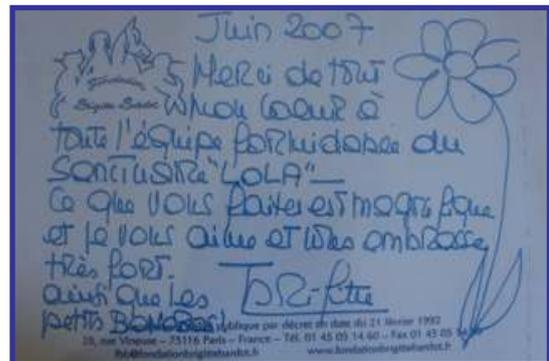


Lola ya Bonobo Newsletter

JANUARY - FEBRUARY - MARCH 2008

The year began with a "miracle"... The Congolese postal service is by no means the fastest in the world, but the mail can (on the rare occasion) reach us!!! These kind words sent to us by Madame Brigitte Bardot took all of 7 months to arrive!!! But here they are! The Brigitte Bardot Foundation has supported the sanctuary for over 5 years: indeed, its kind donation covers the cost of all of the food for the bonobos making it one of our main sponsors. Many thanks to Madame Brigitte Bardot and the whole team at the Foundation for their trust!



The first quarter of 2008 started with filming. We started to shoot a fictional documentary with the Paris-based production company "Films du Rêve" (*Films of Dream*). The feature film is to be produced by Alain Tixier with whom we worked two years ago on *Return to the Planet of the Apes*, one of the last "Ushuaïa" programmes presented by Nicolas Hulot. The staff at Lola ya Bonobo were looking with some anxiety to working on the film. They knew what awaited them! In 15 years, many films have been shot at Lola but none, as yet, had been intended for the big screen. Having read the

synopsis and the script, I sensed that this time round things would be more difficult than for a documentary. This film will feature the apes themselves as the main characters with us, humans, playing only supporting roles! GREAT... however, the bonobos are not actors but rather mischievous animals, who are not always obedient and do as they please most of the time! Those of you who have visited Lola will, I think, know what I mean, imagining twelve year-old Beni, sadly stroking my face to say goodbye for a fictional film sequence in which bonobos are being 'released' into the equatorial forest... And hearing film-maker Alain Tixier's voice commenting: "Fine, let's just do another take just to be sure!"



Indeed, what do you say to that, Beni? Why no? All dreams are possible with the bonobos... And you know what, they all performed superbly! They were "perfect" as Alain said when he toasted the bonobos, their good grace and their patience, when leaving after three-months of shooting.

"Phew! It's over!" Shooting the film took up all my time for those three months, leaving me somewhat orphaned of my precious time at Lola ya bonobo..., where things had carried on as normal thanks to the efforts of those who had continued their normal occupations at the sanctuary during that time, as if nothing was going on.... Let's hope that on its release next year the film will live up to our expectations and will be understood by all, throughout the world, as a message for the preservation of bonobos in the Congo.

JANUARY

So far, so good! January was a quiet month at Lola. Crispin continued administering the vaccinations required by the "IUCN guidelines" for the release of apes into the forest. A measure which, to me, seems to be rather excessive, but this is nonetheless the way things are done today. Westerners are now strictly following all the rules and regulations which become more and more demanding each year (a strategy to have more and more "experts" perhaps?). I was indeed surprised to see that before releasing the bonobos from Lola, in addition to the many other tests required, we now need to check them for traces of the Ebola virus! When you consider that each time a vaccine and its booster shots are administered, the 60 bonobos here at Lola have to be anaesthetised... you can get an idea of how much work is involved... not to mention the stress endured by the bonobos each time! Being neither a scientist nor a doctor, I can only reluctantly comply with these demands (or at the very least by disregarding my feelings) in order to pursue my efforts to see the bonobos return to the forest.

At the end of January, I was given the title of «*Notable*» (or "VIP") in my village of Kimwenza. Of this, I am very proud! The ceremony was simple but attended by the mayor. Through me, Kimwenza pays homage to us all! The «*Lola ya Bonobo*» project now has an important place in the community. What more could we ask for? It is recognition for all of us.



Finally, as a local NGO representative I was invited by the Environment Minister to join him on a trip through Equateur Province with a British delegation, including the Special Envoy of the British Prime Minister and the British Ambassador to the DRC. Our first stop was Basankusu, where we were met by Jef Dupain of AWF. After presenting various environmental projects, we all took a ride down a stretch of the dark and beautiful Lopori River. Our journey then took us to Mbandaka for a trip with the Governor of the Province along the shore of Lake Tumba towards Bikoro.



