stayed on.”

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annihilated another. Nearly 20 years passed before the public found a suitable primate alternative: It was up to the longer limbed, flat-faced, satin-furred bonobo to help answer key questions about primate—and ultimately human—nature. Were we fundamentally violent, selfish, domineering, and destined to be led by rough men? Or were we by nature cooperative, egalitarian, pacific, and matrilineal? Who went off the reservation, Ted Nugent or Joan Baez?

It was chiefly their forbidding habitat that accounted for the relative lack of research on bonobos. They are found exclusively in the DRC, in an area the size of Montana, south of the Congo River and north of the Kasai River. As such, they were one of the last large mammals to be identified, in 1933. It was not until the 1950s that two pioneers in the field, Germany’s Eduard Tratz and Heinz Heck, assigned a species known then as the pygmy chimpanzee its own generic name, bonobo, possibly a derivative of an ancient Bantu word for “ancestor.”

In 1973 Japanese researchers set up one of the first bonobo field sites outside a village called Wamba, about a hundred miles north of the Salonga. Rather than engage in the extremely difficult process of habituating bonobos in the rain forest, the Japanese planted a field of sugarcane to entice the apes to come to them. It worked. For the next decade the Wamba site—along with another nearby site at Lomako—gathered unprecedented data on wild bonobos.

MAP BY OLAF HAJEK



The research showed that bonobos, far from being aggressive and violent, often alleviate disputes, both within the group and between groups, with sex. And not just sex, but an orgiastic male-female, female-female, male-male, and juvenile-adult free-for-all. Casual sex is a large part of a bonobo's daily ritual, an erotic smorgasbord that includes tongue kissing, oral sex, missionary intercourse, and a bonobo specialty known as genital-on-genital rubbing. The primates are also matrilineal in a *Steel Magnolias* way with tight-knit groups of females dominating individual males, who although physically more powerful than females, tellingly, often eat after them. Bonobos rarely hunt, instead eating a diet of mostly fruits, piths, and leaves with the occasional termite thrown in. Researchers speculate that their genteel nature may be due to the fact that bonobos, unlike chimps, don't have to share their habitat with any other large-bodied primates.

By the time Thompson set up her own field site south of the Bososandja in 1992, the first photos of wild bonobos were being published in *National Geographic*. For the next six years Thompson spent ten hours a day with 20 bonobos she named the Luenga Group. The hard-core study led to two groundbreaking discoveries: The Luenga bonobos, she found, frequently went out onto the savanna, a previously undiscovered bonobo habitat, which provided a possible link between bonobos and savanna-dwelling hominids; they also often waded waist-deep into perennial pools to feed on sub-aquatic vegetation, a find that changed the way bonobos were held in captivity.

Thompson marveled at the Luenga Group's sex life, observing bonobos making eye contact during intercourse (humans are the only other species to do so) and apparently having orgasms. "They're pros at it, but they're not oversexed," she said. "Anyone who has researched bonobos in the field long enough knows they are complicated primates who hunt, can be violent, aggressive, and selfish.

"Still, the bottom line is that you can't sit in front of bonobos for any extended period of time and not see their humanness, the similarities between us," Thompson added, recalling an incident in the Bososandja when she came upon a baby bonobo clinging to the chest of its dead mother, who had been shot by poachers. "It had terror still in its eyes. The baby was traumatized because it realized, it knew its mother was really gone. "Bonobos have an authentic emotional life and even empathy for other beings. It's really freaky," she said. "And I think on some level people can learn from them in that they are like us, or we are like the bonobo."

In 1997 dictator Mobutu Sese Seko was overthrown by his longtime nemesis Laurent Kabila, which ushered in a phase of the DRC conflict known as Africa's World War. "By then, in that environment, with all the awful, horrible things that were happening, pure field research became a luxury," Thompson said. She instead began working with local villages and their headmen to protect bonobos as well as other endangered species. In the Bososandja, where Thompson continues to work, she convinced the 23 chieftains of local villages that the wildlife in the nearby forest was "theirs" and therefore should be protected. Her most powerful tool in winning hearts and minds proved to be a 20-cent poster of Muhammad Ali—a demigod in the DRC dating back to his 1974



