

Happy 45th Birthday to western lowland gorilla, Kivu

Oct 26, 2023



If you find yourself at the Downing Gorilla Forest, you might notice a gorilla with graying hair lounging in a hammock.

"We are all just living in Kivu's world," Zookeeper Katie Kiker said. "She does not do anything she doesn't want to. She's a sassy old lady, and we love her."

Kivu has lived at Sedgwick County Zoo since 2013. In the ten years she's been here, she's made an impression on zookeepers and zoo guests alike.

Kiker noted that Kivu loves babies- human and gorilla. When Alika was born in 2016, Kivu bonded with Alika and her mother Barika. She spent a lot of time just watching the infant. And if there are human infants in the Downing Gorilla Forest when zookeepers are getting the gorillas ready to go in for the night, Kivu will not go inside because she is so transfixed on watching the babies.

"Her favorite snack is grapes, but she also just loves food in general," Kiker said.

"She likes to hang out in hammocks, fire hose slings, or a nest of wood wool. So, she's always relaxing."



Kivu and Alika enjoy a snack (2020)

Kivu, like most gorillas in AZA facilities, is a western lowland gorilla.

Western lowland gorillas, who have the scientific name *gorilla gorilla gorilla*, are the smallest subspecies of gorilla. Despite their smaller frames, they still possess immense speed and strength.

Found in central Africa, these gorillas are considered critically endangered.

"Historically, the number one threat to gorillas has been loss of habitat," Kiker said.

"Some of that has been through the Coltan mining."

Coltan is a metallic ore that is used in the manufacturing of electronics such as phones, computers, and cameras.

Campaigns like [Eco-Cell's "Gorillas on the Line"](#) are working to help mitigate the issue through recycling.

By recycling your old electronics, you're helping raise funds for gorilla conservation, reducing the demand for Coltan, and deterring waste from landfills.

This sustainability effort helps wild gorillas and their animal ambassador counterparts in Zoos, like Kivu.

While Kivu currently calls SCZ home, she hasn't always lived here.

On October 29, 1978, Kivu was born at the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago to Benga and Otto. Kivu was Benga's third child. Kivu lived at Lincoln Park Zoo until she was eight, when she was transferred to the St. Louis Zoo.

While in St. Louis, she would have four offspring over her 18 years there.



Kivu and Mshindi, her offspring (1992) // photo courtesy of the St. Louis Zoo

In 2004, she was on the move again, this time transferring to the Philadelphia Zoo.

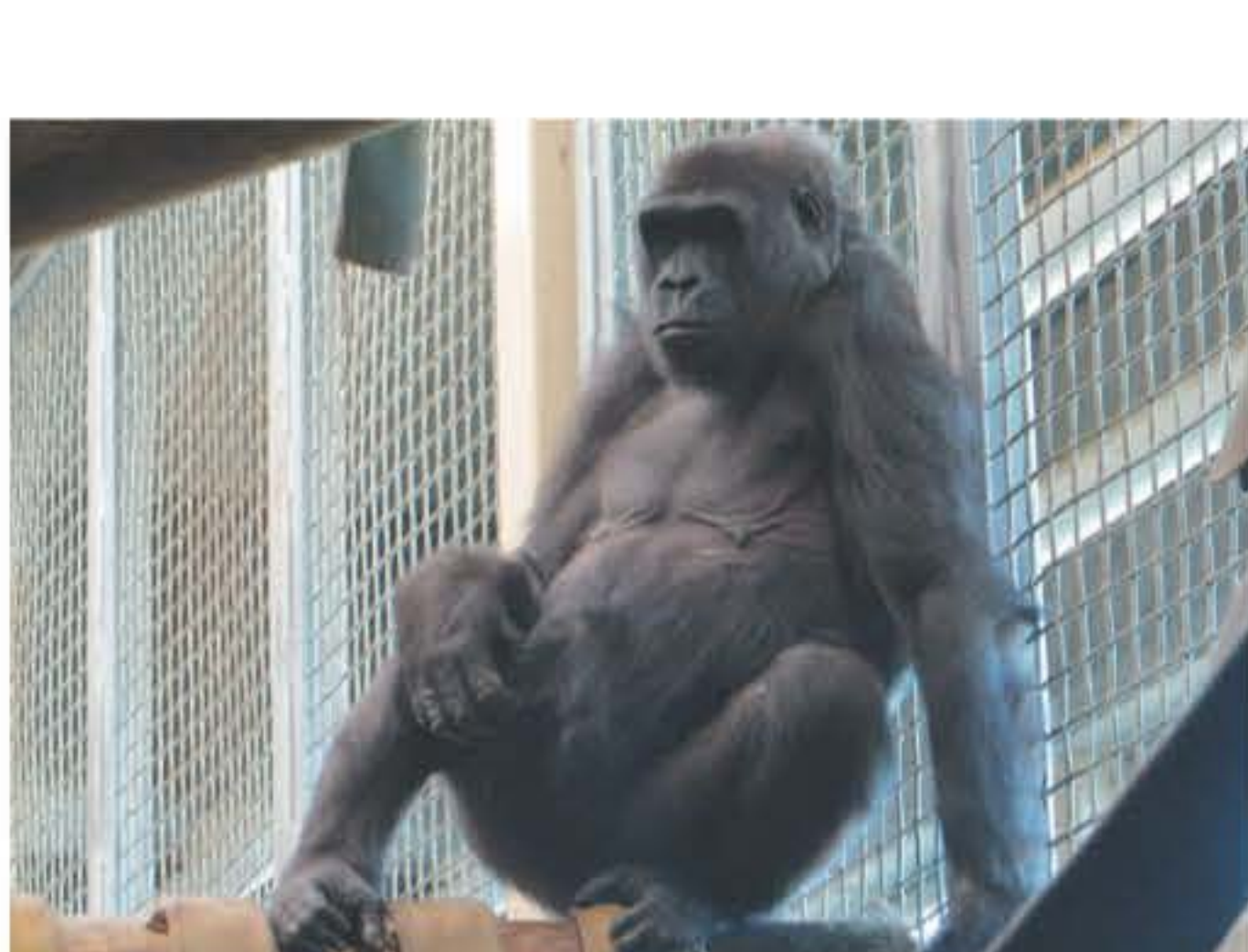
Kristen Farley, the lead primate keeper at the Philadelphia Zoo, said that Kivu was already at Philadelphia Zoo when she began working there.

"She had one of the funniest personalities of any gorilla I've ever worked with," Farley said. "She's a really special animal and I think she was a favorite of all of ours."

Farley said that Kivu's always been quirky. She could always tell which carrots the gorilla had been snacking on because she would leave a moon-like sliver of carrot behind. Kivu also had the habit of collecting up all the toys and enrichment items when the other gorillas were distracted and hiding them away in her own little corner of the habitat.

"I just love that she beat to her own drum," Farley said. "She was just so quirky, and so cute, and so wonderful to work with."

After 9 years in Philadelphia, Kivu was once more on the move and on her way to Sedgwick County Zoo, which she has called home for the last decade.



Kivu after arriving at SCZ (2013)

"If she doesn't want to do it, she's not going to do it," Kiker said. "She challenges us to be creative and to make sure we're meeting her needs."

While she's lived a long life and called many places home, one thing has been consistent the last 45 years- Kivu has always been Kivu.

Both Kiker and Farley described Kivu as being smart and spunky- a gorilla who takes flack from no one, be it from a fellow gorilla or a keeper.