FEBRUARY

While making the film we spent several weeks alongside the wild bonobos in the forest of the Maringa-Lopori-Wamba Landscape. These were unforgettable moments for me! Sitting on the ground with the tracker, surrounded by the entire party of bonobos who were just a few meters away, we shared very special moments, like we do at Lola! The bonobos are no different in Wamba: not the least bit shy and very intrigued by our presence. We followed them all day, from times of rest to foraging trips, when they would seek out the little orange fruit in



season: the "*tendés*" of which they are so fond.

During these days spent following them, my thoughts often went to the hunters who always tell me that bonobos are magicians! "The group is there, then all of a sudden... they're gone! And no-one heard a thing... they walk around the tree trunks... hide... and then disappear!!!" And it's true! When they want to, they all leave without a sound. Laughing, I say that they take the "elevator". In this brightly-lit forest, where giant trees (such as those which offer the *tendés*)

tower over the smaller ones, the bonobos lower themselves down the tall trunks and long branches which bend and fold under their weight, almost silently! Once on the ground they quietly continue on their way. What clever apes!

We had set up mountaineering ropes to observe the bonobos in the tree tops. The contraption was of great interest to them: they came very close in order to investigate the pretty pink snap hooks, right next to Géraldine and Stéphanie, our "rope specialists"! This exercise was tough, athletic and often uncomfortable, but was organized as best it could be with the materials at hand. Hugo, the film's stage manager, worked hard to provide us with the best there was! Part of me stayed with "Kuki", a female bonobo named by Dr Kano during the first studies on bonobo behaviour: I was given her name as a nickname by the Wamba trackers!



Meanwhile at Lola, life was going on as the second film crew continued filming under Crispin's supervision. On our return, we all agreed to postpone further filming for 10 days and the whole filming crew returned to France.

MARCH

Paris, March 6th

I took advantage of the break and accepted an invitation from WWF-France who were organising a conference at the Senate in Paris. The symposium was intended as an opportunity to come together and review judicial protection and international agreements which guarantee justice, damage compensation and the restoration of habitats in times of conflict. Indeed, war has serious consequences on wildlife and the environment. Both have too often been the forgotten victims of 20th century conflicts. International conventions do attempt to limit the environmental impact of wars, but they seem so insufficient and so difficult to apply! We are at the dawn of a new era, one in which the link between armed conflict and the environment is affected by the increasing rarity of natural resources. The deterioration of natural habitats and the decreased access to natural resources, potential agricultural land and, more importantly, to water are environmental causes of armed conflicts in the world today, which can only worsen with climate change. (For example, the present-day situation in Darfur is considered the first conflict due to climate change). We must find solutions in terms of international rights. What is at stake is not "saving" the planet, but conserving acceptable living conditions for humans.



I had been chosen for my efforts in collaborating with the Congolese Armed Forces - I am an honorary member of their « Environmental Unit » - during the 15 years of war in the DRC. But also for our collaboration last year in response to a sad situation in the east of the country, in North Kivu (Virunga National Park) and in South Kivu (Kahuzi Biega National Park), with the fast disappearance of the Mountain Gorillas and the last remaining from our precious and endemic Eastern Lowland Gorillas. Thanks to a long standing friendship with Mr. Swing¹, whom I knew to be committed to nature and conservation, I was hoping that he might send a patrol into the area. However, as I also very well knew, this was not the responsibility of the United Nations Mission in the DRC (MONUC).

My experience therefore confirmed the topic raised at the conference: tentative solutions are possible in situations of conflict BUT they rely on the initiative of individuals. International agreements have been in existence for over 50 years² but rare are those who comply. The Environmental Unit of the Congolese Armed Forces is not taken seriously, neither internally within the Army nor by the conservation NGOs. Without Mr Swing's personal involvement it is unlikely that the patrols would have been organised as quickly as they were...

Bearing in mind that many conflicts of the 21st century might be linked to the environment, it is my hope that the ideas of those who organised this conference, such as French Senator Marie-Christine Blandin and WWF-France, will disseminate and eventually challenge world leaders to take them seriously and perhaps set up, one day, a UN for the Environment.

¹ Special Representative of the Secretary General of the UN, responsible for the supervision of MONUC (the United Nations forces deployed in the DRC).

² Example: The decisions made at the end of the Vietnam War with regards to the use of exfoliating herbicides, which had caused extensive damage throughout the country.