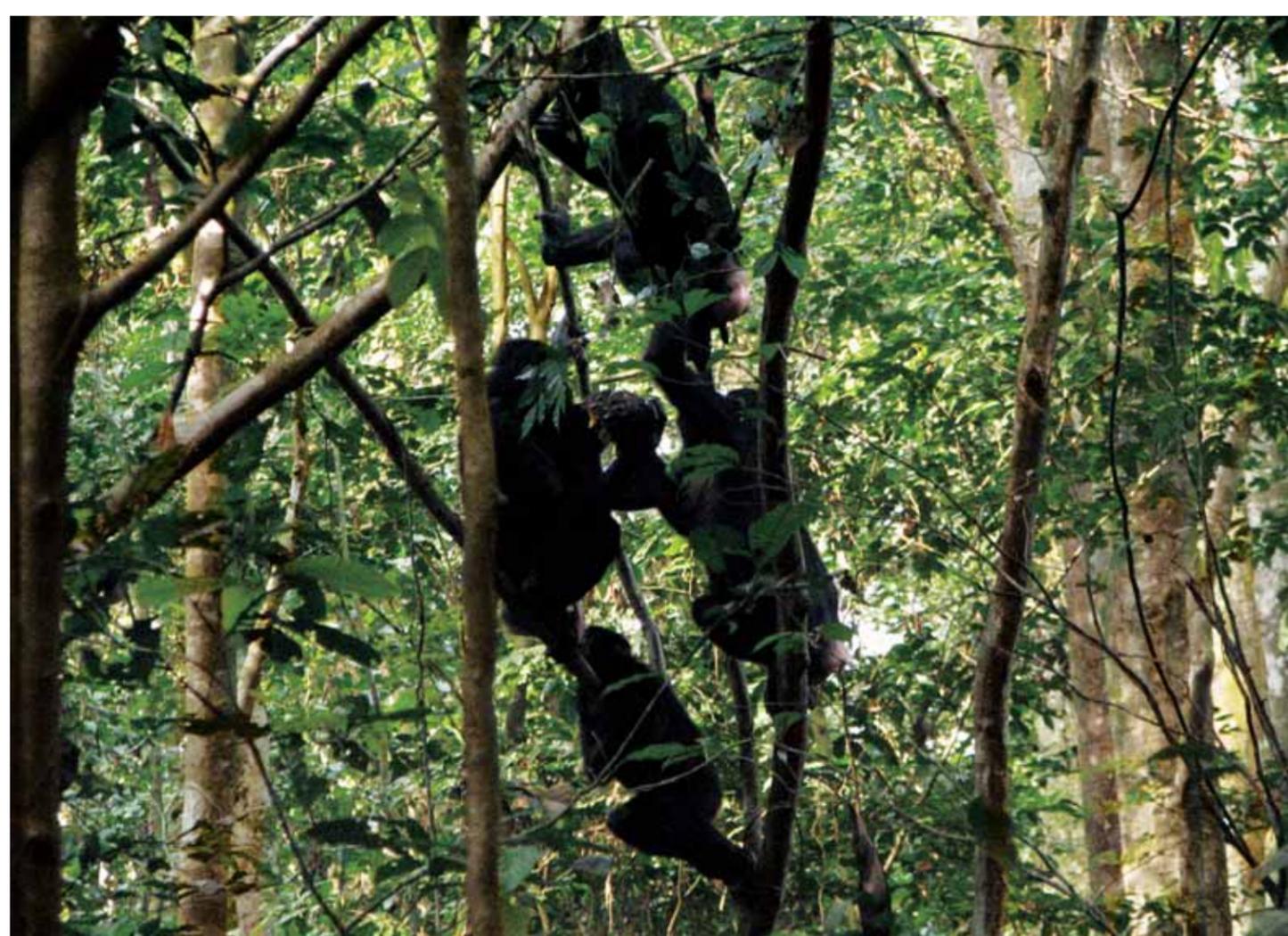
**Our genetic doppelganger had been right there watching us.**

"Rumble in the Jungle" in Kinshasa—that reads "Be a victor. Protect your flora and fauna." The chieftains were so impressed by Thompson, they deeded her the rights to every tree in the Bososandja, a parcel long coveted by a Malaysian logging company. Thompson instantly became one of the largest private owners of virgin forest in the world.

For her efforts, Thompson has been arrested several times, had her research site burned down, and been condemned to death by a drug-crazed warlord, Siki, who controlled the village where she lived during the war. The off-the-charts psychopath was known to torture his victims by stuffing them into oil drums in the equatorial sun. "When he finally sobered up, he released me from house arrest," Thompson recalls. "I was lucky, but that's the risk of working in an environment where human beings slaughter each other without any mercy whatsoever."

