PRIMATE PICNIC

A DAY WITH THE CHIMPANZEES OF KIBALE FOREST, UGANDA

The chimps are somewhere, close but unseen. There is total silence in the beautiful, still forest. We must also be still, merging with our surroundings; present but not intrusive.

WORDS & IMAGES BY: MICHELLE LAWFORD

Suddenly the troop is on the move again. On foot, smashing and crashing through the forest like vandals. Some are swinging through the air, grabbing anything they can to propel themselves through the trees. Their strength is so great; they break off huge branches and vines, destroying small trees as they go. Screaming and screeching like maniacs. Tearing past us with the recklessness of a hit and run driver. Mayhem and madness. The chimp's shrill screams vibrate through every fibre of my body, sending atavistic chills up my puny human spine. Chimpanzees and people are so alike and yet so different. There is something magical and extraordinary in that.

Chimp trekking can be challenging. Since dawn, we have been trying to keep up with the troop as they cover great distances at great speed, stopping now and then for playing and eating. We've been following them for hours and now it's the hottest part of the day. Lunchtime for us, naptime for the chimps. Our small group of six sit on logs or against a tree, spread out across the forest floor, quietly eating lunch surrounded by about 30 slumbering chimps snoring and farting with wanton abandon (no surprise given they mostly eat fruit). What a symphony! The grass is so tall we can't see most of them but we sure know they are there.

Above the top of the grass I spy a raised foot being sleepily scratched, a long leg stretching up perhaps during a dream. Pairs of chimps are roused and start to check each other for fleas. You scratch my head and I'll scratch yours. Then they are overtaken by the urge to fall back to sleep. Little ones play like pre-schoolers, refusing to go down for their midday nap, disturbing their exhausted mothers who just want to sleep. This soporific soirée of primates was the perfect backdrop to our picnic.

In Indonesia, Borneo, India, Thailand and Sri Lanka – where there is frequent and unmanaged contact between humans and monkeys – I have learned to never take out food near a monkey. I have learned to keep everything, from a lens cap to earrings, out of sight and out of reach. Even from what seems a safe distance, a feat of extraordinary monkey athleticism such as a great leap or a precisely timed run-by can result in dangerous contact. Around the world, the response of monkeys to the close proximity of humans has been one of opportunism or, when frustrated, aggression. In other places, such as Bhutan where contact with humans is rare, monkeys are shy and respond by running and hiding. Chimpanzees are very big and very strong. This becomes startlingly evident when you spend the day with them and see what damage they can inflict on the forest.

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Here in Kibale, the greatest care has been taken to foster a very different kind of contact and a very different kind of response. The huge, clamorous, raucous chimps slept and showed absolutely no interest in us or our lunch. We were merely visitors: part of the Chimp Habituation Program. Yes, they had to tolerate us tagging along for the day, but that was ok as long as we didn't bother them and respected that this was their home and we were uninvited guests.

After naptime, a female with a uterus swollen to the size of a large watermelon ambled along, her ripe redness hanging down between her legs for all to see that she was in oestrus. Unsurprisingly, this aroused excited screams from the males who quickly descended upon her. Clearly overwhelmed by the attentions of so many amorous suitors, she climbed high up into the trees. The males stayed below, respecting her wishes. Apparently male chimps understand that "no" means "no". They gathered under the tree and screamed excitedly amongst themselves like frustrated young men at the local pub.

At one point, while I photographed a chimp from what I thought was the legal distance, he suddenly tore off a large chunk of a tree and waved the leafy branch at me. "He's telling you that you're too close," whispered my guide. I backed off. That was the only time I accidently entered the invisible no-go zone. The chimps however, invaded our personal space without hesitation and seemed to delight in almost crashing into us, laughing merrily as they sped off with more maniacal screams. I could almost imagine they were playing a game of 'let's see who can freak out the humans'.

I know the goal of the program is to habituate chimps to being in close proximity to humans, but by the end of a long day, the sun was setting and I was feeling quite habituated to being in close proximity to chimpanzees.

Habituation programs like this are a vital part of the future relationship between humans and wild animals. Remoteness and isolation are becoming a thing of the past. As humans continue to encroach on wild habitats, contact becomes inevitable. We have to learn to get along and share the planet. We are connected, not just by genetics but also increasingly, by proximity. It is our responsibility to ensure that this greater connection still protects and preserves what it means to be a wild animal. Habituation programs teach wild animals not to be apprehensive about human contact. In return, we must act with integrity and not allow others to exploit the trust being brokered. Since Dian Fossey and Jane Goodell stepped into the forest to observe our primate cousins, our understanding and deep connection with primates has formed a central role in our understanding of what it means to be both human AND humane. Both women followed their passion and their heart, which told them that the best scientific data could be obtained through stillness, awe and respect in the presence of wild primates.

Is it a coincidence that two women led the way? I strongly believe that as women and mothers, our humanity is based on our primal instinct to connect, protect and nurture. As adventurous women, our instincts urge us to discover the natural world, taking with us that same care and love. Historically, when men have entered the domain of wild animals, they have taken guns. I would like to think that women take a generous and responsible heart. Perhaps women are wired to approach animals with the same wonder and delight as we might experience when we look at a baby or watch our own children playing. I certainly felt it with the chimps. Research shows that many men don't necessarily have this wonder and empathy until they become fathers.

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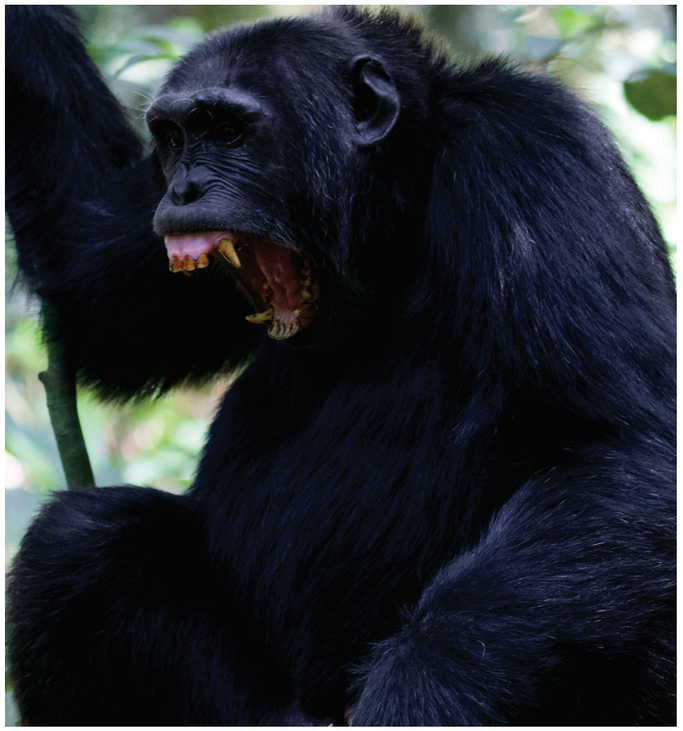
I think owning a pet also arouses the paternal instinct. Maybe pets fulfil our ancient affinity for the wild. Perhaps women and like-minded men will always be at the forefront of conservation. If we are to earn the trust of wild animals, while still retaining their wildness, we have much to do and much to learn. I'm humbled by the challenges and excited by the possibilities.



MEET **Michelle Lawford**

Michelle Lawford is a wildlife photographer, writer, adventurer and advocate for the planet. Her goal is to inspire, excite, promote awareness and action. All profits from sales of her photography are donated towards research and conservation programs that protect wildlife, habitats and support local communities living in harmony with wildlife.
www.wild-photography.com.au