



## Where the Silver Ends and the Gray Begins:

### ***Caring for Geriatric Silverbacks and Older Female Gorillas***

*Kristina A. Krickbaum, Keeper II Primates  
Zoo Atlanta, Atlanta, GA*

Zoo Atlanta is home to 19 Western Lowland Gorillas (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*), one of the largest collections in North America. We currently have three geriatric gorillas aged 50 and older, all of whom were wild caught. Our oldest male Ozoum (Ozzie), is 52-years-old and he lives with 0.1 Choomba who is 50-years-old and 0.1 Shamba who is 54-years-old. Ozzie is currently the oldest living male gorilla in captivity.

Thanks to improved husbandry and veterinary care, gorillas are living longer in captivity. As these animals age, there are certain challenges to keep them healthy and with a good quality of life. Many animals experience decreased mobility as they age due to conditions like arthritis. Over the years, Zoo Atlanta has made several modifications to our holding areas to accommodate arthritic gorillas.

To aid in husbandry, many of the indoor holding areas already had large rungs attached to the wall or ladders attached to the mesh to facilitate climbing up to nesting shelves or to upper shift doors. In addition to these fixtures, we have also made concrete steps on the inside and outside of shift doors to ease access to the building. (Figures 1 and 2)

Another modification that has been made to help with climbing in and out of upper shift doors or nesting shelves is adding lengths of chain that run through PVC pipe and are then suspended from the ceiling. In one holding we also have a ramp leading up to a shelf. Firehose can also be used to aid in climbing and we even constructed a ladder made of firehose with PVC in the rungs to be more stable. Hammocks can be lowered near the floor and some of the gorillas enjoy dunnage racks to rest on as well. (Figures 3, 4 and 5)

Given the sensitivity older animals have with their joints, we use foam gym mats for gorillas while recovering from anesthesia. This is particularly helpful for animals that try sitting up too early and may fall back down. These mats have come in handy for ill gorillas as well to add extra padding under hay or wood wool (excelsior).

We have had to be inventive when animals are not able to get close enough to the mesh to eat, drink or take medications. The "geriatric spoon" is a spoon on a long broom handle and the "geriatric straw" is a PVC tube with an elbow bend at one end. (Figures 6 and 7)

Geriatric gorillas also need to be monitored carefully for heart disease which is the number one cause of death in captive gorillas. In partnership with The Great Ape Heart Project and sonographers from Children's Healthcare of Atlanta (CHOA), we have been training for voluntary cardiac ultrasounds and voluntary blood pressure readings. This will enable veterinary staff to catch potential problems earlier as well as tracking individuals who currently have heart disease. Some gorillas have difficulty getting their chests up close to the mesh, so we created a "Reverse Sleeve" for easier access. (Figures 8, 9 and 10)

We have been looking into starting laser treatments for gorillas with arthritis, and have begun training with several gorillas to accept having the laser probe near them. On occasion we have used radiographs to check hands or wrists for arthritis. We fitted a PVC sleeve for use with our portholes and Veterinary staff was able to set up a portable x-ray machine to get images.

In conclusion, there are any number of ways to help make life easier for the aging gorillas in our care. It doesn't have to be expensive, it just takes a little forethought and creativity. 🐼



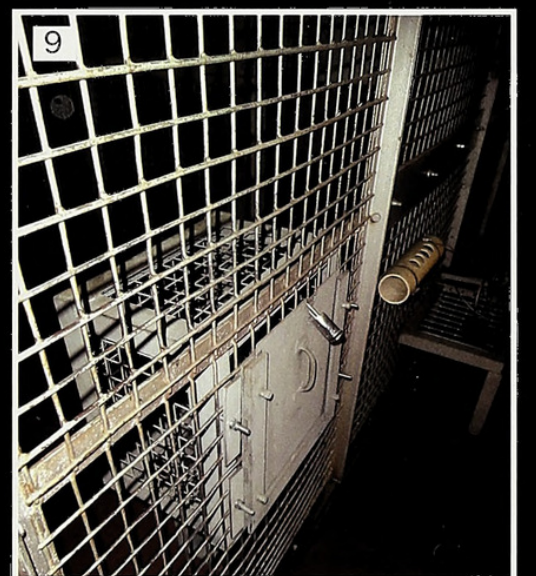
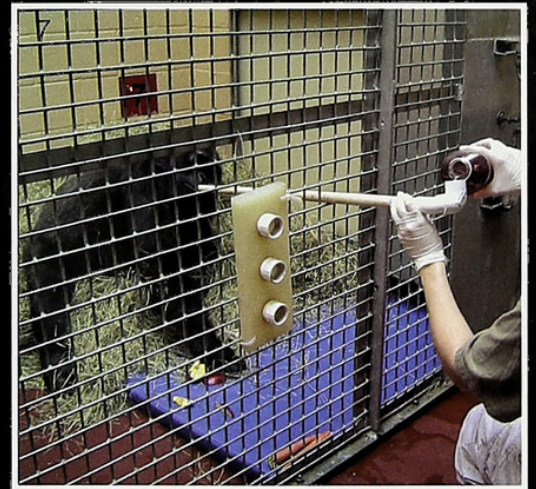


Figure 1: Wall rung made in-house. Photo by Jodi Carrigan. Figure 2: Cement step made in-house. Photo by Jodi Carrigan. Figure 3: PVC pipe covering chain made in-house. Also shows rungs that were manufactured. Photo by Jodi Carrigan. Figure 4: Mesh ramp. Photo by Jodi Carrigan. Figure 5: 0.1 Choomba enjoying a Dunnage (TM) rack. Photo by Jodi Carrigan. Figure 6: Geriatric straw made in-house. Photo by Jodi Carrigan. Figure 7: Geriatric spoon made in-house. Photo by Jodi Carrigan. Figure 8: 1.0 Charlie participating in blood pressure training with keeper Jodi Carrigan. Photo by Adam K. Thompson/Zoo Atlanta. Figure 9: Reverse sleeve viewed from keeper-side of mesh. Photo by Jodi Carrigan. Figure 10: Reverse sleeve viewed from gorilla-side of mesh. Photo by Jodi Carrigan.





Krickbaum and Kristina A. 2014. "Where the Silver Ends and the Gray Begins: Caring for Geriatric Silverbacks and Older Female Gorillas." *Animal keepers' forum* 41(3), 84–85.

**View This Item Online:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/219342>

**Permalink:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/315320>

**Holding Institution**

Smithsonian Libraries and Archives

**Sponsored by**

Biodiversity Heritage Library

**Copyright & Reuse**

Copyright Status: In Copyright. Digitized with the permission of the rights holder

Rights Holder: American Association of Zoo Keepers

License: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

Rights: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/permissions/>

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.