**WE GOT OFF TO** a late start from Anga, descending from the mixed forest and savanna into the green haze of the Congo Basin at 11:30. That morning, as Lubuta struggled to assign loads to porters, Thompson dealt with the emotional fallout from a bit of bad news. The overseer of the Salonga and commander of its 120 guards had been recently ousted for moonlighting as the capo of a large-scale poaching syndicate. After his dismissal, The Snake, as he was subsequently nicknamed, stole most of the gear Thompson had donated to the Salonga guards over the years, about 50,000 dollars' worth. He left only uniforms, ten mattresses, and a few pairs of wick-away underwear that even someone called The Snake wouldn't steal. I found Thompson wrapped in her husband Craig's flannel shirt, a talisman she keeps handy for just such occasions. Thompson married Craig, a community development consultant, in 1987 and has seen little of him ever since. "He understands me and knows that this is what I have to do," she said. "The man is a saint."

We hiked several hundred feet down from Anga into a canopied rain forest of palm and fig that topped 130 feet. The forest floor was a sunless steam bath thick with clawing vines, palms, thornbush, and rank pockets of methane. After ten hours we staggered out of the pitch-blackness and into an ICCN ranger camp, Patrol Post Iyamba, a 20-mile walk from the first Iyaelima village. Around a bonfire that night, Thompson—a light traveler who usually doesn't even carry a radio (we persuaded her to bring a Thuraya sat phone) and wears only Crocs—inspected her feet for chiggers while



Lubuta set about coordinating our first bonobo hunt.

Tracking bonobos, as Thompson told us, is best done by sending pisters—park guards trained in locating the apes—into the forest to slip in under a group as they nest at dusk. When the bonobos fall asleep, the pisters return to camp and lead the main party back with ninja-like stealth. If all goes according to plan, the voyeurs arrive at the nesting site before the prime bonobo viewing begins at dawn. Tomorrow's excursion, according to Thompson, was a good test for the day when the ICCN would regularly welcome tourists in the park. Thompson opted out, however, telling us she had already seen her fair share of bonobos (a statement she would later modify).

The next morning, well after sunrise had come and gone, two machete-wielding pisters led Ross and me, not with predatory stealth, but by chopping and crashing through the forest like drunken elephants. A mile after leaving Iyamba, we entered an area where a village once stood. There was an abrupt thinning of the canopy, permitting a secondary-growth forest with such bonobo delectables as tshake, a fleshy spiked fruit, and ginger plants. High in the cruxes of the trees I counted up to 20 large nests of branches and palm leaves left by our evolutionary brethren. It was obvious even to me that the apes had just been in the area: Nests were green, the jagged

**LOVE NEST:** Wild bonobos in the Congo Basin. **Left:** The author gets in deep.

ends of snapped branches still white, and freshly chewed marantaceae piths littered the ground. Here the pisters halted us; one sniffed a pith. He nibbled on it, spat out the pulp, and pinched his nose, letting blow a mighty honk that threatened to shoot his brains out of his ears. The blurt mimicked an injured duiker, a small forest antelope—the bonobos' idea of a cheeseburger *el gratis*. We waited. The only sounds were insects and shallow breathing. The pister blew again. My heart started racing. And then again. After the fifth honk he shrugged and took a step. At that moment a bush not ten yards to our right exploded, and I felt the ground-thunder of an unseen bonobo charging away. It was the most thrilling rush I had had in years. Our genetic doppelganger had been right there watching us, even outwitting us.

Ross and I turned to pursue the beast. But in an act of pister sabotage that would inexplicably repeat itself throughout our expedition, our guides—schooled in ape tracking at Thompson's expense—tore off terrified in the opposite direction.

"The problem," Thompson told me by way of explanation after I returned to camp, "is the people who kill the bonobo aren't scared of them, but the ones out here protecting them are."

**IT WAS A RELIEF** to enter Iyaelima territory on our third day in the Salonga. The tribe has created an arboreal superhighway by hacking out five feet of forest on either side of the game trail. The farther we walked, the more the forest came alive with golden-bellied mangabeys, red colobus monkeys, and African gray parrots. We found fresh tracks of leopards, duikers, and red river hogs, as well as spectacular evidence of where a forest elephant had (Continued on page 84)

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEXANDER GEORGIEV



Luapa is laid out in a forest clearing a hundred yards wide and a mile long with a hundred or more mud-walled huts on either side. There are also a few community buildings—school, dispensary, church—constructed of adobe bricks made from molds that Thompson had brought with her on her first visit. We again sat down opposite the etoschi, and Lubuta began the proceedings by offering the Iyaelima our tributes, which looked to me suspiciously like stuff one might find in a trash barrel outside a 7-Eleven: two cans of sardines, tomato paste, black shoe polish, carbon paper, and several baseball caps. Apparently the etoschi agreed. Two older men objected loudly and stormed away, setting off an hour of brinkmanship that Thompson resolved only by promising to bring the Iyaelima soccer uniforms like those she had given another tribe, and two bottles of aspirin.

