

Gorilla



When you hear the term 'life cycle,' the first thing that pops into your head might be an insect, since they have different physical forms at different stages of life. However, the term life cycle simply refers to the birth, growth, and reproduction of any living thing, regardless if it dramatically changes form or not. As an example, take the mountain gorilla (*Gorilla beringei beringei*). These creatures grow during their life cycle, but they don't dramatically change form.

Female mountain gorillas give birth to a single baby after a gestation period (the time a mother carries the baby before giving birth) of nine months, just like humans. Even though gorillas are large animals, the newborn babies weigh in at just four pounds! They rely entirely on their mother. She carries them until they are four months old. Then, the babies are able to cling to her back, which they do until they stop nursing at two to three years old. At age three, mountain gorillas are independent, but not mature. This is their 'juvenile' stage, and it lasts until they are six or so.

Females reach sexual maturity at about 10 years old, and males at 15 to 20 years old. This is the 'mature adult' stage. In the period between their juvenile and mature adult stage, they are young adults. To recap, the mountain gorilla life cycle looks like this:

Infant->juvenile->young adult->mature adult.

Infant mountain gorillas cling to the backs of their mothers

Choosing a Mate

The life cycle comes full circle once the mountain gorilla is sexually mature and can find a mate to have a baby of its own. Mountain gorillas live in groups of up to 30 individuals, led by a single dominant male. He is known as the silverback, because male gorillas grow gray hair on their backs as they age. The rest of the group is made up of females and their young, and occasionally one or two young adult males.

The silverback has total access to the females of the group. He is the only one that mates with them, and he mates with several of them. When males reach adulthood, they typically leave to form their own group or to challenge a silverback in order to take over an established group.

Though the male is dominant, it is the female that decides when to mate. When she is ready, she will approach the male. After having a baby, females will not mate again for several years and usually have only one baby every four years at most. Gorilla mating is not seasonal, and can happen any time of year.