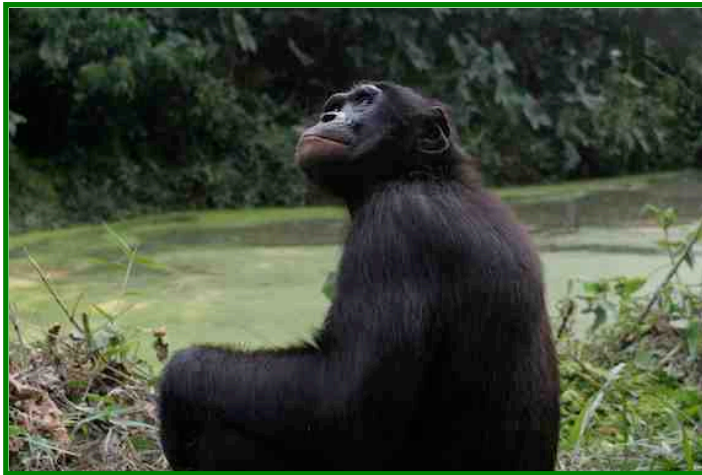


★ ★ ★ Planete Bonobo ★ ★ ★

Tatango keeps escaping



Our star athlete is in full training mode! But his escapes have become more frequent and disruptive, making visits to the sanctuary virtually impossible, in particular the school visits so cherished by Pierrot and Blaise.

Tatango and Pierrot are engaged in a battle of wills, neither showing any mercy. Pierrot refuses to accept defeat, exclaiming: "No matter how large he is, he is still the ape... and I am the human! The victory will be mine!"

No sooner said than done. Careful surveillance exposes Tatango's escape strategies: He leans fallen tree trunks against the fence posts, thus avoiding electric shocks. "This is too much!" sighs an indignant Pierrot. "I had already cut down trees likely to aid his escape; this time, I'll have every fallen trunk removed!"



Operation Big Clean-Up with our villagers...

Alas, the very next day Tatango is back outside, threatening every human male he encounters.

