

E-mail from Solène Lehmann

Ever since I came back to France, people who know me and who know that working with bonobos was my dream and the reason I started a career in primatology in the first place, all ask me the same question “How was it to finally meet the bonobos?”. So, I thought this was a great story to share with you; the story of how thanks to the LuiKotale Bonobo Project and Bonobo Alive I got the incredible chance to meet wild bonobos in their natural habitat.



I arrived in Congo on the 11th of November 2020 and 11 days later after months (or even years) of waiting for this day, on the 22nd of November it was finally my first day in the forest with the bonobos. It was 5h10 when I got to the place where the bonobos spent the night, it was still dark, but I could distinguish a few dark heaps in the trees; the nests. Seeing these nests, I could already feel the emotion seize me. And then I heard them for the first time. When I tell the story of this first encounter, I always split in 4 major moments, and the first one is the first time I heard them move around in their nests and I heard their vocalisations. This sound will forever remain in my memory. After a few minutes hearing them communicating and agitating themselves in their nests, they started coming down and I saw a bonobo for the first time. This is the second part of my encounter with the bonobos, when I first saw a bonobo arboreal. This bonobo was a female named Polly. When I set eyes on her for the first time, I froze, I think it was at this very moment that I started to understand that there I was finally, I was in the rain forest of Congo surrounded by a community of bonobos with whom I was gonna live and work for 9 months. And then there was THE key moment of this encounter, the 3rd step and the most intense, when I found myself only a few meters away from a bonobo on the ground, Emil. At this instant, time stopped, the world faded away to leave just the two of us, this male bonobo that I discovered for the first time and me. Emil was there, sat on a log, looking at me with a peaceful, but also very intrigued and curious look on his face. It was not a meeting just for me, it was one for him as well. When our eyes crossed, I felt a warm feeling overwhelm me, tears started to run down my cheeks, the emotion I felt at this precise moment is indescribable. It took me a couple of minutes to gather my thought again and then I started my workday and followed Emil and the rest of the bonobos during their day in the forest. The final step of my encounter with the bonobos is not an exact moment, but it is the 9 months that followed that day, I met the bonobos once, but I discovered them everyday I spent with them.

Living 9 months in LuiKotale with the people who became my friends, even my family, working with the bonobos who I also ended up developing some sort of relationship with, was a life changing experience. Of course, it would be lying to say that it was not challenging and that there were not days

where I deeply hated the bonobos and wanted to go back to France. However, I am also grateful for those rough moments, having to run behind the bonobos, going through insane patches of lianas and all sorts of vegetation, falling in the swamps with mud until my thighs, or simply walking nonstop from 5 in the morning till 8 at night, all of that was an integral part of this amazing work. I now and will forever cherish every little moment I spent in this forest with the local people, with my fellow research assistants and most importantly with my beloved bonobos. I know I am extremely lucky to have been able to work in such a place, and I am deeply grateful to Bonobo Alive for this opportunity they gave me to fulfil my dream but also for the work they conduct there, protecting the bonobos and their surrounding biodiversity, raising awareness among the local communities, involving them in every way then can in the conservation work they do.

Solène Lehmann (Strasbourg, October 2021)