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The real Jurassic Park: Inside story of the wild zoology experiment that could have gone horribly wrong



A chimpanzee on Rubondo Island today CREDIT: ANDREW RENNEISEN

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By **Jessamy Calkin**

19 OCTOBER 2019 • 7:00AM

It was like a cross between Jurassic Park and Noah's Ark: take a cartload of animals, including chimpanzees, elephants and giraffes, leave them on a remote island in Africa and see what happens. Five decades on, Jessamy Calkin travels to Rubondo Island to see how things worked out

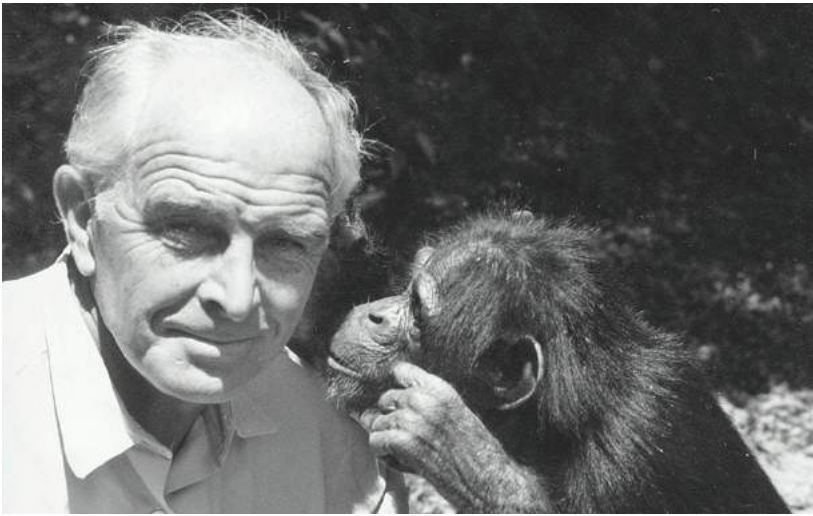
Viewed from the air, Rubondo Island (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/safaris-and-wildlife/Five-great-new-safari-experiences/>) is so supernaturally green that it looks like a cartoon. A thickly forested atoll sitting in the vast expanse of Lake Victoria (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/lists/best-lake-escapes/>), the island is little known, but in 1966 it became the setting for an audacious experiment, the initiative of an eccentric German conservationist named Professor Bernhard Grzimek.

Grzimek was well known for raising the profile of African conservation and wrote several books, one of which – Serengeti Shall Not Die – became an Oscar-winning film. He was also mad about chimpanzees – he had fostered several in his home, undaunted by their unpredictable temperament. ‘A zoo director of my acquaintance had his kneecap half torn out when a male chimpanzee flew into a fit of rage, and another had both thumbs bitten off,’ he wrote cheerfully in *Among the Animals of Africa*.

Having visited Rubondo Island, he deemed it a perfect setting for his plan: 135 square miles, heavily forested but free of predators, with only a few species of indigenous mammals and no inhabitants – the island had just been cleared of its population and declared a game reserve by Tanzania’s new socialist government.

In 1966, Grzimek took 10 chimpanzees and released them on to the island. The chimps – seven females and three males, one of which was little more than a baby – had been donated by European zoos and travelled to the island in crates, singly or in pairs because they didn't know each other.

The idea was based in conservation. Chimps were in decline as their habitat was being invaded, and it was predicted that they would soon also be threatened by the new but increasing demand for organs, as they are our closest biological relatives – sharing 96 per cent of our DNA. Grzimek, who was director of Frankfurt Zoological Society (<https://fzs.org/en/>) for more than 40 years, was passionate about the project. But no research had been done as to how the chimps would take to the island and whether the vegetation was suitable; they had been brought from west Africa as babies, but had lived most of their lives in zoos.



Professor Bernhard Grzimek in 1965 CREDIT: OKAPIA GEKAUFT

Still, Rubondo looked like a promising refuge. Deserted banana groves left by previous inhabitants promised food. The isolated location of the island discouraged poaching, and there was also potential for tourism: Grzimek wanted to ‘render assistance not only to animals but also to a poor but dynamic new country which does a great deal for its wildlife’.

