

BBC

OCTOBER

2024  
Issue 11 Vol 42

# wildlife

discoverwildlife.com

## A NEW HOPE

The sanctuary giving chimps a foothold in Sierra Leone



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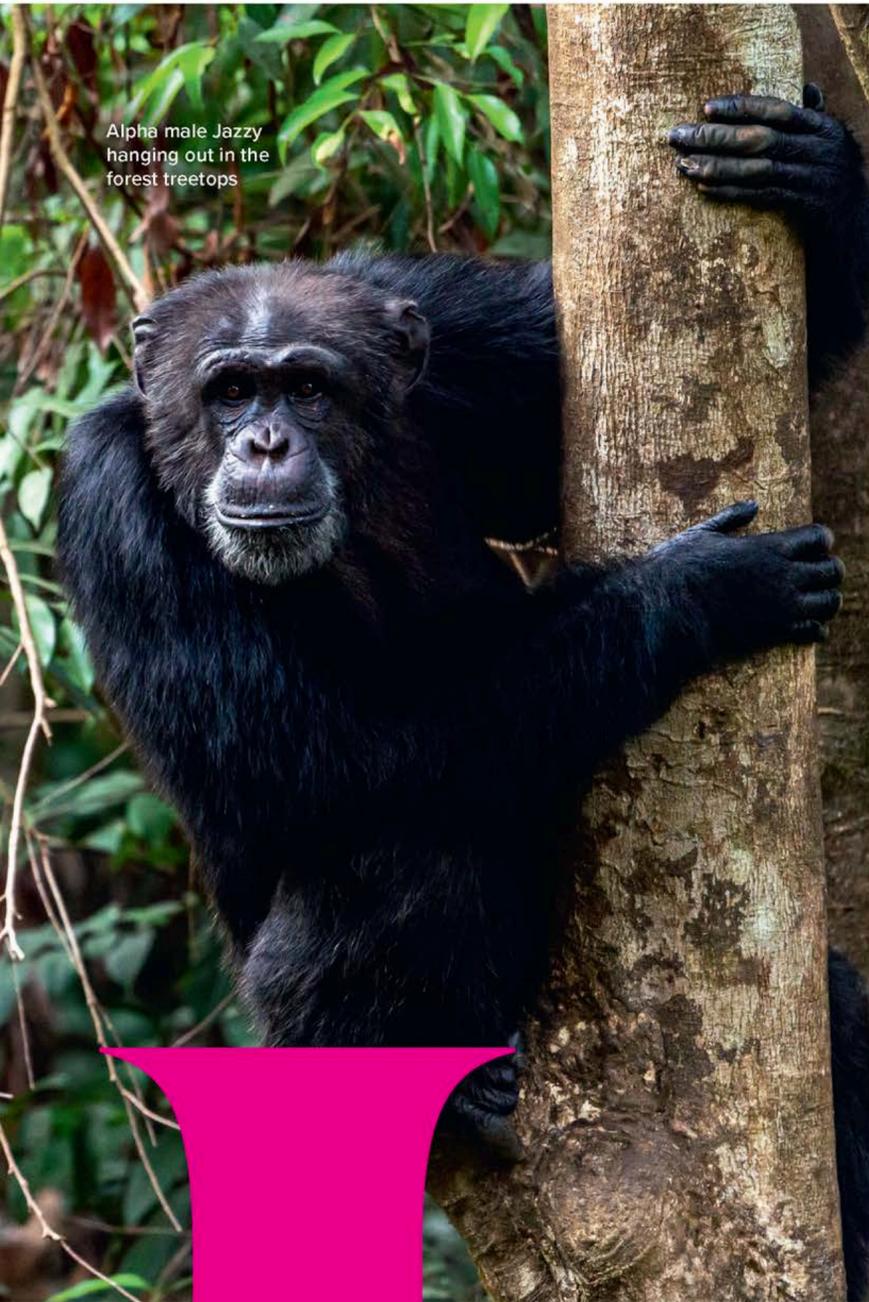


Rescued female Mus holding her baby Midas, just visible beneath her hands

# FINDING SANCTUARY

There's a special place in Sierra Leone that offers refuge to chimpanzees in need

Words by JONNY BIERMAN  
Photos by RENATO GRANIERI



Alpha male Jazzy hanging out in the forest treetops



Adults pass knowledge and skills onto youngsters

**I**N THE LUSH EXPANSES OF SIERRA LEONE, uncharted mountains sprawl with verdant forests that blend seamlessly, eventually tumbling down to the coast. These slopes are home to the western chimpanzee – one of four subspecies of the common chimpanzee – yet this charismatic great ape is not having an easy time in this remote corner of the world.