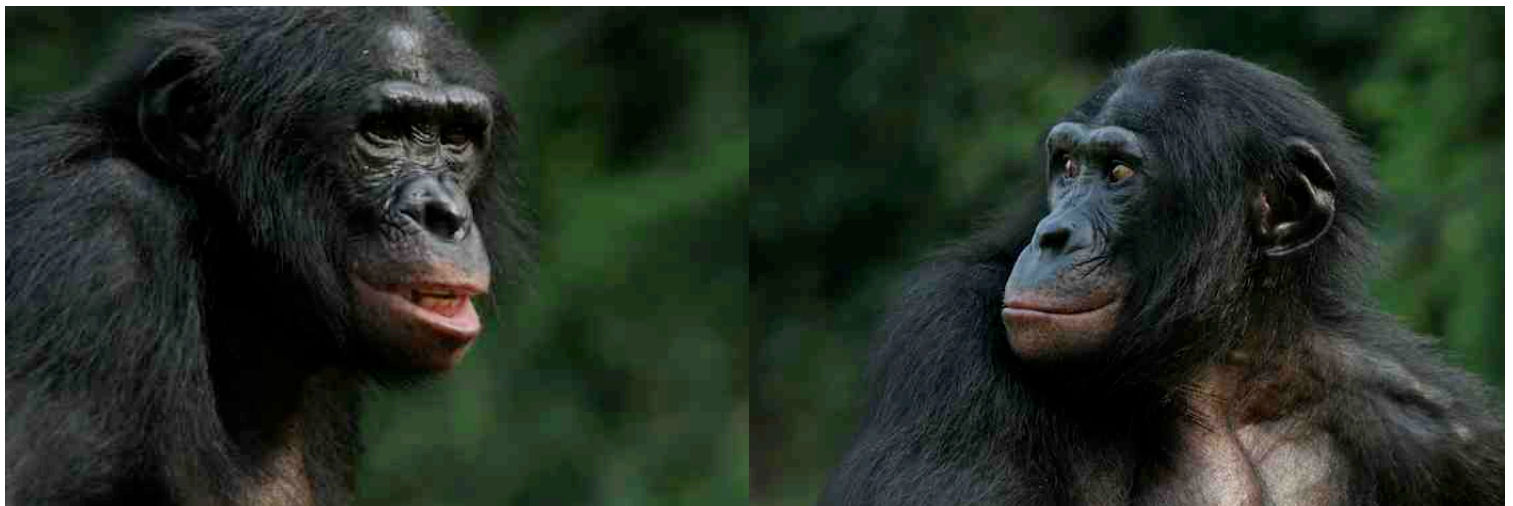


We position guards around the sanctuary to figure out his new strategy. "He's going over the little bridge at the so-called Musketeers crossroads!" This one has an easier fix, says Pierrot: additional electric wires and a reinforced trellis. And yet, there is Tatango, out again!

Pierrot is on the hunt for yet another strategy....

But what is our beautiful Tatango seeking so desperately outside? The females gone for the reintroduction? Which one? Etumbe? Lisala? Or sweet Lukaya?

In any case we, the mamas of the sanctuary, are not-so-secretly coming to the conclusion that Tatango has seized the advantage and is close to winning the war against Pierrot! (But please, don't tell him we said so! To be continued...)



Tatango's Death

The following chapter is far more tragic: Tatango's next escape was to be his last. Vengeance of a destiny protecting Lola and its peace? Or an evil hand? Our most beautiful male, the most rebellious admittedly, but with a gaze as soft as satin, is found one morning in the night shelter where we had isolated him for the weekend, vomiting blood and twisted by abdominal cramps.

Despite the best care provided by Fanny Mehl, our new Vet, assisted by advice from Veterinary Doctor Serge Belais in Paris and our own (human) internist Dr Kasongo, on August 2nd Tatango died. Toxicology analysis revealed nothing to help us come to terms with what remains a terrible mystery, a dark unknown that continues to eat away at me.

Suddenly I feel the weight of a year of heavy burdens: the death of Mimia, of my sister, the reintroduction process with all the stress and strong emotions it entailed. And today, the death of my beautiful "Hildago" leaves me K.O.

But it's not yet time for a break: life goes on, and as Mama Henriette puts it so well: "At Lola, we always move forward."

Two new little males

For every orphan we welcome at Lola, we can't help but think that part of a free bonobo family was once again turned into dried meat. Yet at the same time the comfort we provide to a little orphan never fails to bring us happiness. What joy it is to follow the progress of their physical and, especially, psychological rehabilitation!

The arrival of two beautiful little 2-year-old males sets our hearts right and the mamas who are still mourning for Tatango once again resume singing their songs. (After all, it was always the mamas, as well as Anne-Marie and Clémence from our health team, who would manage to put Tatango back on the right path, or at least back into the enclosure. They will not forget him so quickly.)

The two little bonobos come from the Wildlife Reserve of Lomako.

The Ministry of Environment Provincial Coordinator and the national police seized the one we will call "Lomako" and brought him to the ABC office in Basankusu.





Meanwhile, a man turned up at our reintroduction camp in Elonda village to find Suzy, the Congolese biologist responsible for the reintroduction program. He had with him a second little male, most likely Lomoko's brother of misfortune. This one will be called "Kodoro," after a little village from around here.

