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National Wildlife Federation®

# Ranger Rick

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**BIG Tale  
of a  
LITTLE  
Gorilla**

Growing Up

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# GORILLA



**Meet a little mountain gorilla with a big world to explore.**

The group of *mountain gorillas* in the photo at **left** has settled in for a rest. Two mother gorillas hold newborn babies in their arms. Two gorilla “kids” snuggle beside them.

What’s it like to “grow up gorilla”? Those babies, safe and warm in furry hugs, will soon find out. And if you follow the little guy **above**, you’ll find out, too. Let’s call him Cahiji (gah-HEE-jee), a name from his home country of Rwanda. He hasn’t even had his first birthday yet, so he’s got lots to see, lots to do, and lots to learn.





was small and helpless when he was first born. His mom, like all gorilla mothers, was gentle and loving with her baby. **Below**, she cleans him with her mouth. **At far left**, she holds him while he sleeps.

For his first few months, Gahiji's mom carried him close to her chest while he held on tight to her hair. Now he's old enough to ride on her back, as you'll see on the **next page**.

*(Story continues on page 10.)*

### **MOUNTAIN HOME**

Gahiji lives with his family among Central Africa's Virunga (vee-ROONG-gah) volcanoes. The gorillas' home is high on the volcanoes' steep slopes in a cool, misty forest. Gahiji's thick hair helps keep him warm. He also stays close to Mom for warmth—and more.

### **MOMMY TIME**

Wherever Gahiji is, his mom is sure to be close by. He'll stay with her until he is three or four years old, sleeping in her nest at night and going everywhere she goes each day. For his first year, Gahiji's only food will be milk from Mom (**above**).

Like a human baby, Gahiji





*Thanks for the ride, Mom!  
When the gorilla family gets  
going, Gahiji catches a ride  
on his mom's strong back.*



### BATH TIME

Even wild gorillas in the forest have to get clean. But they don't always like it! **Above**, Mom wrestles with Gahiji. She wants him to sit still so she can *groom* him. **At right**, it looks as if Mom has won. She's using her fingers to pick bits of dirt and bugs out of his hair. Don't worry, little Gahiji. Soon it will be time for something more fun.

### THE GORILLAS' DAY

Mountain gorillas live in family groups led by grown-up males called *silverbacks*. (They're named for the patch of silver hair that grows on their backs as they get older.) The silverback at **far right** is Gahiji's dad.



As the leader, the silverback protects the group from danger and decides where to go each day. The gorillas usually spend the morning and afternoon moving through the forest in search of plants to eat.

Around midday, the grown-ups rest. That's the best part of the day for Gahiji and his friends. It's playtime! The lively young gorillas run, climb, and wrestle. They play games of tag, follow-the-leader, and king-of-the-mountain. Playing is fun—and together they get strong and learn to get along.

As the sun sets, each adult gorilla piles up branches to make a nest for the night. Gahiji climbs in with Mom for a good night's sleep.





### GROWING UP

Soon Gahiji, like the gorilla **above**, will be munching wild celery. He'll also eat lots of leaves, flowers, fruits, bamboo shoots, and roots. When he's full grown at age 15 or so, he'll weigh around 450 pounds (200 kg). He'll eat up to 50 pounds (23 kg) of food in a day!

Gahiji has lots of learning and growing to do before then. But every baby that grows up is important—because mountain gorillas are very endangered.

### GORILLAS IN DANGER

There are only about 700 mountain gorillas left. About half of them live among the Virunga volcanoes and half in the Bwindi (BWEEN-dee) Impenetrable National Park (see map **below left**). These parks are islands of forest surrounded by a sea of farms.

The gorillas can't survive without their forest habitat. When people turn it into cropland, it means big trouble. But this is a hard problem to solve. The people living in this area are very poor, and wars have forced many to flee to the gorillas' forest just to stay alive.

Another big threat is people who hunt gorillas illegally. They sell the meat or body parts, and they steal baby gorillas to sell as pets. Gorillas also get caught in traps set for other animals.

Luckily, people are doing a lot to help the gorillas, too. They've set aside the remaining forest in national parks. Rangers patrol the parks, removing traps and watching out for hunters. Tourists bring money to the area when they pay for the chance to see gorillas. This helps the local people and encourages them to protect the gorillas. And scientists are studying the gorillas to learn more about what they need to survive.

So hang in there, little Gahiji (**right**), and grow up strong! 🍌



BACKGROUND BY MARK GOFFREY