Name: _____ Date: _____

The Chimp Who Fished for Termites

Reading level 8 (4th grade) · 590 words

In the fall of 1960, a woman in a forest in Africa stopped to watch a chimpanzee. He sat by a mound of earth. Again and again, he pushed a stem of grass into a hole in the mound. Then he pulled it out and picked something off it with his mouth. What was he doing?

The woman was Jane Goodall. She was 26. Her first day at a place called Gombe, in Tanzania, was July 14, 1960. Gombe sits beside Lake Tanganyika. She had come with a notebook and some old binoculars. Her job was to watch wild chimpanzees and write down what they did.

At first, the chimps ran away from her. That was no surprise. She was a stranger in their forest. So she sat on a high ridge and looked through her binoculars. Slowly the chimps got used to her. After a while she could move closer and see much more of what they did.

She gave each chimp a name. Most scientists in those days gave the animals they studied numbers. Goodall chose names instead, like Goliath, Frodo and Fifi. One older male had silver hair on his face. She called him David Greybeard. He is the chimp from the mound.

Now back to the mound. When David Greybeard left, Goodall tried the same thing with a grass stem. She pushed it into the hole and pulled it out. Little insects were clinging to it. They were termites. The chimp had been fishing for termites.

A few days later she saw something even more surprising. Some chimps picked a small, leafy twig. Then they stripped off the leaves. Then they used the bare twig to fish for termites. Goodall called it the crude beginning of tool making.

Why did this matter? For a long time, people believed that only humans made and used tools. They even described people as "Man, the tool maker." Now a wild chimpanzee had shaped a twig for a job. That was a big surprise to science, and it was news.

Goodall sent the news by telegram to Louis Leakey, the scientist who had sent her to Gombe. A telegram is a short message sent by wire. He wrote back that people would now have to change their idea of a tool and of a human, or else accept chimpanzees as human.

She saw more. In 1960 she also watched a group of chimps eat meat, from a wild pig. Until then, people had thought that chimps ate only plants. Page after page, her notebook was filling up with new details about wild chimps.

Every day she wrote what she saw. One note says that at 2:00, a young chimp named Flint drank milk from his mother, rested a little and then drank again. A page like this is called a field note. It says what happened, when it happened and who did it.

The notes did not stop with Goodall. Almost every day since July 1960, someone has watched the chimps of Gombe and written down what they do. The Jane Goodall Institute says it is the longest study of wild chimpanzees in the world.

Jane Goodall died on October 1, 2025, at age 91. At Gombe, researchers still follow chosen chimps every day of the year. They watch the chimps with the same patience she had on the ridge. One chimp, one twig and one mound of termites changed what people knew about chimps. Every day, someone at Gombe still follows a chimp and writes down what it does.

Questions

1. What did the chimpanzee do with the stem of grass?

A. Ate it
B. Pushed it into a hole in a mound
C. Threw it at Goodall

2. Why was a chimp stripping a twig such a surprise?

A. Many people thought only humans made tools
B. Chimps never eat insects
C. Twigs are hard to find

3. Which words best tell what "stripped" means in "stripped off the leaves"?

A. Painted green
B. Counted
C. Pulled off

4. How did Goodall tell one chimp from another in her notes?

A. She gave them names
B. She gave them numbers
C. She drew their faces

5. What does a field note say?

A. Who won a race
B. What happened, when and who did it
C. What the weather will be next year

Words to know

termites: small insects
binoculars: far-seeing glasses
ridge: high, narrow hill
telegram: fast written message
tool: useful object

Answer key: The Chimp Who Fished for Termites

1. B. Pushed it into a hole in a mound
2. A. Many people thought only humans made tools
3. C. Pulled off
4. A. She gave them names
5. B. What happened, when and who did it