Loss of habitat as a result of (illegal and legal) logging and mining is not only fragmenting the chimps' forest home, but making them easier targets for bushmeat hunters. In rural areas of Sierra Leone, people still rely on local wildlife as a source of food, targeting adult chimps in particular. Their orphaned youngsters often end up as pets.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



Jonny Bierman is a sustainable-travel journalist and guidebook author. Through his work, he aims to show how travel can be a regenerative force for good. @ecoescape.travel

In 2016, the western chimpanzee became listed as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List. Fortunately, these rare apes have a hero fighting their corner: legendary conservationist Bala Amarasekaran.

Originally from Sri Lanka, Bala moved to Sierra Leone with his family as a teenager to flee the civil war. Together with his wife Sharmila, he rescued his first chimpanzee in 1988. Bruno, as the young animal would become known, was found tethered to a tree in a village 240km from Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital. Like many others, the youngster was orphaned and kept as a pet.

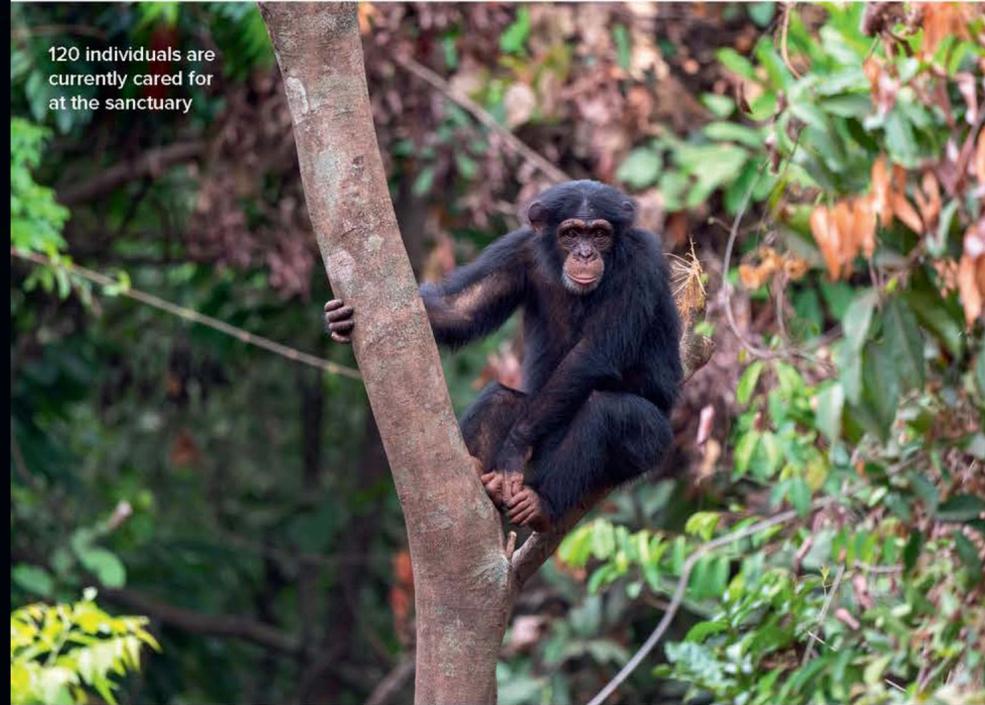
"I can still remember that sad and desperate look in Bruno's eyes as he held on

to my legs," says Bala. "We knew if we left this little guy behind, he would die."

They paid US\$20 for Bruno, and two years later, Bala rescued a second chimp, Julie. Over time, the number of their chimp charges grew to seven, all living in a makeshift shelter at Bala's home in Freetown. After six years of campaigning to establish a sanctuary in the Western Area Peninsula National Park (WAPNP), on the capital's outskirts, his efforts were rewarded when the Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary finally opened in 1995.