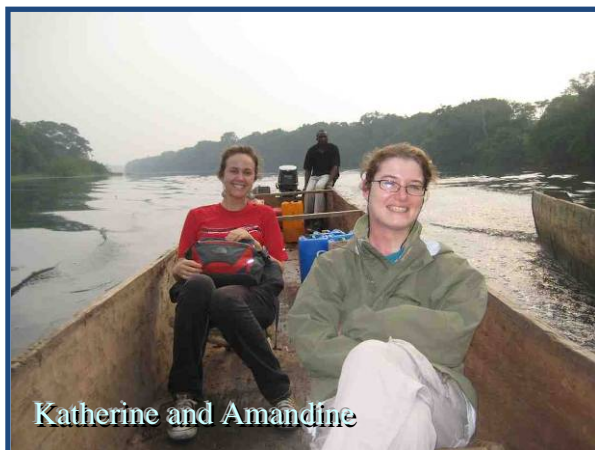
This man had exchanged a bag of salt for Kodoro, for lack of the seven boxes of cartridges from Macc¹ that the hunters were demanding.



The man tries his best to squeeze some benefit out of this little bonobo, but quickly realizes that Suzy is an expert at these kinds of negotiations. He loses the fight. Suzy is of the same kind as Pierrot and other ABC staff members, determined to have the law respected.



¹MACC is an ammunitions factory in Pointe Noire (Congo Brazzaville), and is most likely largely responsible for the destruction of much of the wildlife of the Congo Basin: small, medium and large "game." Karl Ammann fought against the factory in his campaign against the bushmeat trade in Central Africa (Congo, RDC, Gabon, RCA, Cameroon...) but, politically protected, it is alas still as active as ever!



He leaves empty handed, but proud of his patriotic gesture. Amandine and Katherine (two students who came to study the post-release period) and Suzy dote on the two twin-like little ones.

Sunday is the day of the regular flight by Congolese airline Filair. Our friend Dany Philemotte, the manager of the

airline, regularly transports little bonobos seized by the authorities to bring them back rapidly to Lola ya Bonobo.

This time, alas, Lomoko and Kodoro travel alone, with only the cabin crew to watch over them. At the Mbandaka stopover, the plane is rerouted to Lisala to pick up a few last minute passengers. The flight attendant offloads the babies leaving them on the tarmac, clutching each other in their cage, while the plane takes off again for this quick extra leg.

Unfortunately, the paperwork from the Environment Ministry and from the veterinary service has remained on board. Our precious shipment is seized by the local customs office! The "signal drum" (in this case mobile phone provider Vodacom) goes into action. We finally resolve the problem, but only after disturbing the Provincial Coordinator of the Ministry of Environment, who gives up his Sunday off to go to the airport!

At last, late in the evening, Pierrot, Fanny and I welcome the two very tired little males in Kinshasa.

The next day, under the watchful eyes of Mama Henriette and Mama Micheline, the girls (as we usually call our health team: Fanny Mehl, Clémence and Anne-Marie) take charge of the two newcomers.

They are in fairly good shape. Lomako has a mangled finger, probably caused by a thin thread tied around the base of his pinky. The joint nearest his palm is detached, but continuing blood flow has prevented total loss of the finger.



"It will probably need to be amputated at some point," Fanny explains, "but it's not urgent; there are more important things to deal with. It hurts just to see the despair in their eyes!"

They hold on to us or the two mamas, but, distrustful, they climb up to look into our eyes and try to discern what bad surprises we might still have in store for them.

Mama Yvonne is on her annual leave. In the nursery, Espérance is now all on her own to keep in line the ten rowdy youngsters, since Henriette and Micheline are taking care of Lomako and Kodoro during their quarantine. Luckily, young Sandoa and Luruku have been taken under the wings of their older 'sisters' Sankuru, Kinshasa and sweet Katako.



It's all very moving as life gets itself organized, one little step at a time.

Dominique in EKOLO



Meanwhile, we welcome Dominique Morel, the Vice President of ABC and ABE and President of Friends of Bonobos, for a ten-day visit. She will finally see "Ekolo ya bonobo" in Basankusu for herself, after having both dreamed up the venture and put it on paper to secure its financing. Lola's staff has built the traditional flowered arches of welcome. From Pakistan, where Dominique does her "real" work (!), she has brought a modest gift for each one of them, which she distributes during the welcome cocktail.

