

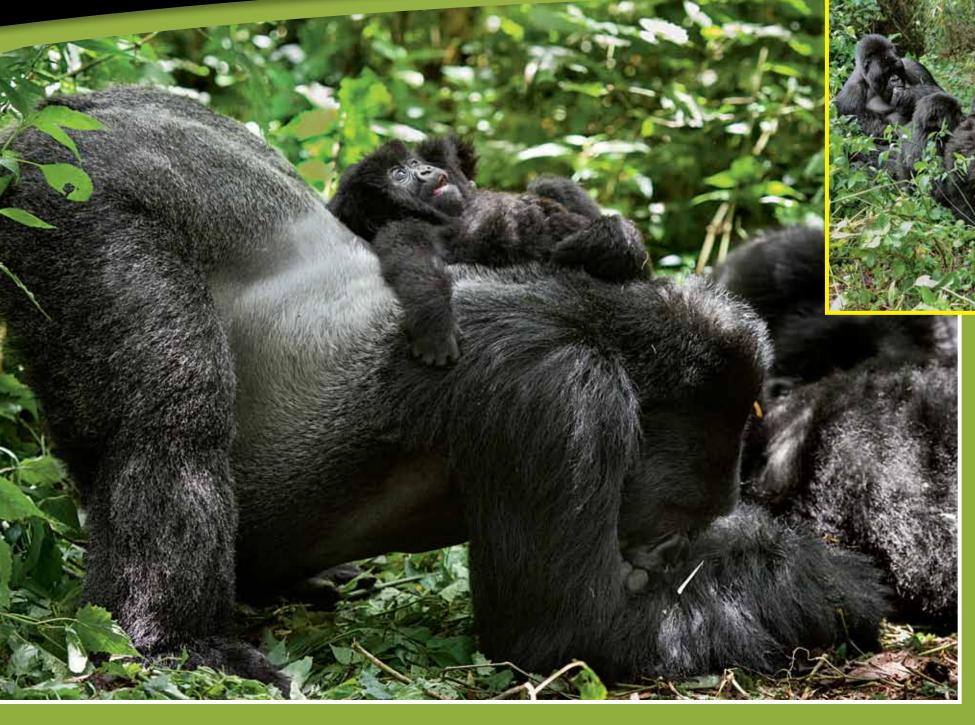


BY HANNAH SCHARDT; PHOTOS BY SUZI ESZTERHAS

The birth of a rare baby gorilla is always a reason to celebrate. What's two times as exciting? Gorilla twins!

It's a cold, drizzly day in the mountains of Rwanda, a country in Africa. A mother *mountain gorilla* hunkers down in a clearing. Her arms are wrapped around a precious bundle. But what's this, snuggled deep in Mama's fuzzy hug? Not one baby gorilla, but two!

This lucky mom, called Kabatwa (kah-BOT-wah), gave birth to twin boys, Isango (ih-SAHN-go) and Isangano (ih-SAHN-guh-no). In the photo at **left**, the babies are only five months old. They depend on their mom for everything—food, warmth, and protection—and spend most of their time nestled against her chest. But in another year, Isango and Isangano become the frisky, playful toddlers **above**. And then they're double trouble!



Break time! Moms and youngsters from the family group hang out together after a busy morning of searching for food (left). To the playful, young gorillas below, their vine-filled forest home is like a giant swing set.

Above, Dad makes a great jungle gym! He tries to rest while Isango rolls around on his back.

## **FAMILY LIFE**

The twins and their mom live together in a family group led by a *silverback*. That's a big, grown-up male named

for the silvery hairs on his back. There are several adult females in the group, but the silverback is usually the dad of all the babies.

Isango and Isangano's dad, Munyinya (moon-YIN-yah) is huge. He's more than 6 feet tall, weighs 450 pounds, and is very strong. He

will fight off anything that threatens his family: humans, leopards, or other gorillas. But with his kids, he's an old softie.

The group spends each morning and afternoon roaming the forest in search of food—mostly leaves and tender plant shoots. Around noon, the grownups settle down to take a break. For the youngsters, that means it's time to play! They wrestle, chase, climb, and swing from vine to vine—always under the watchful eyes of their moms. Sometimes the moms and even the silverback dad may join in the fun, though adult mountain gorillas usually stay on the ground. Their big bodies are too heavy for swinging on vines.



Nyah-nyah, look who doesn't have to walk! When they aren't hitching a ride on Mom's back (right), the twins spend time playing and romping through the forest (below).

## MAMA'S BOYS

Munyinya protects and plays with his youngsters. But it's Kabatwa who cares for them around the clock. Newborn gorillas are helpless and tiny only about five pounds each. For the first year of their lives, the twins' only food is Kabatwa's milk. And they will stick close by her for even longer, sleeping with her each night in a leafy nest on the ground until they are three or four years old. With growing twins and a 250-pound mom, that's

a very crowded nest!

Gorilla moms sometimes take their babies off to a quiet place so both mom and baby can rest undisturbed. But that's not possible for poor Kabatwa! No matter where she takes her twins, each always has a playmate. So Kabatwa doesn't get much rest.

## **DANGER AHEAD**

Mountain gorilla babies aren't just cute. They're a really big deal to people who want to save the species. That's because mountain gorillas are highly endangered. Only about 880 of them still live in the wild. Some people kill gorillas, even though it's against the law. Sometimes gorillas are caught in traps set for other animals. And people cut down gorilla habitat to build houses or plant crops.

Also, mountain gorilla moms give birth only about once every four years, so the population grows very slowly. That's why every gorilla baby is great, but twins are *two-riffic!* 

Even when little Isango and Isangano go exploring, they are never far from Mom—or each other (above).

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