They too have had much to do this quarter:

Marie-Laure's newsletter

After completing my studies in veterinary medicine, I chose to specialise in natural resource management at the University of Liège. I then decided to return to DRC, the country in which I had spent my childhood, to complete my dissertation on the reintroduction of the bonobos of "Lola ya Bonobo" sanctuary. In mid-February I took the plane for the city I had left 10 years earlier, Kinshasa. Back then LOLA was housed in a vet's compound at "Ma campagne" and only had the very first few orphans: Mickey, Maya, Bukavu... As I visited the sanctuary I was astounded at the work that has been carried out since!

After a few days, I took a flight to Basankusu, a small town in the north-west of the DRC, only a few kilometres away from the forest intended for the release of the bonobos. I am accompanied by the sanctuary's educator, Pierrot, in charge of community and official relations in Basankusu, and Camille, a forestry expert for AWF (African Wildlife Foundation). Based on ABC's request, Camille will provide his technical expertise to support the project. Together, we will go and meet the Pô (the native population neighbouring the forest), in order to explain to them the release project and to evaluate the feasibility of the project. Following this, we will jointly define the boundaries of the intended release area.

Having finally reached Basankusu, I discover the ABC guest-house, the town centre, the small market and the magnificent cathedral... Basankusu is a small isolated town, where the population lives in extreme poverty. The town is situated on the southern bank of the Lulonga River, where the Maringa and Lopori rivers meet. Our house has a large garden overlooking the river. At dusk, Pierrot and I watch the sunset with its blazing colours.



Once we had introduced ourselves to the Basankusu authorities, we left for Boso-Ngubu, the main Pô village, by means of a dugout canoe. A meeting had been arranged with all the village representatives. We were introduced to the 'notables', the chiefs, easily recognisable with their leopard skin caps, necklaces made of teeth and their large bracelets bearing bronze bells which they shake on meeting people of importance.

The meeting was very well organized. The chief first greeted the audience: "M'boté Na Bisso", to which everyone replied, and then took the stand. He was followed by a spokesperson, then Pierrot and finally Camille. Then the "Elders" left in order to discuss among themselves and on their return we all took part in an open discussion. They did indeed find it hard to understand the reasons that lie behind our desire to protect the bonobos: "Are there diamonds in their faeces?" "Is there no risk of the bonobos nabbing our wives?" The Pô are not used to being in contact with people who work in conservation; rather, they more commonly meet with companies looking to exploit the forest for logging or mining. And it is certainly the first time they ever hear of the concept of "participatory management"....

We had to explain to them the fact that we were going to work together, that we wanted to encourage them to become 'the Guardians of the bonobos'. After a long drawn-out discussion, in which everyone had their say in a calm and respectful atmosphere, we were asked to go with them to define the boundaries of the area that will be reserved for the bonobos. We asked them to themselves select for this task 12 representatives from all four Pô villages and socio-economic backgrounds.



A few days later, after many long discussions about the different criteria needed for the site (for instance, as many natural borders as possible, proximity to Basankusu, etc.), we went to look around the proposed site. Camille went into a detailed explanation of the cartography techniques we will use to map out the natural resources of the site. On the way there, in the dugout canoe, we set up a little orientation competition: the first one to find out the North wins a badge of Lola! We spent our first night camping in Monbengele, a small fishing camp on the Lopori riverbank. The next day was the first day of walking through the forest. We tried to walk in a somewhat organized line: those with machetes in front clearing the path, then those with the compasses to keep us in the right direction, followed by those carrying the GPS devices. Next came the observers, who pointed out to the rest of the team behind any sign of human activity or animal tracks.

We carried on with this routine for 3 days. Don't forget that this involved stepping over roots, climbing over huge tree trunks, running away from wasps, remembering not to lean on the prickly creepers, and by-passing swamps... The landscape is truly spectacular! The giant trees of the rainforest, reaching up to 100 feet, allow only a few rays of sunshine to penetrate through the dense canopy!



On the second day, two trackers who had wandered off, returned with a huge 8 foot long jet-black snake, which they had pulled and caught with their bare hands before cutting off its head with their machetes. They called it 'Mombito'. A few days later I found out that it was in fact a Cobra! On the third day, as the whole team was beginning to tire, a land tortoise was caught. This one however was not eaten for breakfast, since this particular species is considered to represent "the wise ones". Indeed, finding the tortoise was an excellent omen for the mission, signifying that

the ancestors were accepting and encouraging our project! We decided to give it to Claudine André on our return to Kinshasa... Later that afternoon, we were all delighted to reach 'Monzenze', the last stop in the mapping process. The most delighted of all were probably those responsible for keeping the north with their compasses and those carrying the GPS devices - who, by that time, had realized by themselves that the devices were indeed for finding their way and not for finding diamonds!