After a fairly arduous journey, the crates were unloaded and positioned close to the water so that their sliding hatches could be pulled open with ropes from the lake (some of the chimps were aggressive). The results were mixed: one female ran straight into the forest, a few lurked about uncertainly, one wouldn't get out of its cage at all, and the baby clung to Grzimek's legs. But by later that afternoon, all the chimps had vanished into their new home.

The following year, seven more chimps were imported, including an unpredictable male called Jimmy who ended up being shot by one of the resident game rangers after he repeatedly broke into their camp and attacked them.



The chimp release on Rubondo Island in 1966 CREDIT: OKAPIA KG, GERMANY

And, in a sort of aberration of Noah's ark, other animals were also sent to Rubondo: 12 giraffes, 16 rhinos, 20 colobus monkeys, some roan antelope and, in 1973, six elephants.

The experiment had begun.

In November last year, I disembarked from a tiny plane at Rubondo's 'airport' – a neatly thatched hut in a field. 'Welcome to Jurassic Park,' said Mercedes Bailey, my host, the PR director of [Asilia Africa](https://www.asiliaafrica.com/) (<https://www.asiliaafrica.com/>). Asilia – an adventurous tour operator based in Tanzania – came to Rubondo in 2013 under the initiative of its Managing Director, Jeroen Harderwijk. He realised the potential for unusual tourism and chimp habituation (inuring them to human presence), and has bankrolled the project ever since: to date Asilia has invested \$500,000. The tourists' participation has become part of the habituation process.



Hamza Visram, Northern Tanzania's head guide at Asilia CREDIT: ANDREW RENNEISEN

There are now about 60 chimps on Rubondo, and amazingly they have formed their own social structure and settled into two distinct troupes, colonising different ends of the island, one in the south and one in the north. 'It's the only place in the world where chimpanzees have been reintroduced into the wild, become entirely independent from humans, and thrived,' says Charles Runnette, an American documentary-maker whose film about the island will be premiered at the Berlin Film Festival next year.

The northern troupe are observed and monitored daily by a team of rangers (the southern chimps are loosely monitored but totally wild). But it has taken years of persistence and dedication for the chimps not to flee. Habituation has been done successfully with gorillas in Uganda, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, but chimps present a harder challenge, mainly because they are permanently on the move.

The other animals imported to Rubondo have not fared quite so well. The rhinos have long since been poached, and the elephants, which now number more than 100, are aggressive and odd, most likely the result of inbreeding: they all descend from the original stock of six. Physiologically they have adapted to living in the forest, even though they are not forest elephants. The giraffes are flourishing, but they too have had to adapt. They are Masai giraffe, normally quite dark - but the Rubondo giraffe are paler because they don't see much sun in the jungle, and taller because they have to reach higher for their food, so enormous are the trees.



Trackers looking for chimps on the island CREDIT: ANDREW RENNEISEN

Asilia's camp consists of eight thatched cottages set back from the water and a large open dining room and sitting area, overlooked by giant ficus trees. It could be a sublime honeymoon paradise were it not for the sign that says, 'Danger! Crocodiles and Hippos. No Swimming.'

Lake Victoria is full of crocodiles, which in the days when people lived on the island were not much of a threat, because there weren't so many of them. Now it's a different matter. There are also more than 200 types of birds here, including a high density of fish eagles, and another recently introduced species: African grey parrots, found nowhere else in Tanzania. But I am eager to see the chimps.

It works like this: a team of resident rangers go out early every morning to look for them at various 'calling' points - not easy in 135 square miles - and communicate by phone or walkie-talkie, then when (if) they hear them, they find them and follow them all day. The idea is that we will head off as soon as we're contacted and just hope that the chimps don't move too fast.



Rotiken Ngorien, a ranger with the Tanzania National Parks Authority, at a chimpanzee calling point on Rubondo Island CREDIT: ANDREW RENNEISEN

We set out in an open Land Rover driven by Hamza Visram, Asilia's head guide, and pick up Rotiken Ngorien, one of the Tanzanian National Park rangers, along the way. A Dad's Army sort of character, he carries a 1909 Mauser rifle, with a shoelace attaching it to a shoulder strap. The roads are terrible but the landscape is enchanting: a messy feast of green with huge gnarly ficus trees festooned with strangler figs, date palms and hanging liana vines everywhere. It's like an episode of *Lost* drafted by Arthur Rackham.