As we head off to Basankusu, she is impatient to see the work accomplished so far by ABC and by Marielle, who has constructed a camp at Elonda, across from the release site. Suzy is proud to show how well the bonobos have adjusted, and Etumbe is proud to show little "Nsomi ya Ekolo" ("First born in our land"), born in the wild on 18th July.



Etumbe et Nsomi ya Ekolo

Our friend Etumbe! She has given us Lola's first birth, and now the first birth at Ekolo! What a long way you have come since the INRB laboratory!

Dominique finds them beautiful, growing, and in great shape! All the bonobos recognize her and vocalize their greetings.

Community Meeting

We take advantage of Dominique's visit and the fact that it coincides with the first anniversary of signing our contract with the Pôo community to hold our annual meeting with them.



Things are tense between the Pôo and ABC. A crazy rumor has spread that we are running bizarre experiments to mate bonobos with humans! Worse yet: we are supposedly offering 600 dollars to participants for each sexual encounter! We laughed at first upon hearing this story, but Suzy will go repeatedly to the local radio station to explain the project on the airwaves and set the record straight.



Suzy and children from Elonda

The Pôo also feel that we have broken our promise to bring a telephone connection to their village. I had, indeed, brought in an engineer from Vodacom (a Congolese mobile phone company) to check the feasibility of extending phone coverage to the area, and he had confirmed it would be technically possible. Alas, Vodacom was not able to take the necessary technical steps within the year, thus inflaming the Pôo's suspicions about the project. This proved unfortunate for our collaboration! I was surprised that such wild dreams could put everything into

question!

The Pôo also raise questions about the alleged "enlargement" of Ekolo ya Bonobo to 20,000 hectares. We are baffled. The boundaries have never changed since the contract was signed. What is going on?

The Pôo, usually so welcoming, announce that they are breaking their contract with us and add most ominously: "You and your bonobos can just leave!" Such determination is surprising. As an "old African hand," I wonder what is hiding behind these declarations. Is this how things will end between us?



I try another tactic: a new opportunity. We ask for their customary permission to purchase an unoccupied island from the Congolese government: "Totaka" island, which lies about 5 minutes by pirogue from our current camp. (The idea of setting up a new sanctuary had arisen when we had seen the positive educational impact that the released bonobos had on the population along the river. What a beautiful addition to the Maringa-Lopori-Wamba landscape! Moreover, it might help alleviate an eventual risk of over-population at "Lola ya bonobo.") They are surprised by our request - what could we possibly see in that island? But they are not opposed to it...

There is much discussion in the canoe on our way back to camp. Our Congolese staff is just as disappointed as we are. They don't understand this sudden reversal of the Pôo! Everyone in Basankusu whom we tell of the Pôo's decision insist that the Pôo have until now always been so proud to host the project! Nevertheless, we are stuck! We head back to Kinshasa.



With the big "32 teeth" Nkumu

Deep down, I feel certain that this is just a bump in the road, an unfathomable lack of comprehension between two radically different worlds, a step in the instruction manual we somehow missed... Was it a forgotten greeting? A jug of palm wine we neglected to offer? The "Nkumus" (traditional chiefs) with four (leopard) teeth are sometimes harder to manage than those with 32!

(The 32 teeth Nkumu had indeed walked us to our boat at Boso Ngubu, and bidding us goodbye, he had asked us to try to understand and not to worry: nothing had changed!)

Finally, we get an explanation: It's all because of the 20,000 hectares!

I had given a long interview in Paris for the magazine of the French Society for Animal Welfare (SPA), and we had given a copy of the magazine to the Pôo. The article stated that the area of the reserve was 20,000 hectares. But then, someone probably re-did the calculations for them.... in some creative way of his own! So the 20,000 contiguous hectares apparently gave us rights to the forest far beyond Bongandaga, almost 200 km away! The Pôo thus expected serious trouble from their neighbors! So that was just basically a problem with the math of decimal points and commas, we exclaimed, smiling. And this is what was threatening to put our bonobos on the street!

