

# Mountain Gorillas Threatened by Conflict

A different conservation challenge plagues eastern DRC. This past spring, fighting once again broke out between various rebel groups and the Congolese military, with some rebel groups “occupying” parts of Virunga National Park, home to the critically endangered mountain gorilla. As you’ll read in the story opposite this letter, thousands of people fled their homes, while many rangers and their families had to be evacuated. Still, a small but dedicated group of rangers chose to stay behind and have resumed limited patrols to locate and keep an eye on the park’s gorillas.

Conservation demands dedication: It takes rangers willing to risk their lives to protect mountain gorillas and ecologists prepared to endure days of traveling—not to mention months of isolation in the forest—to protect bonobos and other wildlife. It takes finding ways around obstacles until you find ways to overcome those obstacles.

Conservation is hard, but through dedication, adaptability, a clear mission, and of course the continued support and commitment of donors like you, we will prevail—as will Africa’s wildlife.



Virunga National Park

Rebel presence in Virunga National Park and the resulting insecurity in the region have prevented rangers from being able to conduct regular monitoring of the mountain gorillas.

## Some 200 mountain gorillas living in the Democratic Republic of Congo face uncertainty as fighting flares up in the region

**R**enewed conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) this spring saw incursions of a rebel army into Virunga National Park, raising concerns for the safety of the people and mountain gorillas that live in the area. Virunga National Park, Africa’s oldest national park, is home to approximately 200—one-quarter—of the world’s mountain gorillas.

On May 8, a rebel army estimated at 1,500 men crossed into Virunga’s Mikenko Sector, where mountain gorillas live. Their unlawful presence in this area, and subsequent sustained fighting with the Congolese Army as the rebel group known as M23, has displaced thousands of refugees.

AWF, through its partner, the International Gorilla Conservation Programme (IGCP), supports the daily monitoring of seven families of habituated mountain gorillas in DRC. While support from AWF/IGCP normally allows rangers to check on the families daily—ensuring the gorillas are free from snares and safe from poachers—park authorities had to suspend monitoring patrols early on in the conflict because of the dangers to the rangers.

Virunga National Park was able to conduct a limited gorilla monitoring operation in early August, and rangers found four of the six gorilla families—including a new baby in one of the families. “That at least four of the mountain gorilla families are safe is tremendous news, but we do remain concerned about this situation and how it will impact mountain gorilla conservation efforts in the long term,” said Craig Sholley, mountain gorilla expert and vice president for philanthropy and marketing at AWF. “Unfortunately, this is one of the challenges of working in politically unstable areas of Africa with long histories of civil unrest.” —Christine Rumion

Patrick Bergin, Ph.D.  
Chief Executive Officer

P.S. These days, being a conservationist also means being able to adapt when conditions on the ground change. As we’ve seen with the continued and relentless poaching of rhinos in South Africa—a middle-income country known for its strong wildlife management—those changes on the ground can happen in the most stable of countries. Please see our special supplement, which details the perils facing Africa’s rhinos and what you can do to help them.

**RHINOS IN PERIL**  
A SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT TO AFRICAN WILDLIFE NEWS

**THE BIG FOUR?**  
Africa wouldn't be the same without rhinos.

**GRAZERS VS. BROWSERS**

Not all rhinos are built alike, and while Africa's two species of rhinos—the white and the black—are similarly bulky, they distinguish one from the other. A mature white rhino bull is 4,500 kg (approximately 10,000 lbs) and 1.90 m (approximately 6 ft 3 in) tall. For both rhinos, their large body size means they can withstand poaching pressure and "hold" through bad weather, which is why they are considered keystone species.

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AWF's rhinos have been around for 60 million years, with the lineage of the black rhino diverging from the white rhino about two and a half million years ago. In spite of its long history, under the threat of 90 percent poach since the 1960s, the black rhino's population is reduced to about 5,000 individuals. AWF is doing its utmost to ensure the survival of one of Africa's most threatened species and keystone species.



For updates on the rebel situation in Virunga National Park, visit [awf.org/igcpsite](http://awf.org/igcpsite)