Using Lubuta as interpreter, I first asked about the phonie. The kapita thought for a moment and then explained that when Iyaelima traders and hunters come into contact with other tribes, they report feeling inferior. They describe a world with bicycles, modern clothes, medicine, and schools. The Iyaelima, he said, were backward. “So they decide they need to develop,” Lubuta translated, “so their people can have those things too, so their children don’t leave for the outside for a better life. And that’s why he says Chief Longanga send letter to Madame Jo, because they hear this white woman is out there helping other people.” The Iyaelima, Lubuta continued, also wanted Thompson’s help to fight poachers. “The kapita says not as many animals in the forest anymore. That means sometimes now they can’t give gifts of food to the spirits of their ancestors in the rain forest, which is very, very bad.”

“Can you ask him about the bonobos?” I said. “Why he thinks they are all around here but not other places?”

When Lubuta translated my question, the crowd started to laugh. Animated conversations broke out before the kapita hushed them and spoke. “Kapita says the bonobo live around Iyaelima because they feel safe,” Lubuta told me. “He says also bonobo like brothers, and bonobo know Iyaelima will not kill them.”

When I asked why the Iyaelima would not kill bonobos, the kapita said it would be murder, like taking a human life. Bonobos, he claimed, walk upright like we do, have humanlike eyes, cry, bury their dead, dance, speak, make bonfires, and most important, worship their ancestors like people do.

“Kapita says when their ancestors meet the bonobo in forest, they see the bonobo talking around fire, just like they do,” Lubuta added.

“So the Iyaelima like the bonobos?” I asked. This set off a cascade of cackling in the crowd. The kapita looked stunned. He then spoke to Lubuta very carefully.

“OK, kapita now wants me to tell you that the Iyaelima people scared of bonobo,” Lubuta told me, while the kapita watched for my reaction. Lubuta relayed the ancestral story of an Iyaelima who bumped into a bonobo on a forest path and was severely injured after the two went at it in an interspecies fistfight, and then another in which a bonobo captured a large duiker, dragged it up a tree, and snapped its legs. While the

## The Iyaelima sorcerer cast a spell to summon all the bonobos in the forest to our village.

duiker cried out in pain, the bonobo enjoyed a hearty laugh.

“Bonobo can be big danger in forest because bonobo were man who have fallen,” Lubuta explained.

“Sinned?” I asked. The kapita nodded, not needing a translation.

“Yes,” Lubuta said. “Yes. Bonobo at one time human like you, me, but then they do something very bad, very long time ago, and now live here in forest around village. Kapita says bonobo watch always, that bonobo out there right now watching. They follow the Iyaelima in secret, you see, to learn to be human again.”

**AFTER TEN DAYS** and four mind-bogglingly inept ape hunts—all orchestrated by Lubuta—we had yet to see a bonobo. We either started too late, were too loud, got lost, or our pistors were too petrified to pursue the bonobos. This didn’t exactly bode well for future ecotourist operations in the Salonga. So when we set out on a 20-mile hike in a downpour to Ila, a village whose surrounding forest happens to be chock-full of bonobos, it was for the sole purpose of spotting this primate.

In Ila, however, on the 11th day of the expedition, the bonobo chase went from

bad to worse. Instead of trained pistors, the village chief and his political aid insisted on taking us into the forest, and then only after holding a secret ceremony all morning that involved a bucket of the Salonga’s best palm wine and an invoice from the chief for \$5. After a 9 a.m. start, well past the planned sunrise departure, the chief and his aide did everything short of firing off a few rounds to alert the apes to our approach, eventually steering us into a half-acre colony of fire ants. Hundreds of the little devils crawled up our pant legs and down our shirts, each of us running around in our own private hell, tearing at our clothes.