We plan our response strategy and I board the plane once again in the other direction for yet another meeting, whose outcome we can already predict.. The contract in one hand, we re-read the clause clearly defining the unchanged boundaries of Ekola ya Bonobo; in the other hand, a calculator helps clear up the geographical misunderstanding.



We close the meeting by giving them supplies for the delivery rooms of their two health centers: basins, buckets, and pans, another gift from a partner sensitive to our calls for help on their behalf: the Canadian Embassy. Joy returns to their faces; a feast prepared by Mama Suzanne fills our stomachs; beer and palm wine flow freely. The battle is over! Everything is back in its place... This is how things often go in

traditional Africa: You need to know the instruction manual backwards and forwards. Hallelujah!

And what about Totaka in all of this? They decide to yield their customary user rights and give us permission to buy the island from the state in exchange for two health centers built in durable materials deep in the forest. After some quick mental calculations, I reply that Totaka, a few hectares of land that flood every year, doesn't quite match their dreams.

We end the meeting. I think to myself that they will pass by Totaka on their way back home laden with their presents and sigh about their lost dreams while remembering the Nkumu's words to them, "You have had Totaka for so many years. What have you done with it?"

Let them think about it; we have all the time in the world!!!

Creation of Village Development Committees

Off to Eleke to organize a new Village Development Committee (VDC), building on the enthusiasm around the first VDCs formed by Pierrot among the Ilonga Pôo last year.



Marielle, with Mathieu's support, has begun organizing these all along the Lopori River which borders our reserve. VDCs allow them to meet and help local villagers to organize themselves, identify their needs and their problems, and together develop plans to address these. VDCs are a useful bridge, connecting us to populations emerging from war and poorer still than they were before.

The welcome is cordial: an old Sutitunga (beautiful marsh antelope) horn is sounded to call the villagers around Mathieu, his blackboard, and his chalk; many take notes conscientiously.

Here, speeches are peppered with, "Bantu ya eleke, Mbote!" (People of Eleke, welcome!) The group replies, in unison, "Mbote!" Is this just to keep the group awake? Mathieu is in great form, explaining the word "development" by miming one step forward... and another step forward. The many children in attendance laugh. It's a real performance! I am having a lot of fun; so are Marielle and Suzy.



Sweet moments of communion where the hope for better days is palpable. VDCs are the link between us (ABC) and the local population. Thanks to them, we can better understand their priorities and ask our partners to help relieve the misery present in all the riverside villages and fishing camps around our reserve.



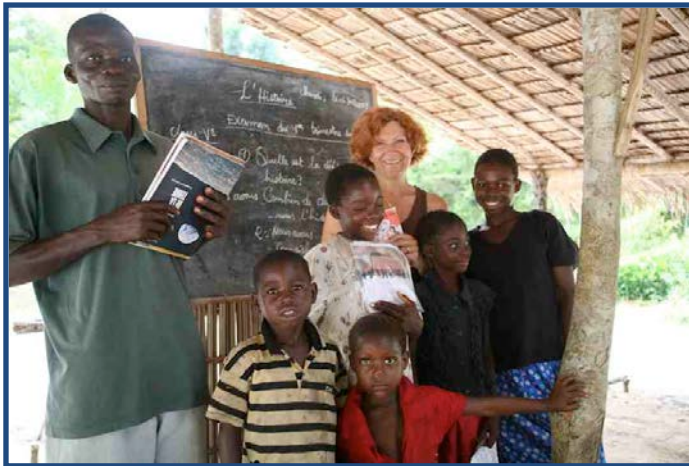
Impossible to remain unmoved in front of so many children in tatters, often naked and dirty simply because their mothers cannot afford a bar of soap! Many have swollen abdomens and discolored hair from malnutrition. Mothers often have ten or more children - "gifts of God." (We haven't quite gotten to the "rhythm method"....)

