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Zoo warns visitors not to show videos to 'fascinated' gorillas

Keepers became concerned about addictive behaviour of teenage ape being shown footage on people's phones

By Verity Bowman and Susie Coen, US CORRESPONDENT

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He is not the only teenager to have become so enthralled by mobile phones that it impacts his relationship with his family.

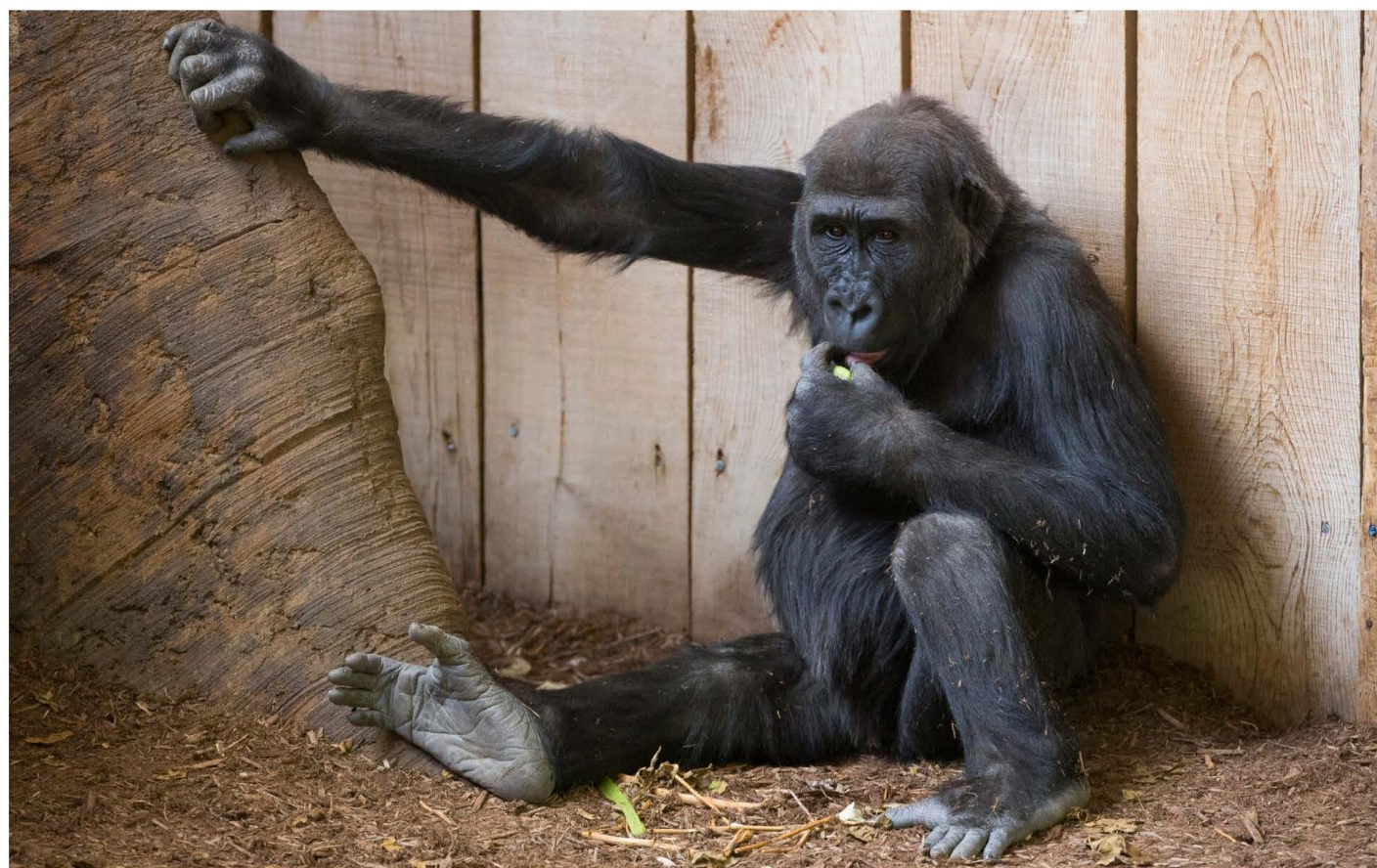
But Nassir, aged 13, is a Western lowland gorilla and his behaviour so concerned Canadian zookeepers that they have put up signs around his enclosure asking visitors not to show him any more footage.

Videos and photos shown to apes on mobile phones “can be upsetting and affect their relationships and behaviour within the family”, the signs at Toronto Zoo read.

Zoo patrons have taken in recent years to showing gorillas videos on their phones and recording the reaction to share on social media.

But it has left some of the animals glued to mobiles. Toronto Zoo says that Nassir is the “the epitome of a teenager” who is “fascinated by videos and screen time would dominate his life if he had his way”.

“Nassir, in particular, was really interested in seeing different videos. I think, mostly, he was seeing videos of other animals. But, I think what is really important is that he’s able to just hang out with his brother and be a gorilla,” said Hollie Ross, a behavioural husbandry supervisor at the zoo.



Toronto Zoo says 13-year-old Nassir is very interested in screen time | CREDIT: Rick Madonik/Toronto Star

Maria Franke, the zoo's director of wildlife conservation and welfare, said Nassir "was just so enthralled with gadgets and phones and the videos" he was becoming distracted and not interacting with other gorillas.

The ape now appears to have grown out of his fascination with the devices after the ban, Ms Franke said.

She told the Toronto Star: "It's like Nassir was a little boy, all he wanted to do was sit in the basement and play games on the computer".

"I'm not really sure what the content of the videos was. Was it gorillas in the wild? I have no idea. Was it a cartoon? I have no idea. But obviously, there was something that was attracting him to it."

It comes after a Chicago zoo was forced to install a rope line a few feet away from the glass partition between visitors and the apes after experts noted that apes distracted by phones had begun to show behavioural changes.

Lincoln Park Zoo employees were concerned gorilla Amare's interest in the devices could see him become a target for bullying after the ape was "glued to a cell phone" when a fellow ape "rushed him".



Signs have been posted around the apes' enclosures at the zoo to remind visitors to stick to the rules | CREDIT: Richard Lautens/Toronto Star

Stephen Ross, the director of the Lester E Fisher Center for the Study and Conservation of Apes, said at the time: "It's probably a cyclical phenomena, the more he shows interest, the more people want to engage in it."

In San Diego last year, a monkey was seen attempting to use a phone after it was dropped into his enclosure.

CCTV recorded in China showed a monkey pick up a phone from the floor of an apartment and scroll through it. The phone's owner told local media that the monkey had managed to empty her online shopping cart in one go.

Another viral clip showed a gorilla signalling to the person holding a phone near his enclosure to swipe to the next video, raising his finger each time he wanted to watch something new.

Toronto Zoo said it is committed to making sure the video issue does not become serious.

"When our guests come to the zoo, we want them to be able to see gorillas in a very natural state, and what they would be doing naturally – to sort of connect with them on that level," Ms Ross said.

"We don't really want our guests coming and showing them videos. We would rather have them see them do gorilla things," Ms Ross said.

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