

## E-mail from Luz Carvajal

Bonobos have an interbirth interval of approximately 4-5 years, which means that once a female has a baby, she will usually care for them for at least 4 years before having a new one. This is why it was so wonderful that during my nine months at LuiKotale I had the fortune to see five new baby bonobos join the two communities that we're studying. Ngola and Uma, from the West community; and Evimba, Pembe



and Agbaya from the East community all had babies in the last year! Being there to see all this new life, the hope that each baby represents and the ways motherhood changes each of the females in a unique way was an incredible experience.

Bonobos are classified as endangered according to the IUCN Red List, and on 2016 it was estimated there are at least 15.000 to 20.000 bonobos left in the wild. Everyone on the team at LuiKotale - Congolese and foreigner alike- is deeply invested in bonobo wellbeing and conservation. When we are there we all share the sun and the stars, the heat of the dry season, the endless pouring of the wet season. When we are there we all share the forest and we all root for bonobos to live healthy and long lives in their only home. Thus it is always a celebration when a new baby is born, we're all happy and excited. Sometimes, when possible, the assistants would get together after dinner and share a chocolate bar among us to celebrate the new life. Chocolate bars are rare and valuable when you're in the forest, and they taste like heaven, like home, like happiness. We celebrate that there's a new individual in the community, and most importantly that they have a rich and safe environment to grow in and thrive.

To keep track of the females' reproductive cycles and health, we try to test them for pregnancy once a month. To do this we collect urine samples whenever we have the opportunity in the field, take them back to camp in the evening and then use a human pregnancy test that we stick into the pee tube. Expectation builds while we wait ten minutes for the two red lines to appear. Sometimes a bonobo tests positive but then months pass and nothing happens. And sometimes a bonobo tests negative and then... surprise! This was the case on a January morning, one of the difficult ones. Sometimes the weather is playing against us: it's rainy, the bonobos are not having a good morning either so they go high up in a tree to rest for hours in a nest and we just have to stay under the tree in the cold and with poor visibility. Then after the rain, honeybees and sweatbees like to come out and enjoy a tasty treat of field assistants. So there I was, excited because bonobos were finally coming

down from the tree and I knew action was afoot. I saw Uma coming down from the tree and I positioned myself under her to try to collect her urine. Then I see... is that a tiny foot?

Uma's youngest daughter at the moment, Uzi, is quite independent and I had never seen Uma carrying her before. And the little leg visible on Uma's fur was way too small to be Uzi anyway. Surprised and joyful, I tried to get a better look and there she is, seen by a human for the very first time, Uma's little baby. I was euphoric! I stayed with Uma for a while, trying to see her baby as clearly as possible without disturbing them, making sure she was alive and well. I noticed that adult male Hugo was with Uma, casually grooming her limbs and sitting next to her. Hugo is most of the time found at the periphery of the group thus I found this interaction very sweet. That was an unforgettable morning and I felt privileged to catch a glimpse of this new life, to have our life stories cross, even for a moment.

The mother-infant bond in bonobos is a precious thing to witness. Female bonobos of different ages and levels of experience receive their babies into the community with dedication and so much care. From making sure that the baby is being carried safely while traveling in the forest, to attentively grooming their little bodies to keep them healthy and clean, motherhood is a full time commitment to female bonobos. But bonobos always have time for fun, and mothers are no exception! Once I saw Evimba from the East community enjoying a fresh antelope while her baby Eba cried loudly. Holding an antelope and deciding who to share it with is a very demanding task, and sometimes babies just have to wait! Carrying a dependent baby is no obstacle for female bonobos to engage in sexual activity either. You can see them sometimes holding their baby with one arm while performing the active hip motions typical of a G-G rubbing. There's always time for strengthening community bonds in bonobo society!

The work at LuiKotale is like nothing else. Seeing baby bonobos starting their lives, exploring the forest and getting more curious, brave and independent is an incredible experience. The biggest reward is knowing that every contribution goes to support their safety and gives them a better chance of having a bright life in the forest, their home.

Luz Carvajal