

# Tales from Gombe

The chimpanzees of Tanzania's Gombe National Park are the world's most studied and most photographed mammals. Photographers **Anup Shah** and **Fiona Rogers** have just published a stunning new book documenting these extraordinary ape communities. *Wild Planet* finds out more about this epic project four years in the making...

*Interview by Keith Wilson*

A portrait of two-year-old Google, one of the approximately 90 Eastern chimpanzees that populate Gombe National Park, made famous by the studies of Jane Goodall, June 2011

Canon EOS-1D Mk IV, EF 300mm f/2.8L IS USM, ISO 800, 1/200sec at f/2.8

© Anup Shah & Fiona Rogers/ Natural History Museum



## Feature

Freud, aged 41, one of the elders of the Kasekelan community, which has been observed continuously since 1950, and the largest of Gombe's chimpanzee communities, September, 2012

Canon EOS-1D Mk IV, EF 300mm f/2.8L IS USM, ISO 800, 1/60sec at f/2.8

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*“One great advantage of photographing a wild chimpanzee is that it does not wear a mask. They have nothing to hide and are truly candid”*







**Feature**  
A juvenile male, Gimli, aged eight, rests on a fallen tree. Gombe National Park is heavily forested and fed by more than 10 rivers, which flow into Lake Tanganyika, May 2012  
CCanon EOS 5D Mk II, EF 16-35mm f/2.8L USM at 35mm, ISO 800, 1/400sec at f/2.8  
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A map of Gombe National Park, with an inset showing its position in Tanzania

**Congratulations on a very impressive book. What were your reasons for doing it?**

The photograph started in 2001 for a *National Geographic* assignment on the Gombe Chimpanzees, but after the assignment was completed, there was a break from 2004 to June 2011. However, from then on, we have been with the Gombe chimpanzees regularly for long periods of time. We realised quite quickly that a book was there. Not only do the chimpanzees lead very rich lives and have great social stories, but we thought here was also an opportunity to put faces to the characters in those stories. We thought that if we could narrate their stories with compelling photographs then a book would acquire an emotion of its own. We hope that a book would also

**“Our primate photography is done on foot and we always end up being honorary members of the group in question”**

serve as a fitting homage to these extraordinary beings.

**From inception to publication how long did it take?**

The bulk of the photography was carried over the period, June 2011 to October 2013. The text, design and production took one year then after.

**The Gombe chimpanzees are among the most studied and photographed animals**

**in history. How did their responses vary to your presence?**

Unlike the overwhelming majority of photographers who are in and out of Gombe quite quickly, we spent a lot of time with the chimpanzees, getting to know them and allowing them to get to know us. They are, as a consequence, truly relaxed in our presence. Chimpanzees have a facility for recognizing humans as well as a prodigious memory to go with that. At times we found that they were keenly observing us as well.

**The chimpanzees have a variety of character traits. Can you describe how you would try to depict an individual personality in a single image?**

One great advantage of photographing a wild chimpanzee is that it does not wear a mask. They have nothing to hide and are truly candid. A further advantage we have is the vast amount of time we spend with them, which enables us to observe their character, personality and attitude. So when we are working with a particular individual we get to see what makes up their true character, what makes them ‘them’. So when they strike a characteristic pose, or wear a characteristic expression, we are ready to capture it.





**Glitter, a 12-year-old female grooms her newborn baby, less than a week old, June 2012**

*Canon EOS-1D Mk IV, EF 300mm f/2.8L IS II USM, ISO 1600, 1/25sec at f/2.8*

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The juvenile male Siri gently takes  
michaichai fruit from the mouth  
of Faustino, a 22-year-old male  
*Canon EOS-1D Mk IV, EF 200mm f/2L  
IS USM, ISO 800, 1/2500sec at f/2*  
© Anup Shah & Fiona Rogers/ Natural History Museum

**What does Jane Goodall think of your book?**

We have sent Jane Goodall a copy of the book. However, she is a busy woman so that it is not surprising that we are still waiting for a response.