There have been various challenges in the intervening years. Bala has steered Tacugama through Sierra Leone's devastating civil war (1991-2002) and terrifying Ebola

In the wild, babies are dependent on their mothers for many years



120 individuals are currently cared for at the sanctuary

outbreak (2014-2016), and in 2006 a group of chimpanzees (including Bruno) escaped the sanctuary, attacking construction workers and killing their driver. He remained committed to Tacugama throughout and has been instrumental in elevating the status of chimpanzees within the country, successfully advocating for the primate to be declared the national animal in 2019. "It's about creating a sense of affinity between people and species," says Bala. "Now, Sierra Leoneans feel proud of their chimpanzees." Fast forward to 2024, and Bala and Tacugama have also helped amend the 1972 Wildlife Act to include stricter penalties for the poaching of chimpanzees.



Chimps are adept at using tools, here a coconut shell

The primates flourish in primary forests, and the vitality of their wild populations serves as a barometer for forest health. Uniquely distinct from eastern chimpanzees after half a million years of isolation, western chimpanzees are fascinating and intelligent. They are known to play 'sports' with rocks and are innovative hunters, using wooden spears and teaching this skill to their young. Versatile omnivores, they also consume termites and ants, extracting these insects from their nests with twigs. They play a crucial ecological role as seed dispersers and pest controllers.

Western chimpanzees use plants medicinally, eating specific leaves to treat stomach issues and clear the gut of parasites, and, like us humans, they enjoy a drink. They collect fermented alcoholic sap from palm trees, often returning to a source.

**C**URRENTLY, 120 CHIMPS CALL Tacugama home. Of these, 12 were rescued last year, three times as many as usual, and the most in one year since the sanctuary opened. The increase in rescues is a sign of the times. Despite WAPNP having national park status, the area surrounding Tacugama has recently fallen victim to deforestation as the capital encroaches on the hillsides through illegal land titles. Regular satellite monitoring reveals WAPNP has seen a 25 per cent loss in canopy since 2016, a pattern that is repeated across Sierra Leone and much of West Africa.

Nestled high in the forests, Tacugama is a playground of ropes, swings, balls and

→ INSIDE THE SANCTUARY

## How to bring up a chimp

Young chimps go through three stages of care after they arrive at Tacugama



A surrogate mother cares for baby chimps in quarantine

### 1 Quarantine

Newcomers have often had close contact with people and may have contracted disease. They undergo thorough health checks and spend the recommended three months in quarantine. They are closely monitored during this time, with a 'surrogate mother' member of staff who plays with them, cares for them and feeds them, and helps them to feel safe.

### 2 Nursery

After quarantine, the chimps start to integrate. In the wild, chimps are highly social, born into family groups ranging from 15-100 members. As Tacugama's chimps are not related, bonds take time to form. The surrogate mothers put small groups together of 3-4 babies, who play together and bond (the younger the chimp, the easier it is). They are still fed milk, and are introduced to the electric fences.

### 3 Integration

The chimps become part of larger groups, whose members take over care duties from the surrogate mothers. Integration is quite a process – staff must closely observe behaviour and 'friendships' before any blending takes place. Youngsters are typically moved with their closest friends, so as not to break established bonds. Chimps are territorial, and don't always welcome newcomers, so dynamics are monitored carefully. The process is tailored depending on the individuals; no two integrations are the same.

● CHIMPANZEES



Tacugama founder  
Bala Amarasekaran

infrastructure that mimics the vines and forests that its lodgers were once swinging from. On any given day, chimp residents Perry and Tetina can be seen grooming Mac, while youngsters Coco and Ribi learn from the adults, playing with rocks and trying to crack nuts. Hashi, meanwhile, lounges in the sun resting with baby Milo.

Tacugama's new rescues are often young chimps who have been poached from the wild after witnessing the killing of their families. Frequently sold into the pet trade, these youngsters often arrive with broken bones, gunshot wounds or injuries sustained from snares and ropes. They are often



The sanctuary is able to undertake medical procedures in-house



Female Fifo was rescued in 2018 and is part of the nursery group

Where is Sierra Leone?



The country lies in West Africa and is bordered by Guinea to the north, Liberia to the south-east, and the Atlantic Ocean to the west.

suffering from illness due to poor conditions endured in captivity, including malnutrition, respiratory issues, parasites and skin infections – all issues the chimps could largely solve on their own in the wild.