His blackboard leaning against a tree, Mathieu explains the four "houses" around which a village functions: the church, the health center, the school and the market. The group listens, repeating the ends of phrases and the awakening "Mbote" that regularly punctuates the presentation. The mothers from Elonda village, who have come to help with the presentation, lead the group into a song about "the real values". Mathieu will maintain contact each month with the VDC to sustain their energy, as he is doing today.



The school director is here as well. He explains that he lost two teachers, even as he is opening a sixth grade class this year. He seems worried. The primary classes have many children, yet there are so many more whose parents cannot afford the 1150 Congolese francs (\$1.30) that are required as tuition. (These will help defray the costs of paying the teachers, so often forgotten by the State.) We provided chalk and blackboards, along with all the official Ministry of Education textbooks for the teachers. But what about exercise books? Pens? Pencils? And even a plastic bag that might serve as a precious book bag?

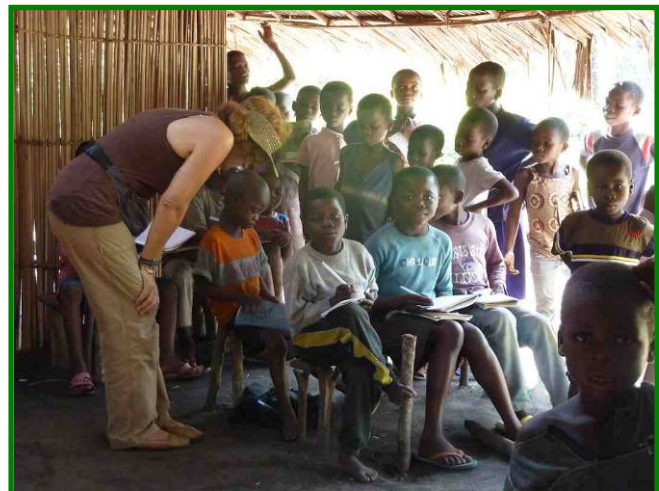
In Elonda, the village where our camp is located, we have helped the VDC and the parents build a primary school. Everyone contributed its share: one brought three wooden sticks, one a few bamboos to serve as benches, another a board for desks. ABC will pay for the thatching to cover the roof. We also supply the blackboards, so precious here! Pierrot has already bought books in Kinshasa. Mr. Elwin Blatner has offered his company's boat to bring these free of charge to Basankusu, along with boxes of exercise books and slates for first year students.



"We should make little waterproof cloth bags with the "Ekola ya bonobo" logo," suggests Suzy, "That would be great!" Long live the little school at Elonda! Our presence has motivated the local administrative authorities: our little school will be officially recognized!

We have kept two of the precious soccer balls that Professor Brian Hare's mother had sent for the villages surrounding the reserve. We give them to the parent committee of Elonda. What joy! "It's a real school!" the parents exclaim. We "even" have a soccer ball!

But it is a poor little structure indeed. How about it, Claudine? What about finding a partner school in France or Belgium? Linking with a few letters and gifts children who have so many dreams to share! In Europe it might be one more toy, here some new clothes, less gray, less dirty, less...



But here too children are children! They laugh, shrug their shoulders, smiling, and dive into the dark river water. They are happy in spite of it all!



Mathieu finishes his presentation amidst feelings of good will. "The committee is elected; time to celebrate!" some voices exclaim. "Not at all," replies Mathieu, "it's just time to get to work!"

We return to our canoe. Elonda is not too far. On the way, we will pass by Totaka Island, my new dream! Perhaps a new sanctuary dedicating to educating the people of the Marigna-Lopori-Wamba Landscape (LMLW), in Equateur Province, and, most importantly, to the bonobos?



But that's another story... to be continued!