

Animals on the edge

IT WAS one of those moments that wildlife photographers dream of. Weymouth-based photojournalist Chris Weston was in the depths of the Congo jungle capturing images of great apes when one of them made it quite clear that he felt completely at ease with the human's presence. Chris remembered: "I had been taking photos of gorillas for several days and at one point I had to stop and change the card in my camera.

A big silverback followed me through the forest and lay down about six feet away from me. He put his hands behind his head, his feet up against the trunk of a tree and went to sleep. I could hear him snoring. It was amazing. He should have been afraid of me, but instead he was comfortable enough to chill out and go to sleep." Chris, who has been named one of the world's 40 most influential wildlife photographers, added: "Gorillas are mesmerising. They are the thinking man's primate. If you want to play a game of chess, play with a gorilla. But if it's a pint down the pub you're after, go with an orang-utan. They are both apes but so very different in character."

Chris, whose original career was as a computer salesman, specialises in photographing mammals. His book *Lion Country*, recently published by Evans Mitchell, is a companion volume to the ITV series of the same name and looks at not just the lions, but also the other animals and humans that share their world. *Animals on the Edge* is a photographic journal of some of the planet's most endangered species, including snow leopards, tigers, hippos, otters and several species of apes and monkeys. All the images in both books are amazingly intimate, granting each creature individuality rather than seeing it simply as just another member of just another exotic species that is nice to look at.

Chris said: "I try to show each animal's character, its peculiarities and how it sees the world. To do that you have to build a relationship with the animal and spend time with it and by doing so you end up being able to communicate with it. Animals talk to each other through body language, as do humans to a certain extent. It is rubbish to say that animals can smell fear. Of course they can't, but they can see it through your body language." Over the years, Chris has had some

Dorset photojournalist and conservationist Chris Weston, who has been named one of the world's 40 most influential wildlife photographers, shares some of his amazing experiences with Ruth Meech



■ Mountain gorillas taken from Chris Weston's book *Animals on the Edge*

unnerving experiences with animals, once or twice feeling 'scared but not terrified'. Interestingly, the only time he felt directly threatened was by his fellow humans, armed with guns, in the Congo.

"If an animal wants you off his territory, he will make it perfectly clear you are not welcome without attacking you," said Chris. "And then it is polite to leave. It's no different to having an unwelcome guest in your house – if you asked them to leave, you would expect them to."

Chris's photography and books are gorgeous additions to any wall or library, but they also have a more

serious, less cosmetic purpose.

Five years ago he heard about a project in Zimbabwe run by a man called Andrew Conolly. ALERT – the African Lion and Environmental Research Trust – was working to release captive-bred lions into the wild to try and halt the huge decline in the numbers of this most symbolic of the Big Cats. It is virtually impossible to release captive-bred lions into the wild, but through a four-point project Alert was having some success until Zimbabwe's political and financial instability started to take its toll.

By this time, Chris had co-founded *Animals on the Edge*, an NGO



■ A lion from Chris Weston's *Lion Country*, and an Amur (Siberian) tiger and Sumatran orangutan from his book *Animals on the Edge*

dedicated to raising awareness of some of Earth's most critically endangered species. Conolly asked for his help and got it.

Chris photographed the work of ALERT and the result is *Lion Country*, a book of stunning images, and two ITV series of the same name which has raised the charity's profile and made it more financially stable.

"There is a definite link between human poverty and endangered species," said Chris. "But if you make an animal worth more alive than dead, it will be protected. In India, a dead tiger is worth \$750,000 and if you are poor and your children are dying of starvation, you are going to go out and kill a tiger."

"But in Rwanda, gorillas are a massive source of income for the country. Its biggest exports are coffee, tea and gorilla tourism, so the government has put money into gorillas and their numbers are rising."

Chris agrees that you have to be realistic and pragmatic about preserving wildlife. In the end, everything boils down to money and since the start of the global financial downturn, charities worldwide are suffering.

"The ultimate aim of *Animals on the Edge* is not to save the world because no one charity can do that," he said.

"It's too big and in any case, the planet is quite capable of looking after itself.

"Our aim is to make a difference, to solve problems where they arise. If you thought you were not able to do anything it would be demoralising, but most solutions are relatively simple. We – the human race – just tend to over-complicate things."

One simple solution presented itself to Chris in Kenya where he visited a village where there was a dead elephant, probably killed by the villagers for trampling their crops.

"If a farmer has a field of lettuces and they are his livelihood and the crop's success or failure means money or his kids' life or death, then he will protect it by whatever means necessary. This is what happened here."

"But we discovered that elephants don't like chillies because it irritates their noses – and they have a lot of nose to irritate – so the farmers in this village have planted a fence of chilli plants around their crops and the elephants didn't go through them."

"So their main crop was protected but not only that, the chilli crop was bought by Tabasco for their sauce and became a valuable second income for the village. The solution was so simple it was almost daft."

Of course, like all conservationists, Chris has had his fair share of bad

days, including finding an orang-utan peppered with 28 air gun pellets. The animal later died and Chris says it was 'like losing a friend'.

"I can understand someone killing an animal to stop their children starving, but that, that was just senseless," he said. "It knocks you back for a few days but then you have to move on and see that what you are aiming to do is achievable."

"What I do for a living is a privilege and very motivating. It makes me feel part of something much bigger. Photographing wildlife is humbling and seeing other parts of the world makes you appreciate what you have got."

Chris's next venture to raise funds for *Animals on the Edge* is the Forlorn Hope Tour, named after a near-suicidal military manoeuvre. Between September 4 and 25, he and a companion are cycling the 2131-mile route taken by Tour de France competitors and are aiming to raise £21,131 for the charity.

For further details of Forlorn Hope, visit forlornhopetour.net. For further details of *Animals on the Edge* and Chris's work, visit chrisweston.uk.com

■ See a slideshow of Chris Weston's work at dorsetecho.co.uk