

# CALL *of the* WILD

Barrie vet professor enjoys a wild campout in Africa

BY COLLEEN WINTER

**C**amping out a few weeks ago, Barrie resident Julie Jones had trouble sleeping. The thin walls of her tent did nothing to keep out the grunts and roars of mating season in the wild.

While she tried to rest after a day in the sun, a pair of cats mated nearby and what sounded like something much larger than a rat was trying to scratch its way into her tent.

While there were once cougars in Ontario, it wasn't this breed of cat that was keeping her awake. Jones, a professor in the Veterinary Technician program at Seneca College, was thousands of miles away from the relatively tame forests of Canada, on a 22-day safari through South Africa specifically designed for veterinary technicians.

"It's an eerie feeling to be lying in a tent on the ground and listening to all those sounds," said Jones of the 15-minute intervals between lion mating sessions and the Bush Babies that were never far from the camp. "One night, I was up all night when I heard a hippo calling." Hippos, territorial and dangerous, only vocalize when stressed.

Despite the nighttime lullabies, staying at Kruger National Park was a definite highlight of the trip. "Everything is there," she said, "lions, zebras, rhinos, elephants. They all live together so it's not uncommon to witness an actual kill." During their time at the 19,000-sq.-km. park, she saw a dead rhino, an impala hung from a tree branch by a leopard, and (again) two lions mating by the light of her headlights.

During the day, the group that included Jones and 17 of her students from Seneca, learned the ins and outs of relocating animals which included learning the medications, the difference between mass and individual captures, tranquilizing the animal with a dart gun shot from a helicopter, and the trickiest part - reversing the sedation.

The group didn't actually get to shoot an animal with a dart gun but they did get to chase a pickup truck with a target in the back. "I was the only one that hit the target right in the centre," said a happy Jones. She also stressed the difficulty of bringing down an animal in the wild. "It's worrisome when they go down," said Jones, referring to tranquilizing a giraffe, "You're afraid they'll be injured with those big long legs and neck." The animals are tranquilized either for mass vaccinations, disease control research, or to be moved between game reserves.

Another stop on the tour was at Loskop Nature Reserve in Mpumalanga. While staying at the bush camp they learned tracking and navigation, plant life, and biodiversity. Since water is so scarce in Africa, they would find 15 to 20 different species around the waterhole, but had to be careful in case a hippopotamus was nearby. As a necessary precaution each of their three guides carried a gun and they had to learn to travel in a tight group. "If there was a slacker or someone slipped behind," said Jones, "they could be prey for a cheetah or a leopard."

The trip was designed as an educational one, and at its completion, after writing the required exam, participants receive four credits from the University of Pretoria. Much to the delight of her students, Jones also had to write the exam. While the focus was on learning, one day involved bringing their veterinary skills to the pets in a squatter town of 35,000 people. CLAW, the Community Led Animal Welfare group, operates strictly on donations and visits the town every third Saturday.

"The children were wonderful. They were on our backs, holding our hands, it was an amazing place," said Jones, adding the town has few resources, garbage everywhere and only six water taps to supply the 35,000 residents. "It felt great to be putting our skills to work. Some of the students were crying at the end of the day because they didn't want to leave."

Towards the end of their day, a group of children asked Jones to sing their national anthem. "After a very poor rendition of O Canada on our part, the children sang their anthem in an incredible six-part harmony. It was so beautiful it raised the hairs on the back of my neck."

Jones' tour was the first specifically designed for veterinary technicians and a second tour is currently underway. The tours are arranged through Simmonds Travel out of Newmarket and are not only focused around vet technicians. Jones has only good things to say about the experience. "There is no other wildlife on earth like there is in Africa. We saw Africa in a way that most tourists never can."

Since returning to Canada, Jones has been in e-mail contact to look into a work placement so next time she can take her husband and two children along for the ride.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO  
Barrie resident Julie Jones gets up close and personal with a sedated female lion during capture and release training on her recent trip to Africa.

