Nemours Pediatric Specialists Perform First of Its Kind Hearing Test on Gorilla

When the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens suspected that one of their Western Lowland Gorillas, Kumbuka, wasn't able to hear, they asked for assistance from pediatric specialists at Nemours Children's Health System to diagnose the nearly 300 pound primate.

On Thursday, March 9, after a hearing exam from Christine Cook, MS, CCC-A, Pediatric Audiologist and Drew Horlbeck, MD, Pediatric Otologist from Nemours Children's Health System, it was confirmed that Kumbuka is indeed deaf in both ears.

"This is something that I do everyday with my patients at Nemours but this was the chance of a lifetime in my opinion," said Cook. "Walking up to her for the first time, it took my breath away."

Not long after Kumbuka arrived at the Zoo in 2014, zookeepers began to suspect that she may have hearing loss in a similar fashion to how you may get indications from a small child — not responding to their own name, needing someone in front of them before recognizing that they are present, etc.

Dr. Horlbeck used an otoscope to look into the gorilla's ears to see if there were any obvious signs of abnormality or blockage but found none. "A gorilla's ears are structured very similarly to a typical human's ears, only theirs are darker and definitely a lot more hairy," he said.

The audiology department at Nemours in Jacksonville sees nearly 6,000 children annually to test for hearing loss. This is the first documented gorilla hearing test of its kind.

The hearing testing was part of a larger health screening that Kumbuka underwent while fully sedated. Other testing was completed by other specialists who will complete the routine portion of her exam. Unfortunately there isn't much that can be done to restore her hearing however the Zoo's keepers can use this knowledge to improve her overall quality of life.

"Now that Kumbuka's deafness has been confirmed, we will continue to work helping her to improve her quality of life by having the keepers incorporate more visual queues than would typically be used and ultimately help her become a great mom which is the ultimate goal," said Meredith Persky, DVM, Veterinarian at the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens.

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