

Ontario Vet Techs in the Land of Mandela

by Kristen Hamilton



July first marked the return of the "Canadian Vet Nurses In the Wild" tour to Canada. They spent three incredible weeks in South Africa, learning about all aspects of wildlife management in the greatest outdoor lab on earth, the bush veldt of South Africa! This great educational opportunity, organised by Julia and Lanny Simmonds and conducted under the auspices of the University of Pretoria and Ecolife Expeditions, comprised both academic and experiential learning, leading to completion of a three credit course in Wildlife Management. The group also spent 2 days with CLAW (Community Led Animal Welfare), an organisation providing free health care to pets in the poorest settlements in and around Johannesburg. This practical service time provided a unique experience in domestic animal care, and allowed the technicians to test their adaptability and creativity in the field.

The technicians were exposed to the realities of animal care in the 3rd world, and were also able to make a huge impact - by conservative estimates, more than 100 dogs alone were vaccinated, treated for ticks, and given physical examinations.

The 18 person group was very capably led by Stephanie Cliff, RVT, from Toronto. Stephanie was also invaluable in providing the hands-on expertise required to restrain feisty canines, some of which came complete with telephone curly-cord leashes and an attitude! The rest of the group members (mostly Veterinary Technicians or Vet Tech students) hailed from across the province of Ontario. North College Veterinary Sciences Professor Tom Hamilton also participated in the expedition, and tapped into this wildlife background

to devise strategies to deal with marauding baboons!

The group learned from the top animal scientists, veterinarians, and field guides in South Africa. Interesting and informative lectures set the stage, practical demonstrations focused the group on techniques, and lots of hands-on experience allowed the participants to develop new skills

and work with exotic species. With the majority of the time spent camping and on wildlife hikes and drives, the group had an incredible array of wildlife viewing and interactions.

The students camped at the Loskop Dam Nature Reserve where they learned practical bush skills such as tracking, orienteering and identifying plants which can be utilized in emergency situations. These new skills were evaluated via both written and practical exams. The group got used to having a black mamba snake camping out in a tree next to the cookhouse, having hyenas walk through the campsite, and having electricity available for only a few hours each night. Amongst the other wildlife sightings were crocodiles, rhinos, impala and kudu. An exciting afternoon was spent learning the basics of rappelling, and then putting theory into the test by descending a dramatic river gorge!

Then it was on to the internationally acclaimed Kruger National Park, where early morning game drives yielded spectacular sunrise photographs and incredible viewing opportunities for lions, giraffes, hyenas, elephants....

The group also attended a game capture school, where they learned the finer points of darting and transporting wild animals, and was able to participate in live chemical captures! A highlight was target practice with a dart gun from a helicopter, trying to hit a target mounted on the back of a speeding pickup. The group also spent time visiting a hippo capture boma and returning later to view a captured group of very upset river horses. Throughout game capture school, lectures by one of the world's leading game

capture experts covered the theoretical aspects of anesthesia and animal handling, as well as local issues faced by wildlife and veterinary technicians.

These experiences were supplemented with tours of local wildlife rehabilitation centres and the laboratories and animal facilities of the Onderstepoort Veterinary Facility at the University of Pretoria. The trip was capped off with a tour of the Sterkfontein Caves, part of the "Cradle of Humankind," a valley containing the richest collection of hominid fossils in the world

A written exam concluded the trip, during which the students were asked to apply their knowledge in solving a theoretical issue involving the management of a wildlife park. In order to formulate a complete answer, the students had to draw on knowledge about geography, plant succession, animal group dynamics, local elephant management issues, the care of orphaned elephants, the management of diseases in the environment, and much more.

The students were asked to draw on lectures, practical training, and the information provided in the study guide to complete the essay. Every student who completed the exam was successful. As well, several of our students chose to obtain university credits from the program, some of which were transferred to Nipissing and Guelph Universities.

The trip was both a great adventure and a tremendous learning experience. ED.: And a resounding success!

