

The zoo files

GREAT APES

From Melbourne Zoo's family troop to Werribee Open Range Zoo's bachelor group, let's explore the social dynamics of Western Lowland Gorillas.

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Pictured: Kanzi, one of Melbourne Zoo's female Western Lowland Gorillas.

Puzzle feeders are a form of enrichment.

YAKINI

"They like listening to music – we usually get a lot of pleasure grumbles when we put on Michael Bublé."

LAURA

African River Trail Keeper,
Werribee Open
Range Zoo

It may sound menacing, but the growl that gorillas make is called a "pleasure grumble". They might do it when breakfast is coming, when they want to communicate with each other – or even when their keepers pop on some easy-listening music.

"They're a vocal bunch," says Werribee Open Range Zoo's African River Trail Keeper, Laura. "The pleasure grumble sounds similar to a dog growl, but it's incredibly positive. For our boys, it's often associated with food. And they really like listening to music – we usually get a lot of pleasure grumbles when we put on Michael Bublé."

While Melbourne Zoo is home to a family of three Western Lowland Gorillas – dad Otana, mum Kimya and daughter Kanzi – Werribee has three bachelors: silverback Motaba and his two sons, Yakini and Ganyeka.

"Family groups can only tolerate one dominant male. If you have too many, there's too much testosterone and competition for the females. In a family group, [the male kids] have to move off once they reach maturity – so you end up with all these extra males floating around with nowhere to go so they form bachelor groups, which is what we have at Werribee."

THEY'RE CALLING ON YOU

Critically Endangered Western Lowland Gorillas are threatened by habitat loss from logging and mining for coltan, a mineral used to make mobile phones. They are also susceptible to many human diseases, including COVID-19 and Ebola. "Mining not only clears forest they need as their homes," says Primate Keeper Mia, "but it also allows more paths for disease to come in from humans, and potentially poachers as well." With Zoos Victoria's They're Calling on You campaign, you can recycle your old mobile phone at our zoos and the funds go to Gorilla Doctors, which monitors the health of these magnificent animals in the wild.

The Werribee bachelor pad

When the trio was moved to Werribee, 40-year-old Motaba – who has fathered five gorillas as part of an international breeding program – was the leader, but 200kg Yakini soon overthrew his father. "It's all about who's the biggest and the strongest – and you have to show off that strength to assert your dominance," explains Laura.

It's called "displaying": they puff themselves up, stand on two legs and beat their chest, and charge past each other. Ganyeka, who turns 24 in April, will occasionally throw his weight around but doesn't stand a chance: "Yakini has about 30 kilos on Ganyeka," says Laura. "You can almost see him roll his eyes at Ganyeka."

Yakini, also 24, usually leaves the others alone, but if they're eating food he wants, he'll take it. If they're sitting in his favourite spot, he'll take that too. Still, Laura describes him as a "gentle giant" who giggles often and sings an excited "food song" when dinner is on the way.

"Ganyeka, on the other hand, is our little troublemaker," says Laura. "He's in the middle of the hierarchy, so he has the sweetest life – he doesn't have to worry about being in charge or being on the bottom. So he's cheeky and keeps us on our toes."

Motaba is slow and quiet, but can be feisty, especially when he's hungry. "He's just an old soul," says Laura. "He likes classical music as opposed to Michael Bublé."



Gorillas enjoy hanging tyres, hammocks and hoops.



GANYEKA

The Werribee bachelor pad is modelled on the African forests where Western Lowland Gorillas live in the wild. There are plenty of trees, plus hanging tyres, hammocks and three separate shelters. The three bachelors spread themselves out across the enclosure and generally keep to themselves. "They're pretty happy eating, sleeping and essentially co-existing," says Laura.

Keeping it in the family

In contrast, Melbourne Zoo's gorilla family moves about as a unit, with 22-year-old Otana calling the shots. "He'll determine where the group will go," says Primate Keeper Mia. "If he goes outside, the girls will follow him." Kimya, 18, keeps a constant eye on eight-year-old daughter Kanzi. The pair groom each other and play together. "Otana will do some chasing, but the girls do more play-wrestling and tickling," says Mia. "Kanzi often tries to engage her parents in play – she'll touch them as she runs past – but adults are not as playful as kids."

Fed a minimum of three times a day, the family eats 32kg of leafy greens, including lettuce, spinach and silverbeet, as well as browse (tree leaves and bark) and a variety of other vegetables, such as carrots, capsicum and sweet potato, to ensure all their nutritional needs are met. "We might do a scatter feed and that allows them to do natural foraging," says Mia. "That gets them active and moving."

Food for thought

Food is also used for mental stimulation through the use of puzzle feeders. "A lot of enrichment items have holes in them – it might be a big barrel or ball – and they'll have to manipulate that to get the food out," says Mia. "They can use tools like sticks or their fingers – whatever they believe is the best way."

Training time calls for favourite foods – treats like nutrient-rich primate pellets and dried fruit. At Werribee, the bachelors are taught to present body parts, such as their shoulders, for injections, and to accept ultrasounds of their chest.

The gorillas also take part in sensory activities. "Ganyeka loves different textures, so he likes putting his hands in bubbles and playing with them," says Laura. "They also like moving paint around on the floor – just playing with those textures."

Laura never stops marvelling at their intelligence: "The way they solve problems is amazing!" she says. **ZN**



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