BIOGRAPHY OF A PRIMATOLOGIST

JANE GOODALL

Born
April 3, 1934
London, England

By Cynthia Stokes Brown, adapted by Newsela
Jane Goodall pioneered the study of chimpanzees in the wild. She demonstrated how similar chimpanzee behavior is to that of humans, and helped to show the close evolutionary relationship of the two species.
An early interest in animal life

Jane Goodall’s father was a car-racing businessman. Her mother wrote novels.

When Jane was just over a year old, her father gave her a stuffed chimpanzee toy named “Jubilee,” after the first chimpanzee infant ever born at the London Zoo. No one could have foreseen the influence it would have on her.

Goodall’s interest in observing animal life began early. When she was 4, she wanted so badly to know how an egg came out of a hen that she hid inside a small henhouse for nearly four hours waiting to see it happen.

Goodall’s fascination with Africa was aroused by reading The Story of Doctor Dolittle by Hugh Lofting. Lofting depicts Dolittle as a kindly doctor who travels to Africa and talks to animals. Jane also read all of the Tarzan books.

Goodall’s parents divorced when she was 12. She could not afford to attend college. Instead, she went to work as a secretary. In 1956, a friend invited her to visit her family’s farm in Kenya. Goodall went back to live at home, and worked hard as a waitress. In five months, she’d saved enough money for the fare on a ship to Kenya.
A meeting with Louis Leakey

In 1957, Goodall visited her friend’s family on their farm outside Nairobi. She soon found a job as a secretary in the city. Her interest in animals led her to contact Louis Leakey, the famous seeker of hominine bones, who was then working in Africa. He promptly hired her as his secretary.

Leakey had been looking for someone to study chimpanzees in the wild. After he got to know Goodall, he felt that she would be perfect. Leakey believed that a woman would be more patient than a man in the field. A woman’s presence might also be less likely to trigger the aggressions of male chimps. She returned to London to study primates in the London Zoo. Meanwhile, Leakey raised money to support her field studies and arranged her equipment.

In 1960, when she was 26, Goodall eagerly traveled 600 miles southwest of Nairobi to live at Gombe Stream Chimpanzee Preserve, on Lake Tanganyika. There, about 150 chimpanzees made their home in a 20- to 30-square-mile area. It took months for the chimps to get used to her presence. After nearly a year, most of them would allow her to get within a hundred yards.

Observing chimpanzee culture

Goodall had little professional training in animal studies. She found her own way of working. Instead of giving the chimpanzees numbers, she gave them names. She wanted to understand the personality of each one. She also found that baiting the animals with bananas helped to attract them close enough for her to observe their social behavior and to photograph them.

Within four months, Goodall had observed behavior that went against a belief strongly held by archaeologists: that only humans used tools. “Man the toolmaker” was the phrase they used. But Goodall saw a chimp break off a twig, strip its bark, and insert it into a termite mound. When the chimp withdrew the twig, it was covered with delicious termites ready to be licked off. Since then, other researchers have observed chimpanzees using more than half a dozen tools for assorted purposes. Chimp societies across Africa vary in their use of tools. Other animals, including some birds and dolphins, are now known to use tools.

Chimps were also widely believed to be vegetarians. However, Goodall observed them hunting, killing, and eating small colobus monkeys. Goodall made her findings public in her book *In the Shadow of Man* (1971).

Leakey believed that having a PhD would help give credibility to Goodall’s work. He raised the funds to send her to Cambridge University. In 1965, she received a PhD in ethology, the scientific study of animal behavior.

Leakey also sent a photographer, Hugo Van Lawick, to Gombe to record Goodall’s work there. The two fell in love and married in 1964. Their son, Hugo Eric Louis Van Lawick, was born in 1967. They called him “Grub” and raised him in Gombe with the chimpanzees. In 1972, Goodall and her husband published a children’s book about their son called *Grub: The Bush Baby*. But their marriage deteriorated, and they divorced in 1974. A year later, she married Derek Bryceson, director of Tanzania’s national parks. However, he died of cancer after only five years of marriage.
After Goodall recovered from the death of her husband, she wrote her defining scientific work, *The Chimpanzees of Gombe: Patterns of Behavior* (1986). In this book, she detailed acts of warfare, murder, brutality, and even cannibalism by her beloved chimpanzees. When Goodall began studying chimps, she believed in their basic goodness. For the first 10 years, she had believed that they were “rather nicer than human beings.” But now she had seen that in certain situations, such as competition for food, a mate, or territory, or under emotions of jealousy, fear, or revenge, they changed. Their behavior proved as dark and troubling as that seen in humans.

At the same time, chimpanzees often demonstrated sharing, helping, and compassion. Mothers, children, and siblings developed deep ties. Throughout their lifetimes they assisted each other. Older siblings adopted younger ones if a mother died. They would even adopt an orphan from another mother if it had no relative to protect it. Some mothers were more attentive and playful than others. Goodall observed that their chimps grew up less depressed and aggressive than the chimps whose mothers were less attentive.

Some primatologists have criticized Goodall’s methods, especially her use of bananas in feeding stations to attract chimps. They claim that the food causes higher levels of aggression and conflict, distorting normal behavior. But other research has shown similar levels of conflict without feeding stations.

**Messenger of compassion**

Since finishing *The Chimpanzees of Gombe*, Goodall has devoted herself to writing, speaking, and fundraising to support the study and protection of chimpanzees and other wild animals. In 1976, Goodall and a friend founded the Jane Goodall Institute to support research and efforts to protect chimpanzees and their habitats. It has offices worldwide.

In 1991, a group of 16 teenagers met Goodall at her home in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. They wanted to discuss what they could do to help the environment, animals, and the global human community. Out of that meeting, Goodall organized Roots and Shoots, a global youth program. It now has thousands of groups in more than 100 countries.

Goodall remains extremely active in wildlife conservation work. In 2002, she was named a United Nations Messenger of Peace.
Timeline of Goodall’s life

1986
Publishes *The Chimpanzees of Gombe*

2002
Named a United Nations Messenger of Peace

2004
Made a Dame of the British Empire

2011
Release of *Jane’s Journey*, a documentary film about Goodall’s life and work

1986
Diane Fossey, a Leakey colleague studying gorillas, is murdered in Rwanda

1980
1990
2000
2010
2020
2030

During the time of Goodall
Sources


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Goodall with a chimpanzee, in the Gombe National Park © Bettmann/CORBIS

Portrait of a chimpanzee © Fiona Rogers/CORBIS

Goodall speaks at the National Press Club, 1985 © Bettmann/CORBIS
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