The team of volunteers and staff are kept busy with the young chimps, who require round-the-clock care from a mother figure who will provide them with milk every couple of hours, teach them to climb, introduce them to food and give them the support they need to grow and thrive. The keepers form deep bonds with the chimps while treating each one with compassion and dedication.

Over the years, Tacugama has been able to grow and expand its on-site clinic, and most procedures are now done in-house. Late last year, with the help of visiting vet Romain Pizzi, the team completed a particularly monumental orthopedic procedure on a young female called Tsotsi.

Tsotsi had come into the sanctuary alone, malnourished, hairless and with a complete fracture to her leg. She had suffered the fracture when she was captured six months earlier, possibly from the impact of a bullet. Checking her over, the team discovered 12 bullets still in her body. But after extensive

surgery and five months of dedicated rehabilitation work, involving repeat checks, radiographs and intensive physiotherapy, Tsotsi made an impressive recovery. “She is now a beautiful young lady and the peacemaker of her group,” says resident vet Zoe MacIntyre. “We are very proud of her progress, and that of the other young chimps in our care.”

The care and attention the Tacugama chimpanzees receive means that one day, they’ll be fit for the wild again, as they are released together in the family bonds they’ve formed in the sanctuary. This is important, as in the wild, western chimps live in diverse groups comprising individuals of all ages.

**B**EFORE ACHIEVING THIS GOAL, it is crucial to ensure the wild is a safe habitat. Bala and his team are achieving this not only by enforcing stricter anti-poaching laws, fostering national pride and even adding chimpanzee conservation to the national school curriculum, but also working towards more education and enforcement in remote, rural areas. Numerous projects are in progress across the country, including in

the Loma Mountains and Outamba-Kilimi National Parks.

Loma Mountains National Park is a particular biodiversity hotspot in Sierra Leone, home to 20 per cent of the country’s chimpanzee population – the highest concentration of chimpanzees in West and Central Africa. In March 2019, a nest survey by Tacugama revealed a significant increase in chimpanzee density, highlighting the region’s crucial role in conservation. However, logging near the park has disrupted local communities and increased threats to the park’s ecosystem.

In Outamba-Kilimi, meanwhile, alongside the sanctuary’s efforts, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) has funded the West Africa Biodiversity and Low Emissions Development Program to support conservation, community development, and ongoing research and protection.

ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER



Italian-born Renato Granieri is a wildlife photographer who specialises in the polar regions and is involved in a project with Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary 2022.

A national survey and census by Tacugama has revealed that half of Sierra Leone’s chimpanzee population resides in unprotected areas. To address this, Tacugama is collaborating with more than 108 communities living in poverty, offering support via various initiatives in exchange for the protection of local chimpanzee populations. “You’ve got to provide something different,” says Bala. “We support farming, livestock and handicraft development. We can say, ‘We’re planting rice because you still have chimps in the forest. The moment the chimps are gone, we are gone.’”

To assist with these initiatives, the sanctuary recently recruited their first female rangers – a group of 15 women from remote villages. Carefully selected and trained in the scientific and technical aspects of the job, the women are being deployed as anti-poaching guards and assisting with zoonotic disease programmes.

Through support with education, resources and livestock, these communities are empowered to thrive through sustainable farming, reducing the potential for human-wildlife conflict. Chimpanzees and their habitat can also provide direct and indirect

benefits to local communities through the development of carefully regulated and ecologically sustainable tourism.

**S**IERRA LEONE’S TOURISM infrastructure is still in its infancy and limited to the capital, Freetown. Rural areas that offer the chance to view wildlife such as chimpanzees, pigmy hippos and leopards don’t necessarily have the infrastructure to support visitors. Bala explains that he’d like to tread lightly with infrastructure, and replicate a luxury tent experience like that found in East Africa.

Through Bala’s efforts, Tacugama’s innovative initiatives serve as a beacon of hope for these remarkable creatures. By fostering a strong connection between people and wildlife, its team are not only saving Sierra Leone’s chimpanzees, but also enriching the lives of local communities and promoting sustainable development. He is demonstrating how conservation can be a harmonious blend of compassion, education and community engagement, ensuring a thriving future for both humans and chimpanzees in West Africa. **W**