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SILVERBACK INTENSITY

by Brian Hesse

(From *The Just Now News*, the Cowabunga newsletter)

He was straight ahead, no more than twenty feet away -- Ruhandeza, the dominant silverback gorilla of "Mubare Group". He was sitting, one huge forearm on each leg with one sizable hand folded over the other in his lap. His magnanimous eyes were fixed on three females and two infants contentedly munching on leaves. I kneeled and snapped a series of pictures. Beside me, Richard, our Naturalist/Guide, did a series of low grunts -- sounds of reassurance.

Ruhandeza shifted.

He rolled and boosted his immense weight onto almost human-like feet and powerful closed fists. Sunlight poked through the dense forest canopy and reflected off his silver back. It was like light hitting a mirror. He moved closer, to within fifteen feet. In an impressive show of strength and dexterity, he stripped bark from the trunk of a tree in one clean motion. He studied it closely, then put it in his mouth and emitted a series of deep grunts as he looked toward the females and babies. "He's checking on his group," Richard whispered.

All told, in addition to Ruhandeza, we saw six adult females, five infants, and two juvenile males. At one point, one of the adult females passed so nonchalantly close that I could not focus my camera's 200 mm lens. After an hour, Richard motioned that it was time to go. I quietly eased backward. The foliage closed in and the gorillas evaporated from view. While the time had gone all too quickly, I did not feel cheated. In fact, I felt just the opposite. I had been granted an incredible, privileged hour, one that, in contrast to some memories, might never fade in its intensity.



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