**Fiona, compared to Anup, you are relatively new to photography. Why did you make the career change to become a wildlife photographer?**

[Fiona] As you rightly point out, I haven't always worked in photography, let alone wildlife photography,

but sometimes circumstances conspire to give you new opportunities in life. My career after leaving school was banking. After working all over the country in a wide range of roles I became increasingly disillusioned and thankfully made the decision to leave well before the recent problems.

I had always been interested in photography and even considered taking up from school but things were different then and unless you had a background in art there was little encouragement or opportunity. So I ended up in a conventional career, life gets in the way,

and whilst I dabbled in photography there was no real focus or results.

However, the advent of digital cameras rekindled my interest and the opportunity to travel after leaving banking led to my taking photography seriously again. To fast forward to the present, travelling in Africa and discovering the wealth of wildlife, I was able to put it all together and here I am today. And then there were primates.... I now have a pretty niche specialism – primate photography, and within that portrait photography.

**How do you differ in your photographic style and approach?**

[Anup] *Tales from Gombe* shows our differing styles perfectly. Fiona is spellbound by faces and expressions of the chimpanzees. So, she concentrates on portraiture and studies her subject assiduously to isolate the characteristic look that she would like to capture.

[Fiona] Anup is interested in being inside the world of the chimpanzees. His approach is an immersive one whereby the viewer can feel he/she is there with him among the chimpanzees.



**How does your collaboration work in tandem?**

Our differing styles, which are at different ends of a spectrum, complement each other perfectly especially when working on in-depth projects, which is our preferred way of working. It means that joint projects are richer than they would otherwise be. It also means that on location we can often go our separate ways. Moreover, we are not at all competitive; we're always willing to help each other develop.

**Do you photograph the same subjects, or do you have different specializations?**

[Fiona] I only photograph primates. Anup also photographs the big game of the East African plains. His immersive style here is very distinctive.

**Can you describe what it's like working in the field at Gombe – the terrain, climate and conditions for getting around?**

Gombe is very hilly, bisected by over 10 rivers. The forest is dense but because there is a distinct dry season lasting for nearly half a year, it is less dense than a rainforest. To follow the chimpanzees, you need to be very fit and supple. There are trails but the chimpanzees usually ignore them. In the dry season it can get very hot but bearable. The advantage is that the humidity is manageable.

**What photo gear do you pack for a field excursion? Which is your 'go-to' lens?**

We carry a wide variety of camera lenses along with back up camera bodies (and of course, the usual electronic gear for downloading and storing the images). So, we have at hand, a choice of lenses to work with and are able to use the lens that is most appropriate for the situation. Actually, the heart and the mind are the 'go to' lens of the camera.

**All your images are made using natural light. How do you overcome the problems of low light and high humidity in the forest?**

In our experience, all wild animals dislike flash so we never use it or, for that matter, any artificial light. With digital camera technology and fast lenses, low light is a manageable problem. The real photographic problem is shafts of light that break through the forest canopy and manifest all around a dark subject. We do not shoot then! We also avoid the heavy rains so that humidity is not an issue.

**Gombe is a small national park next to Lake Tanganyika, with no room to expand. How many chimpanzees live here?**



The two infant males Google and Gizmo play fight while the rest of the G Family of chimpanzees relax in the forest, October 2011  
Canon EOS 5D Mk II, EF 16-35mm f/2.8L USM at 35mm, ISO 800, 1/160sec at f/2.8  
© Anup Shah & Fiona Rogers/ Natural History Museum

In the 1960s there were five distinct communities of chimpanzees in Gombe. Today, there are only three. The Kasekela community, which has been observed since 1950, is the biggest with membership fluctuating between 50 and 60. The Mitumba community to the north has 20-25 members and the Kalende community to the south has about 10. So, you can say that the total number of chimpanzees in Gombe National Park is 80-95. Due to

the size restrictions of the chimpanzee's range, nature manages to maintain a balance, and the numbers only fluctuate slightly.

