



ZOE MULLER

home at last

In the August 2011 issue of *Africa Geographic* we told you about an octet of giraffes that sailed across Kenya's Lake Baringo to a new home. It was a story that touched the hearts of many readers, so we asked its author, **Zoe Muller**, to give us an update on how these gentle animals are progressing.

THE SHORES OF LAKE BARINGO

They were once the ancestral home of the Rothschild's giraffe – indeed, the subspecies was previously known as the Baringo giraffe. When eight of these animals were shipped across the lake to Ruko Conservancy in February 2011, it was hoped they would resettle an area their predecessors had once roamed. So how are these pioneers faring?

All eight giraffes settled quickly into their new surroundings, apparently unperturbed by the long journey. At first they stuck together in two groups of four – interestingly, the same groups in which they had crossed the lake. There could be a number of reasons for this, but many people like to believe that a strong bond developed between shipmates. Almost two years later the bond appears to have dissolved and the eight now intermingle freely with one another and go about doing typically giraffe things: browsing on trees, ruminating in the sunshine and wandering around looking graceful.

As a representative of the Giraffe Conservation Foundation, which aims to protect and conserve all giraffe subspecies across Africa, I am keeping a close eye on these Baringo giraffes. Unbeknown to them, they hold the key to the subspecies' homecoming. It's quite a responsibility for such calm, gentle and unassuming creatures, but already they are on track – two of the females are pregnant!

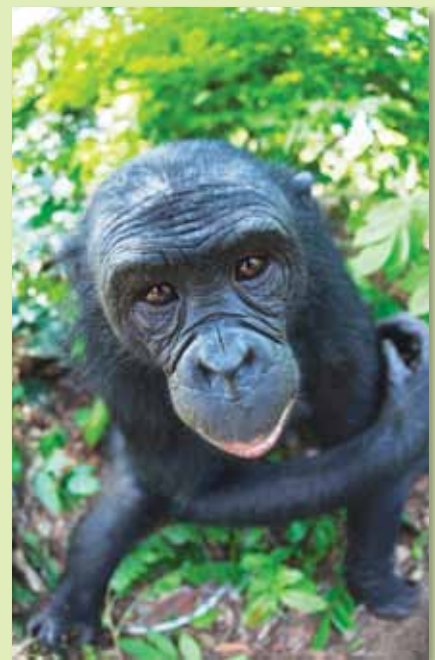
Some of the 'Baringo eight', feeling perfectly at home.

WAR OR PEACE

Bonobos, chimpanzees, humans – we're all closely related, right? A team of researchers led by the Max Planck Institute (MPI) for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany, recently completed the sequencing of the bonobo genome and, with this last piece of the great ape genome puzzle in place, confirmed that we are indeed closely related. Their study, published in *Nature*, went on to look at the evolutionary relationship between bonobos, humans and chimps and, says the MPI's Kay Prüfer, 'We found that more than three per cent of the human genome is more closely related to *either* the bonobo *or* the chimpanzee genome than these primates are related to each other.' The result has enabled the scientists to reconstruct aspects of the ancestry of these two ape species.

Chimpanzees are distributed widely across equatorial Africa, whereas bonobos occur only in the Democratic Republic of Congo south of the Congo River. The genetics indicate that bonobos diverged from chimpanzees about two million years ago. This timing is consistent with the suggestion that the Congo River formed between 1.5 and 2.5 million years ago; it may have separated bonobo and chimpanzee ancestors, allowing the two species to evolve over a relatively short time. By contrast, humans diverged from the ancestor it shared with bonobos and chimps some five to seven million years ago.

Our closest relatives may be similar genetically, but behaviourally they can be quite different. In a conflict situation when chimps will become aggressive, bonobos are more likely to turn to sex. The researchers aim to study the origin of behaviours like these, and their underlying genetics, in relation to humans too. 'If you look at bonobos and chimpanzees, you see that there are specific characteristics that humans share with both of them,' says Prüfer. 'So, for instance, non-conceptive sexual behaviour is a trait humans have in common with bonobos. Aggression, unfortunately, is a characteristic we share with chimpanzees. In a way, it goes back to the ancestor of all three; which trait did it have, and in which species did the new trait evolve?' *Tim Jackson*



MARTIN HARVEY

Bonobo, the 'love ape', is a peaceable species that uses sex to defuse a conflict situation.