

Manchester Magazine™

Gorillas In Her Midst

LOCAL PROFESSOR
MICHELE GOLDSMITH'S
AFRICAN ADVENTURES



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Michele Goldsmith, In Our Midst

A gorilla expert changes lives

BY DIANE LES BECQUETS

MICHELE GOLDSMITH HAS PUSHED HER WAY through the thick jungles of the Congo Basin and Uganda. She has suffered repeated bouts of malaria, one episode almost taking her life. She has stood her ground against the bluffs of gorillas roaring and beating their chests, slept in rainforests amid elephant invasions, had friends gored by buffalo and burnt alive by Rwandan Hutu rebels, and she has withstood the threats of poachers and middle-of-the-night vandals. Goldsmith is a behavioral ecologist who has spent sixteen years studying Western lowland gorillas and mountain gorillas, making a marked and historical distinction between the two, and she resides in our own backyard.

This past fall Goldsmith joined Southern New Hampshire University as an associate professor. She settled into an office next to mine, carrying with her bright prints from Africa, woven cloths, gorilla lamps, and numerous certificates and diplomas, including a Fulbright scholarship. I understood that in many ways this attractive, petite blonde was a successor of Dian Fossey, but I didn't know the full breadth of her research or the extent of the threats she had endured to pursue her mission, a life-calling upon which she believes so passionately.

But where did this passion come from? And why would a woman who spent her formative years on Long Island feel so responsible for a species of mammals living in the wilds on another continent? Goldsmith says she was a "closet geek," as a young person, a tomboy who played sports, played in the dirt, and rescued animals. But her attempts to save animals sometimes left her disappointed in people. The kittens she'd given to a church were abandoned in the street, and the dog that used to wait for her beneath her bedroom window was hit by a car. Perhaps even then, as a child, Goldsmith's life path was being defined.

Finding her way

After high school Goldsmith attended Plattsburgh State University with the intention of preparing for veterinary school. But this choice was an eye opener, as would be other choices she'd make along the way. "Inside the lab the frogs are screaming," she wrote on her application essay for her graduate studies. She could not handle pithing frogs (a certain way of killing them) or euthanizing animals that she cared for. She switched her focus to animal behavior, with a major in psychology and biology. "I learned there was a way to work with animals without being invasive," she says.

Another pivotal point for Goldsmith while attending Plattsburgh was meeting Dian Fossey, who presented a lecture at the university about her interaction with gorillas and her special relationship with one gorilla in particular, Digit. "Her last slide was a picture of Digit with his hands, head, and feet cut off," Goldsmith says. "I balled my eyes out."

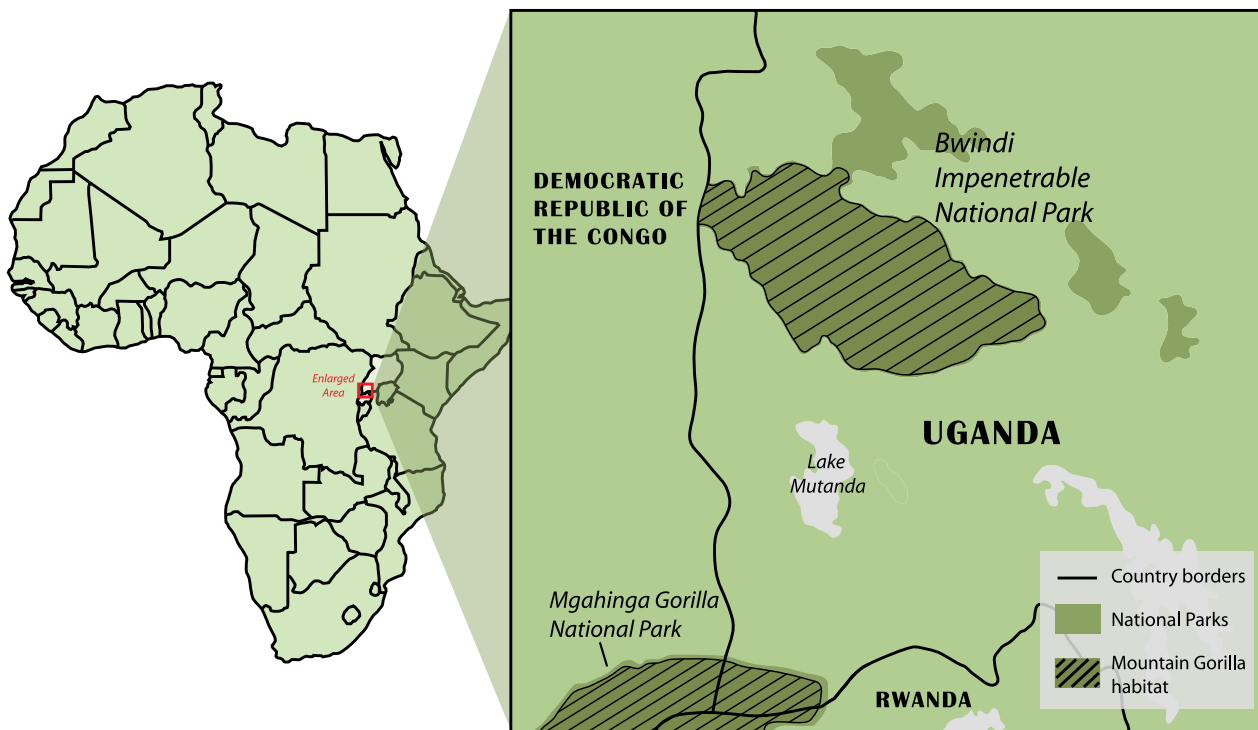
After completing her coursework for her doctoral degree at Stony Brook University, Goldsmith was awarded a Fulbright scholarship, as well as a research fellowship from The Wildlife Conservation Society and a grant from the Leakey Foundation. These awards allowed her to conduct her field study in the Congo Basin of the Central African Republic. "Scientists thought we knew everything there was to know about the Western lowland gorillas," Goldsmith says. "We knew nothing." She explains that what people understood about gorillas was based upon the mountain gorillas that Fossey had studied, of which there are about 320 individuals, and yet the population of the Western lowland gorillas consists of approximately 150,000 individuals.

