

Hear it for yourself: Zoo gorillas invent new call to communicate with human handlers

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Sukari the gorilla at Zoo Atlanta. Credit: Zoo Atlanta, CC-BY 4.0
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A trio of researchers, two with the University of Georgia, the third with Zoo Atlanta, has found that gorillas at the zoo have created a new call for

use in communicating with humans—usually those holding food. Roberta Salmi, Monica Szczupider and Jodi Carrigan have written a paper describing their findings and published it on the open access site *PLOS ONE*.

Humans are very well known for their ability to come up with a new sound or even a word to communicate something they wish to impart to others. Few other animals have been observed doing this. The current list is short—orangutans and chimpanzees, both of whom lived in zoos. In this new effort, the research trio have found that we can add gorillas to the list.

The researchers began their study after hearing of anecdotal reports of western lowland gorillas at Zoo Atlanta making unique sounds directed at zookeepers. The reports indicated that the gorillas did not use the sounds or [vocalizations](#) when communicating with each other or with other animals in their vicinity.

To find out if the sounds made by the gorillas qualified as complex vocal learning, the researchers conducted a simple experiment. They watched as eight different gorillas were placed in three different scenarios. In one, a zookeeper was in the near vicinity without food. In another, only food was present. And in the third, a zookeeper was nearby and was holding some food.

The researchers found that the gorillas only made the sound—which has been named "snough"—when there was a human present, holding food. The researchers describe the snough as sounding like something between a sneeze and a cough—hence its name. They suggest its meaning is similar to the human "ahem." The purpose is to draw attention, hopefully, to garner a food reward.

The researchers note that there has been anecdotal evidence of gorillas

making similar sounds in other zoos. It is not known if they developed the call independently or if it was learned from animals arriving from other zoos. The researchers suggest the snough is evidence of the gorillas producing novel sounds for an intentional purpose as a means to a desired end.

More information: Roberta Salmi et al, A novel attention-getting vocalization in zoo-housed western gorillas, *PLOS ONE* (2022). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0271871](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0271871)

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