

Gemma Crowley

Report of time spent in South Africa as part of the Zoological Society of London's MSc in wild Animal Biology.

My name is Gemma, I am a registered veterinary nurse and recent masters graduate of the Royal Veterinary College and the Zoological Society of London's MSc in Wild Animal Biology. I was extremely fortunate to receive the Vetwork UK student research grant to help fund my MSc project entitled 'Evaluation of biochemical data collected from chemically immobilised semi-captive Southern White Rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simim simum*) in the Eastern Cape, South Africa' which took me to South Africa for the summer of a life time.

Between May and July of this year I embarked on a three month internship with renowned wildlife vet and rhino conservationist Dr William Fowlds and his incredible team, Sister Candice Momberg, Dr Emily Baxter and Dr Waldo Dreyer. The internship was based at Amakhala Game Reserve, in the Eastern Cape and was designed for recently qualified veterinary surgeons to gain experience working in the field with African wildlife but after completing Dr Fowlds' Vets Go Wild course last year, combined with my passion for rhino conservation; they made an exception for me!

The internship allows new graduates to experience exactly what it takes to be a wildlife vet (or nurse), initially shadowing the team on procedures and then towards the end of the internship you're almost running the show (under supervision of course!). The opportunity to work with an array of African wildlife, from lion to lechwe, elephant to eland, rhino to reedbuck; it is unlike anything you'll experience elsewhere. Not only did I utilise my domestic animal skills on anti-poaching dogs, township dogs and livestock, I developed my wild animal veterinary skills and learnt an entire set of new skills that I could never have imagined. I learnt how to fly an anti-poaching plane and a helicopter, how to successfully dart wild animals from a vehicle and from a helicopter, how to fish, how to fly a drone, how to track and how to use telemetry. In addition to the incredible work on weekdays, on weekends I got the opportunity to kayak on the Bushman's river, go on bush walks and game drives, and one of the highlights of the trip... Go on a horseback safari! As well as the actual work and activities, Africa brings something entirely different to the table. This was only my second trip to South Africa but for me it felt like home. There is something spiritual about being in the bush that you cannot experience anywhere else. I revelled in the fact that every day was a new adventure; not knowing what was around the corner.

A typical day ran from dawn until dusk, usually starting at 5am. Each day began with prepping the vehicles with the equipment needed for the planned procedures including consumables, drugs and portable diagnostic equipment such as the ultrasound machine and blood machines. We often had multiple procedures in one day which involved careful planning to ensure we had all the necessary equipment. Once the vehicles were ready the team would then congregate at Amakhala before making their way to each reserve. Some of the common procedures the vets regularly undertook included translocating wildlife, wound and trauma treatment, drop out darting wildlife with anti-parasitic treatment, DNA testing, fitting contraceptive implants in carnivores; with Dr Fowlds having a main focus on rhino procedures such as treating poached rhino, de-horning rhino to prevent poaching, pregnancy scanning rhino and providing veterinary treatment to sick and injured rhino. As my project was based solely around rhinos I spent the majority of my time assisting Dr Fowlds and his amazing nurse Candice with over twenty rhino procedures throughout the three months. I

witnessed first-hand the struggle that this beautiful species faces from the constant threat of poaching every single day. Knowing that my research could help vets treat future rhino was so inspiring.

Many internships abroad allow you to participate in procedures but I can almost guarantee that no other wildlife internship can compare to the experience I got with the Ikhala team. During the first week of my three months I was straight in at the deep end assisting one of the vets with a mass capture of waterbuck - whilst the vet flew above darting from a helicopter, I was in the back of a bakkie with a ground team driving through the bush, and the first to reach the antelope to administer partial reversal and additional sedatives. Once stable, the antelope were loaded into the bakkie and taken to a transport vehicle where they were fully reversed. For me the best way to learn is by doing, and this internship definitely ticks that box. By the last week of the three months I was not only fully competent to provide treatment to a range of wildlife but I was also able to teach 'Vets Go Wild' students myself, purely due to the vast knowledge and guidance given to me by the incredible Ikhala team.

As well as wildlife work, the Ikhala team is renowned for their charity work, providing veterinary treatment to local domestic animals. Whilst in South Africa I was able to use the skills I have gained from working in both first opinion out of hours practices and specialised referral hospitals to provide treatment to local dogs, completing procedures such as stitch-ups, blood tests and neutering. As well as local dogs, Ikhala also provide veterinary treatment to anti-poaching unit dogs. These dogs work with anti-poaching units to protect vulnerable rhino from poaching, so being able to provide them with veterinary care was so rewarding.

This brings me onto the most notable experience I had whilst in South Africa; the Knysna fires. On the 8th of June Dr Fowlds received a phone call from the SPCA to say that Uitenhage SPCA desperately needed veterinary assistance as a result of wild fires in Knysna. The following morning we packed up one of the veterinary vehicles to the hilt with supplies, fluids, cream, bandages and drugs we thought we might need and made the long drive through the garden route to Uitenhage SPCA. We spent the entire weekend, around the clock, providing veterinary assistance to the hundreds of animals affected by the fires, from piglets with burnt feet to puppies suffering from smoke inhalation, cows stuck in burning barns to cats with singed skin. We met many people that had lost family, friends, and their homes, along with everything they owned to the fire but despite this they still prioritised bringing in their animals for treatment, which was both heart-breaking and humbling. I was blown away by the hundreds of people that pulled together in the disaster; voluntarily bringing water tanks to fight the fires, bringing food, water and bedding for the animals that needed treatment, transporting injured animals to us, donating meals for people volunteering around the clock and giving total strangers a place to sleep. The true compassion we witnessed towards other human beings and the animals affected in a time of such adversity will always stay with me.

As I'm sure you can gather from all I have said, this really was the experience of a lifetime. The funding provided by Vetwork UK allowed me to not only collect the samples and data I needed from rhino to complete my MSc research project which will assist vets with treating endangered and vulnerable rhino, but also allowed me to work with an array of other African species and experience

an internship that has provided me with more skills than I could have ever imagined, making me the competent wildlife veterinary nurse I have always dreamed of being.