

Chimps at Edinburgh Zoo

✘ In March, staff welcomed 11 new chimps to Budongo Trail to join the existing 11 resident chimps to create a 'super group' in the world's largest chimpanzee enclosure at Edinburgh Zoo. Now nearly six months on, and after a series of staged introductions, the complex process of integrating the two groups has been successfully completed much to the excitement of keepers.

Chimps live in complex communities led by a dominant male. Due to hierarchical groupings, keepers closely observed the status level of every chimp in the new group and correlated this to the nearest in status in the existing one. As Jo Richardson, Head Keeper at Budongo Trail reveals, individual characters and compatibility as well as hierarchical status is considered when introducing chimps:- "It is important for the success of the integration to know individuals well as chimps have a lot of group politics and social dynamics, and are an extremely intelligent and volatile species. This has been the biggest challenge and achievement for all the team at Budongo Trail so far, as this is the largest integration of chimps we have ever undertaken.

"At Edinburgh Zoo our resident chimps have distinct characteristics and we completely understand their status in the group. But when you bring in a new group this has to be handled in the right way to ensure that no one's status is challenged initially as the two groups come together. So you start with those with the lowest status then gradually progress up the status ladder until you get to the highest level and those being the alpha males. This is done at the chimps' pace to ensure all group members have a chance to settle and integrate well with hopefully minimal aggression, as chimps will sort out hierarchy and dynamics through both affiliative behavior and sometimes fighting."

Chimp hierarchies do not have a strict “pecking order”, but are complex, fluid, flexible, and change often. Rank depends on personality as much as strength. Chimps spend hours grooming friends and family and reinforcing social bonds and allegiances. Highly intelligent, chimpanzees are the closest living primate to humans, sharing 98% of their DNA and are known to live up to 60 years in captivity. Today, there are estimated to be 170,000 – 300,000 chimpanzees left in Africa, and their population is decreasing rapidly.



Photo courtesy of RZSS - on the left Kilimi (original group) and right Heleen (from joining group that arrived in March

As Jo continues: “Over the last few weeks the alpha male from the original group, Qafzeh, and his challenger, Kindia, have now been introduced to alpha male Claus from the new group. So far they have given each other a wide berth but over the next few weeks as the groups start to settle into one, it will be interesting to see how the dominance struggle between these males plays out once the group dynamics stabilise. Already we are seeing allegiances change and strengthen as chimps from both groups start to integrate.”

Originally from Beekse Bergen Safari Park in Holland, it is hoped that the 11 new chimps will be an important part of Edinburgh Zoo’s contribution to the captive breeding programme which is now concentrating on the endangered sub-species, the Western chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes verus*).