There are not many animals visible – occasionally a sitatunga (antelope) darts out of the way, and we stop several times to admire large monitor lizards lounging on the rocks. Fresh dung indicates that we may be close to the elephants, and there is an air of anticipation. Visram tells us that it is possible to negotiate with an elephant; it was one of the tests he took to become a ranger. He had to confront a young bull and get it to back down. There are, he says, only three animals that you can't negotiate with: leopards, buffalo and hippos.

Shortly afterwards we pass a vast elephant in a clump of trees, but he seems uninterested in striking a deal. Visram points out the physical differences. These elephants are bulkier, wide-bodied and taller; their tusks are short and fat and widely spaced. The changes are not particularly obvious to the untrained eye, but it's remarkable, says Visram, that they have occurred so quickly.



Rotiken CREDIT: ANDREW RENNEISEN

It is grey and overcast and there is no sign of the chimps. But in the south of the island, which has an entirely different kind of climate, we spot two giraffes, perfectly still and beautifully arranged in a sort of symmetrical tableau. There are now thought to be fewer giraffes than elephants in Africa. One reason for this is poaching – their tails are considered a status symbol in some countries and used as wedding gifts.

The following day the call comes at 8am: the chimps have finally been heard somewhere in the north and we make our way to the highest point of the island, and wait to be summoned. And wait. ‘The only safari where you need to take a book,’ says Visram drily. Rotiken tells us how he was once hit by a stone thrown by a chimp sitting in the custard apple tree nearby, miffed at not being noticed.

Visram gives us a lesson in dung beetles as we watch a couple roll their prize – a golf-ball-sized piece of dung – over very difficult terrain, rocking and rolling as if they’re moving a piano. Then the walkie-talkie crackles with an exact location – ‘Sokwe!’ (Swahili for chimp) – and we rush back down to the car and drive to the edge of the jungle. Scrambling up steeply wooded muddy slopes, we pass plenty of empty chimp nests – they each build a new one every evening to sleep in – and we can hear them in the distance, chattering and shrieking. Then, out of nowhere, a huge crack of thunder and a massive rainstorm ensues.



The paler-than-normal giraffes CREDIT: ANDREW RENNEISEN

We stand miserably beneath the trees, rain coming down in sheets. The chimps hate thunder and they disappear. When the storm abates, we move to higher ground and resume waiting: Visram shows me photos of his children on his phone. Rotken shows me a picture of his cow. Then we are dive-bombed by giant grasshoppers and circled by yellow-billed kites. I get stung by a bee. And we give up.

It is very unusual, I keep being told, not to see the chimps at all. Charles Runnette had plenty of sightings when he was making the film, but they were brief. ‘In our various experiences the chimps never stuck around for longer than 10 minutes,’ he says.

‘And they always knew exactly where we were. Only twice did they shut their eyes and rest around us. One curious baby walked towards us for a minute before the mother snatched him away. They only let us close when they were tired of walking or when their curiosity got the better of them.’

Chimpanzee Trekking - Rubondo Island, Asili...



Bailey is optimistic. Only last week a Dutch couple had watched the chimps for two hours, until they got bored. I could not imagine getting bored of seeing the chimps, only bored of not seeing them. And the previous week, two academics from Oxford had been there and also seen the chimps, on their first attempt. They were very happy, she says. They were mating.

The academics were mating?

‘No! The chimps were mating.’ It turns out that although chimps refuse to build their nests if anyone is watching, they have no compunction about having sex in public.



Chimpanzee trackers with the Tanzania National Parks Authority take a lunch break on Rubondo Island CREDIT: ANDREW RENNEISEN

Sunrise on our last day. Eight patient egrets line up on the shore outside in perfect symmetry, waiting for their breakfast to materialise. The chimps have been heard in the Kaseney area, and so off we go. It's been raining and smells delicious. Butterflies are copulating and the roads are worse than ever. We pick up Rotiken and his pet gun and transfer by boat – pausing only to inspect the biggest crocodile I've ever seen, which heaves itself malevolently into the water from the sandy beach.