Goldsmith set out to study how the availability and distribution of food influenced the Western lowland gorillas and their natural behaviors, though she would not interact with them as Fossey had with the mountain gorillas, because Goldsmith did not want to disrupt their natural behaviors. She determined the size of their groups by how many nests they left behind, the size and sex of the animals based on their dung diameter, what they ate, and how far they traveled each day. She discovered that the Western lowland gorillas are different from the mountain gorillas in almost every way: they travel greater distances, have different diets, and in fact are more similar to chimpanzees than to mountain gorillas. "We needed to rewrite the textbooks," Goldsmith says.





COURTESY OF MICHELE GOLDSMITH



Back to Africa


After almost losing her life as a result of cerebral malaria in 1995, Goldsmith promised to never return to Africa. Yet her sense of purpose and passion was renewed. In 1996, while working as a *National Geographic* researcher, she traveled to Uganda to study mountain gorillas. Though she had been interested in following up with her comparative work of how the availability and distribution of food affected behaviors, her study changed when she realized how heavily habituated the mountain gorillas were to humans as a result of tourism. She decided to look at how this habituation was influencing the gorillas' ecology, health, and wellbeing. Goldsmith was quick to recognize that the mountain gorillas were being sacrificed so that people could make money. The gorillas were contracting diseases because of their contact with human beings (one infectious disease from human dung can wipe out an entire population of gorillas). They were emerging from the forests and invading farmers' crops. They were fighting with the farmers. Members of conservation groups were chasing the gorillas back into the forests. "The presence and influence of humans has greatly altered the gorillas' natural behaviors and influenced their health," Goldsmith says.

Goldsmith completed her research with *National Geographic* in 2006, but that hasn't stopped her efforts: she returns to

Uganda this summer on a grant from Southern New Hampshire University. She says the benefits of her work are personally and professionally one and the same. She has gained a unique appreciation and understanding for the animals, and this respect for the gorillas and their environment is something she would like to see experienced by her students. "I'd like to motivate my students to think globally," Goldsmith says, "to think about their own impacts on the environment, and I'd like to educate people as to what is going on."

Changing lives

Goldsmith already has made a difference. The textbooks are being rewritten; in fact Goldsmith has co-edited the scholarly text *Gorilla Biology: A Multidisciplinary Perspective*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2003. The mindsets of students are being transformed. After returning to my office after teaching a class one day, I saw a note from a student taped to my colleague's door: "Thank you for changing my life."

Goldsmith says her study in Africa was hard, but also one of the "more peaceful times" in her life. Yet as I watch the students going in and out of her office, and as I pick up threads of her lectures as I pass down a hallway, I imagine the deeper world of understanding that she is recreating right here, in our midst. 



COURTESY OF MICHELE GOLDSMITH