Ross and I stumbled back into the patrol post at dusk, covered in stinging red welts, soaked in sweat and dirt. Lubuta found us at once and sat us down around a fire next to Thompson. He had very good news, he said: He could guarantee that the next morning we would see a bonobo. He had just had a private audience with an emissary from a sorcerer from Ila “who is not just the sorcerer for Ila but the chief sorcerer for all the Iyaelima people.” Lubuta said we had angered the sorcerer by looking for bonobos without consulting him first. “It was this sorcerer who send the bonobo away when you go to find them this morning,” Lubuta told us. “And it was the sorcerer who send the *bifuma* [fire ants] into forest just now to attack you.” Then he threw in the good news: If we laid a couple of dollars and a few gifts on the sorcerer, suggesting perhaps some soap and canned peas, then he would cast a spell the next morning to summon all the bonobos in the forest to Ila. He had already pulled out the Big Bertha, a stuffed toy bonobo Thompson had left behind on her way through town nine months ago. “He even use the stuffed bonobo right now, right now as we speak, to start to bring the bonobo to Ila,” Lubuta added, conspiratorially.

This was the precise moment that Ross snapped. Focusing on Lubuta’s continuous, almost willful screwups of what should have been a straightforward operation, he began a relentless half-hour cross-examination that would have made Nancy Grace cringe.

“So, we know how to find bonobos,” Ross declared near the end. “Jo knows. She’s a scientist. We should do what she says, no?”

“I know,” said Lubuta.

“You don’t know,” Ross shot back. “Or if you do—I mean, instead of sending trained trackers into the forest the day before to find the bonobo, we follow people who

don’t know what they’re doing, or have no experience tracking bonobo, or who are scared of them. . . . And now we’re supposed to listen to some sorcerer who tells us he sent the bifuma to attack us, but now if we give him a couple of bucks and a can of peas he will get us the bonobo?”

“It is what these people believe, Rob,” Lubuta said.

“Well, according to their sorcerer we couldn’t have flown in on a plane, but we did, right?” Ross asked. “Right?”

“Yes.”

“Do you believe in sorcerers?”

“Yes,” answered Lubuta.

“Well I don’t,” Ross barked. “And I think this whole thing is completely absurd. And what’s more, it’s no way to manage a national park, which is what you should be doing here, rationally, not listening to some sorcerer with a toy bonobo. I mean, it’s crazy. Either you live in the modern world, or you don’t. Do you?”

**WITH THIS**, things became quite tense between Lubuta, the porters, the park guards, and Ross and me. For all Lubuta’s faults, the porters and guards regarded him as their chief, and when he was attacked and belittled, they were offended and hurt. For her part Thompson was worried that the inquisition may have permanently ruptured her relationship with Lubuta and the guards. It only got worse later that night when the patrol post outside Ila was overrun by a tsunami of fire ants, an unprecedented invasion that everyone attributed to the impressive handiwork of the sorcerer and blamed on Ross. (As a hedge against any possible supernatural collateral damage, I moved my tent clear across the post from his.)

The next morning, as the porters readied our gear for the return to Luapa, I went on a short walk with Thompson. “That’s why I never went out with you guys looking for bonobo,” she said. “The way Lubuta was doing it, it was a wild goose chase. But what Rob said last night, that’s what you don’t do. It may be absurd to Rob, but that’s what makes sense in their culture. The solution has to come out of that, in their way, and cannot be dictated from above.”

After hiking back to Luapa, we pitched our tents at dusk just as a vicious storm blew in. Exhausted and dejected, we all went to bed early. At 3:30 a.m., however, someone woke me, shining a flashlight in my face. It was a park guard, who insisted I get dressed and come outside, where I

found several other park guards and a few Iyaelima standing in the rain, soaking wet. Ross was out there, as was Thompson, looking about as confused as I was.

We walked three hours in the rain, the guards shining their lights into the trees to search out leopards and mambas. We came upon a large blue tent in the middle of the forest where two excited park guards and a shivering Iyaelima were waiting. They had found a huge bonobo group, they claimed, numbering 60 or more. They were sleeping in the trees just over the next ridge. "Lubuta orchestrated this," Thompson whispered, acknowledging that he did so in response to Ross's outburst. "And these guys came out here in the rain—in the night—to find bonobos, which they are frightened to death of. But they're doing everything they're afraid to do because they want to show you and Rob a bonobo before you leave."

The pisters led us through dense bush up a steep ridge just as dawn broke. We had covered barely 200 yards when the forest detonated in an unnatural, overwhelming squawking sound, like 60 pterodactyls screaming: The bonobos were announcing our arrival.