WAKA's arrival:

During my stay in Basankusu, I got on well with various members of the diocese. In one of my conversations with some of the abbots about the bonobo reintroduction project, I found out that a male nurse at the local hospital had recently bought an orphaned bonobo. Intrigued, I asked more questions and managed to convince the abbot to give me the nurse's name: "Raf"... But he refused to give me any more details... The next day, I asked Chacal, a local employee of ABC, about it. He knew Raf well, so we called him and schedule a meeting. A few minutes later there we were, in his office at the hospital. I introduced myself and explained the role of the sanctuary in Kinshasa. I informed him that bonobos are an endangered species, protected by law. Then came the ominous moment... "I've heard that you might have one at home?" I then showed him a scientific article (which coincidentally showed a photo of a bonobo) on primate viruses and the risk of their transmission to humans. His face dropped. "You know, keeping a bonobo at home could be dangerous for both you and your family. You're a nurse, you should understand..." At this, Raf accepted that we go to his house to see the animal.



When we arrived at his house, Raf headed towards a shed and squeezed in behind a stack of chairs. He came back out holding a tiny ball of fur with a rope tightened around its stomach. It was a tiny female bonobo, approximately 2 or 3 years old. She jumped straight

into my arms and held on as tightly as she could. She seemed to be relatively healthy, despite a huge stomach, sure sign of malnutrition, and several scabs on her body. After 2 long hours of discussions with Raf and the Head of the District's environmental section who had come to join us, he realized that he didn't really have a choice and officially handed the young bonobo over to me. We then had to start the long bureaucratic process required to take her back to the sanctuary on the next flight to Kinshasa which was scheduled 6 days later.



Raf had bought the little orphan whilst on one of his work related missions further inland. She was from the forest near the village of Waka... So here was her name all figured out: Waka! For one week I played the role of a substitute mother: Giving her gentle baths, taking care of her skin, looking for bananas, sugar cane, or pineapple, and managing a serious increase in the quantity of my clothes that needed washing!!!

I had many visitors that week, everyone wanted to know what a bonobo looks like! Most people in Basankusu were actually very surprised at her similarity to humans, particularly when I showed them her hands. The women were however a bit more baffled and couldn't quite understand how anyone could have affection for a wild animal...

After a week of intense care giving and cuddling came the time to take our flight. I had had a small cage constructed for transportation. Once we arrived at the airport, a gathering formed around Waka. Luckily, I had the Head of the environmental section with me, who took care of all the administrative formalities. Once on the tarmac, the airline manager wanted to put Waka in the baggage hold!!! Out of the question!!! I explained to him that she was just a baby and that I had been given authorisation to take her into the cabin. The pilot then asked that she at least be put in her cage for the duration of the flight. I obediently put her in, knowing full well that it would not be that easy.... Indeed, as soon as she was in there, she started throwing herself against the bars and wailing as loud as she could, it was enough to break your heart! The pilot rushed over to me and whispers: "OK, it's OK! But are you sure that she won't bother any of the other passengers if she travels in your arms?" Bingo! Waka will be able to come on my lap for the three-hour flight!

However, no sooner had we sat down than Waka, making herself at home, spotted her food bag and started loudly eating up her pieces of pineapple whilst expressing her joy at the top of her voice... And we had not yet taken off! I was slightly embarrassed that her loud voracious moaning were once again attracting the attention of all the passengers... On arrival in Kinshasa, I was met by Crispin and the Head of the Ministry of the Environment. By evening we had finally reached the sanctuary... Waka would soon discover her new paradise!

The death of our little Malou

As told by her carer, Jean-Claude:

"It was Easter Sunday, the 23rd of March 2008, Lola had welcomed many visitors that day. It seems that no one saw the first appearance of Malou's symptoms. All of a sudden we saw her tumbling down a slope in her enclosure. At first, we thought she was just playing, but when we saw that she was no longer moving, it soon became clear to Amos and I that this was not the case."

After watching for a few minutes, the two carers decided to isolate the rest of the group in order to take care of Malou. Dilolo and Likasi were however guarding her, making the task much more difficult. *"Malou's hind limbs were paralysed, she could no longer move, we had to act quickly and get her to the infirmary."*



Under observation in Lola's infirmary, Malou got worse and seemed in agony. Crispin then decided to take her to Pierre Verhaeghe at the Kinshasa veterinary clinic. Once there the situation got worse and Malou passed away in the afternoon. The results of the autopsy ruled out the possibility of poisoning. So, what killed our little star? Could it be the return of our worst enemy, the Encephalo-myocarditis virus (EMCV)? Further tests should soon provide more answers. In the meantime Lola is grieving. We have received messages from all over the world, attempting to console us.