At the entrance to the forest we begin a very steep climb through the trees, liana vines hanging down perilously, waiting to snare an inattentive human. I keep my eyes on the ground at all times to avoid tripping over roots; Visram walks in front of me chivalrously holding foliage aside, and a guide called Isaac cheerfully brings up the rear. After what seems like hours, we hear some loud shrieks – and meet up with the rangers, who usher us through the last patch of thick jungle. ‘Sssh,’ says Visram. ‘Sokwe!’

He pushes me up a steep muddy slope, topped by a grassy ridge. I peer through the vines. Nothing. Then suddenly a hairy face on the ridge. It vanishes almost immediately

and then comes back, curious. We stare at each other. My first chimp. I like to think something passes between us, some flash of recognition before it scurries off. We then spend half an hour chasing around catching glimpses of the others - a mother with her baby, a couple of rowdy youngsters.

Then suddenly there is a cacophony of screeching, an unearthly noise: the sound of chimps hunting. When we catch up with them they are tearing apart a bloody hunk of something, then race past us clutching scraps of meat. Up in the trees a couple of chimps are eating leaves along with the flesh, to help their digestion: meat and two veg. When one of the rangers examines the remains, a tiny ribcage reveals it to have been a baby sitatunga. It was a vivid, fleeting encounter, like a chaotic glimpse of human nature.



Giraffe are number of non-native species that were introduced to the island CREDIT: ANDREW RENNEISEN

There is a darker side to the story of Rubondo Island, which I learn later that evening. In December 1963, everyone was given six months to leave. The islanders, who had made their living by fishing or from banana groves, were sent to the mainland or other islands with no compensation.

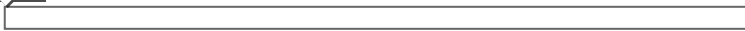
David Tibanywana, a retired schoolteacher whose nephew Emmanuel works for Asilia, remembers that time very well. 'We were ordered to leave,' he says from his house in the village of Mwanza, on the mainland. 'They gave us six months. We had to go to neighbouring islands or the mainland. Everybody was very shocked. We had to leave everything behind. People were growing bananas and cassava, sorghum - some had mango trees, orange trees and some were keeping bees and had hives - but they had to leave everything behind to start a new life. That's the way it was: my mother and father died in extreme poverty.'



Rubondo Island Teaser

from **Charles Runnette**

01:11



Rubondo Island Teaser (<https://vimeo.com/367284486>) from **Charles Runnette** (<https://vimeo.com/makemakefilms>) on **Vimeo** (<https://vimeo.com>).

The inhabitants were told that if they didn't leave, their houses would be burnt, but one old couple stayed. They hid in a cave in the south of the island, and were found as skeletons years later, their arms entwined around each other. Visram takes us to the cave; amazingly their bones are still there.

There is an irony to all this – an island cleared of its population to make way for chimps being reintroduced to Africa. It was not Grzimek's initiative to remove the people. 'But there's every reason to believe that he would have been aware of the plan,' says Runnette. 'He loved chimps but did not have a high regard for humans. He was an interesting character. He just did things without permission, as people did in that era. It's remarkable that he was allowed to do it, but it's even more remarkable that it worked.'



A chimpanzee tracking expedition CREDIT: ANDREW RENNEISEN

Overall, the experiment has been a success. ‘It was such a visionary thing to do,’ says Dr Carlos Drews, of global conservation organisation the Jane Goodall Institute. ‘Today there is great concern about the well-being of chimpanzees worldwide – the vast majority of captive chimps are in miserable conditions and what Grzimek did was very bold. But chimps are socially sophisticated and the fact that they had been living in captivity posed the question about whether they could survive without the assistance of human beings.’

Chimps also have different habits according to their origin. ‘There are dozens of examples – the chimps in Gombe fish for termites with sticks. Elsewhere they do spearfishing. Some use rocks to break nuts, but in other places they don’t, despite the fact you find the same nuts and the same rocks. As for the Rubondo chimps, the more habituated they are, the better for studying – it’s invaluable for research purposes.’

Bernhard Grzimek was lauded for his conservation work in Tanzania, but few people have heard of the chimps of Rubondo Island, and it could be his greatest legacy.

An eight night Tanzania flying safari with [Asilia](http://www.asiliaafrica.com) including three nights on Rubondo Island starts at US\$7,480 based on two people sharing and includes all accommodation, safari activities and internal flights from Kilimajaro

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