Our ten-person party crashed headlong into the bush and scattered every which way, whooping and hollering in fear. Within seconds I was alone and lost, slamming my way through a thicket of palm. I fell. When I got up, I scrambled hand over hand up the ridge until I saw an Iyaelima. He excitedly waved me over and, with his arm around my shoulders, lined up his machete with my eyeballs, pointing the blade at what looked like a manhole cover resting on a branch 150 feet up. He whispered words I couldn't possibly understand, a stream of Ki-Iyaelima so close his breath tickled my cheek. The manhole cover jerked and the Iyaelima squeezed me harder, the machete vibrating in tune with his nerves. Then the bonobo started down the branch and, in one fluid motion, leaped. Silhouetted against the sky was a large, gracefully proportioned, long-legged beast that for a split second could have been human. It was so eerily familiar my fingers and toes tingled. The Iyaelima bounced on the balls of his bare feet and shouted to his buddies. He then said something to me through a beaming smile and tore off through the brush after the bonobo as it darted across the treetops. Rather than running from a fallen human, the Iyaelima was chasing an ape. I scrambled up the hill to tell Thompson and found her kneeling over



The author's leopard-proof accommodations

## The forest detonated in an unnatural squawking sound, like 60 pterodactyls screaming—the bonobos.

some large, greenish bonobo stool. She looked as excited as I was.

"God, this is good," she said, poking the solid specimen with her pen. "This means these Salonga bonobos are incredibly healthy. And it's not loose stool, you see. No diarrhea. That means these bonobos aren't scared, they're not being persecuted here. They're being protected. And you ask me why I do this? Well, it just doesn't get any better than this."

**A WEEK LATER** Thompson, Lubuta, Ross, and I descended from the clouds over the Congo River into Kinshasa, banking above a harbor full of rust-bucket boats in view of the smog-covered capital. Our departure had been delayed two days by a deadly Ebola outbreak, the bush plane commandeered to ferry doctors into the hot zone. On the flight I had asked Thompson for her prediction regarding the future of the Salonga, the bonobo, and the Iyaelima. "You know, I think the Iyaelima are critical to the long-term health of the bonobo, and that the bonobo are critical to the long-term sustainability of the Salonga," she told me. "But I think I have done all I can do for the Iyaelima. They have the phonie now. I'm going back to the Bososandja, and it is up to them to make their case to the world.

"I don't know how it will work out, but

I know for certain that if the Iyaelima are resettled out of the park, they will cease to exist," she added. "But then again, if the Iyaelima stay in the park and are integrated into its management, they will also change. In ten years the ancestral ceremonies like the ones you witnessed, the etoschi, the hunt, will be gone forever. I guess that's the 64-million-dollar question in development: At what point is the cost in lost traditions too much? But the Iyaelima want to develop, so what else can you do?"

We landed on the rutted runway of N'djili Airport mere minutes before 6 p.m., when all air traffic must cease in the DRC due to a lack of electricity. As we taxied to our hangar, the Chinese-built Stade des Martyrs rose out of the shantytown before us. We exited the plane and the pilot opened the cargo bay, unleashing a thick smell of decay from the belly of the aircraft.

There, hidden behind Ross's luggage, was a hundred-pound sack of reeking, rotting flesh. It belonged to Lubuta. He first told Thompson it was goat before sheepishly admitting it was some other kind of meat, probably duiker from the Salonga. He had taken it out in cahoots with the ICCN official who replaced The Snake as overseer of the park. Thompson repeated several times, "Lubuta, I can't believe you did that. You know that's wrong." Lubuta heaved the sack into some brush behind a blockhouse labeled "jet fuel" and slunk away, claiming he needed to attend to paperwork. We all assumed he would return later to pick up the bush meat.

As we were driven back to the hotel that night, Thompson hardly spoke. When I asked her what she would do about Lubuta, she shrugged and replied, "Lubuta is the best of the bunch." She looked exhausted, as we all were, bouncing down the disheartening streets of Kinshasa, watching the overwhelming poverty and despair roll by the window: the crippled beggars; the filthy boys hustling worthless maps and little girls; the stench of burning garbage; the rubble; the river of goddamn sewage. I didn't have to be there to know that at that exact moment, dusk, a few hundred miles to the northeast, a more serene scene was unfolding deep in the rain forest. The Iyaelima men were seated on logs around small bonfires, rehashing the day as the women cooked dinner, and in the trees just outside their villages, a few hundred bonobos were building their nests. Unbeknownst to both, their fates were now inextricably bound. ▲

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT J. ROSS