**What are the greatest threats to their long-term survival?**

Apart from the usual threats to do with rapid human population growth and the associated drive for

development, the chimpanzees are under the short-term threat of catching human borne infections and long term threat of in-breeding since they are isolated.

**You have both extensively photographed other primates across Africa and Asia. What is the main reason for documenting these mammals?**



Frodo, the 36-year-old brother of fellow Kaseketan elder, Freud, walks down one of the many forest trails within Gombe National Park, September 2012

Canon EOS 5D Mk III, EF 16-35mm f/2.8L II USM at 35mm, ISO 800, 1/1000sec at f/2.8

© Anup Shah & Fiona Rogers/ Natural History Museum

*“Like human men, male chimpanzees are very hierarchical. Rank and deference to rank is a serious business”*

[Anup] Actually, we are not documenting primates, just indulging! As mentioned previously, Fiona only photographs primates. We are not intending to provide encyclopaedic coverage. We choose our subjects carefully based on the experience we hope to have. Our primate photography is done on foot and we always end up being honorary members of the group in question. This is extremely satisfying and an end in itself. But really, we find primates fascinating - they are so intelligent, emotional and social. We can relate to them easily.

***In what ways is chimpanzee society most***

***similar to our own? And in what ways does it most differ?***

Like human men, male chimpanzees are very hierarchical. Rank and deference to rank is a serious business. Like us, they are tribal and intolerant of neighbouring chimpanzee communities. Like us, they are competitive in foraging and mate choice and like us there is co-operation at the family level. Like us, family bonds, especially mother and son, can last a lifetime. Like us in a democracy, most are 'law' abiding and conform to social norms, but, like us, individuality is constantly breaking out. Like us, they are emotionally charged.

When it comes to difference, we think humans are fundamentally irrational in social affairs, such as acting on pride and honour, whereas the chimpanzees are very rational. For example, we believe in things we have never seen whereas it is hard to believe they would do that. We doubt if they are driven by ideology and theories and grand designs that characterize us. They are always very practical, although it is worth noting that amongst chimpanzees there is no active teaching. There exists observational learning only. Finally, the modern human is very specialized while chimpanzees have to be generalists in their own environments.

***Will you continue to visit Gombe?***

Yes, we miss the chimpanzees when we are away from them. We will take every opportunity available to visit them for, hopefully, a long, long time.

***What can we next expect from Shah Rogers Photography?***

Not sure since we have two projects that we are in the middle of, but it is taking longer than usual since we have to surpass the standard set by *Tales from Gombe*. Time will tell if we succeed.





**Infant male Gizmo peers curiously  
at the photographer's lens, May 2012**

*Canon EOS 5D Mk II, EF 16-35mm f/2.8L  
USM at 16mm, ISO 800, 1/200sec at f/2.8*

© Anup Shah & Fiona Rogers/ Natural History Museum



## Feature



**Anup Shah & Fiona Rogers** have spent much of the past 10 years specialising in photographing wild primates. Born and raised in Kenya, Anup is one of the world's most admired wildlife photographers and a multiple category winner of Wildlife Photographer of the Year. In 2013 he was one of ten photographers featured in the Natural History Museum book, *The Masters of Nature Photography*. Fiona Rogers wildlife images have been published in numerous international titles, including *National Geographic*, *Smithsonian*, *Geo*, *BBC Wildlife* and *National Wildlife*.

Anup and Fiona are dedicated to maintaining the highest ethical standards with their photography: over 95% of the images hosted on their website are of wild animals in their natural environment and do not bait any wild animals.

● <http://www.shahrogersphotography.com>



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● To order your copy, visit the Natural History Museum online shop here:

**"<http://www.nhmshop.co.uk/books/photography-books/tales-from-gombe.html>, as well as other bookshops and online stores.**

Portrait of the 20-year-old alpha male Ferdinand, in a pensive pose, October 2013

Canon EOS-1D Mk IV,  
EF 200mm f/2L IS USM,  
ISO 800, 1/200sec at f/2

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