Book Review
A.F. Dixson
The Natural History of the Gorilla
A.F. Dixson has presented us with an up-to-date account of the habits, behavior, ecology and
reproductive biology of the gorilla. In eight tightly written chapters, the author presents us with a
detailed examination of past and recent research on the biology of the largest and least known of
the Great Apes.
In the first chapter, the history of the gorilla’s discovery by Europeans is recounted with a
summary on the current status of gorillas in captivity. He then turns to the problems of
classification and makes use of Colin Groves’ suggestion that the species Gorilla gorilla is
divisible into three distinct subspecies. The anatomy of the gorilla is then reviewed, compared
and contrasted with the other Great Apes. The gorilla’s phylogenetic position is assessed in a
very fair manner and conflicting interpretations of the gorilla’s relationship to the other Great
Apes and man are presented. Behavioral research on the sensory capacities and the performance
of gorillas in psychological testing situations are then reviewed and contrasted with other
primates. The longest section of the book summarizes research on behavior and ecology by
comparing and contrasting studies on both the lowland gorilla and the mountain gorilla.
Reproduction and development are thoroughly discussed and compared with the higher apes and
man. The final chapter discusses the problems of preserving extant gorilla populations and the
prospects for captive breeding. Dixson believes that gorillas should be bred and studied in
captivity but he firmly comes down on the side of preservation of natural habitats and protection
of gorilla populations in the wild.
The book is well-indexed and has a competent bibliography. It is written for the nonspecialist but
students of anthropoid apes will find it a useful compilation. The author is to be congratulated on
a well-written volume that should be on the shelf of every pri-matologist.
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