Girton College Travel Award report – Lauren Hillier
Dissertation research at the Costa Rica Animal Rescue Centre, Summer 2017

In June of this year I flew to Costa Rica to volunteer at an animal rescue centre for 3 weeks.

The centre rescues animals that have been injured, orphaned or been part of the illegal pet trade and cares for them with the intention of releasing them back into the wild if possible.

Life as a volunteer

Our working days were split into morning and afternoon sessions, each beginning with a group meeting to share important information and ensure everyone was up to date with what was going on, for example any new animals that had been brought in, released or needed special care that day. After the meeting, we split into five groups which were each assigned a number of different tasks every day. All animal enclosures were cleaned and given fresh water twice a day, and each different species was fed at different times throughout the day to keep them in a routine and stop them being over or underfed. This meant that we had to be constantly on hand throughout the day as there was often a different task needed to be completed every couple of hours. The excitement of these activities varied based on the animal, with some such as the kinkajous and hedgehog sleeping in their house most of the day, while others such as the howler monkeys and the squirrels climbed all over you and made it very difficult to get anything done (see picture)! Other tasks including food preparation for the animals, collecting mangos, cleaning the grounds and common areas, and helping to prepare lunch and dinner for the volunteers.

Some animals required extra attention, for example the marmoset was raised as a pet and so is very used to human interaction and gets very lonely if left alone for too long we brush and play with him twice a day after cleaning his cage.

As a longer term volunteer, I was also able to get involved in the hospital team which mostly involved feeding the younger animals like the kittens, opossums, skunk and owl, which either required regular hand-feeding or medicine in their food. Each member of the team was assigned one shift a day, some at more reasonable times than others (the 2ams weren’t the highlight of my trip!). Other tasks shared between the volunteers included walking the goats and some of the sloths. Cosi and Marie, two young three-toed sloths, lived in temporary cages in the hospital so were
taken out for exercising in the trees twice a day while a larger, more permanent outdoor enclosure was being built. Another sloth, Marius, who suffered severe brain damage following a fall from a tree and was paralysed in all four limbs is also encouraged to exercise on daily walks to his own purpose-built play area.

Free time

Once we’d finished our assigned activities, we were free to relax by the pool or in the hammocks, play with the kittens or make a trip to the nearby town of Turracares. We also often used this time to paint around the centre, create new enrichment for the animals and help to build or improve enclosures.

The accommodation provided was basic, consisting of dorm-style rooms of up to 12 volunteers, but this alongside the large common area meant that there was a really social atmosphere and there were always people around. I visited during the rainy season which meant that occasionally we would be stuck inside and the already limited jungle wifi shut off completely, but those nights actually turned out to be some of the most memorable as we had to invent alternative ways of having fun and I found the limited access to social media to be surprisingly refreshing.
We were allowed one day off a week which I used to go on trips with a group of other volunteers, they tended to be long and extremely tiring as we tried to make the most of the time available but it was definitely worth it getting to see so much of the country. Here’s a brief description of what I did on each of my 4 days off:

Day 1: I visited the Arenal volcano and national park before visiting La Fortuna and swimming in the waterfalls and hot springs.

Day 2: I went on a wildlife trail through a national park (although the only animal we ended up seeing after an hours trek through the rainforest was actually in the car park when we got back!) and did ziplining in the Monte Verde cloud forest.

Day 3: We drove to the Jaco, a beach town on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica, where we relaxed in a beach-side hostel all day, a welcome break from the sometimes hectic days at the rescue centre. On the way there, we stopped at a popular crocodile resting site just to the side of the road.

Day 4: We explored the capital San Jose, which is about an hour’s drive from the centre, had the McDonald’s we’d been craving for weeks and did some souvenir shopping for friends and family at home.

The main purpose of my trip was to undertake some research for my undergraduate dissertation in which I am looking at volunteer tourism as a method of wildlife conservation. My investigation was based specifically on what kinds of people take part in volunteer projects such as this one, what motivates them to do so and how they are influenced by their experience. While at the centre, I did some group interviews to gain information which was later used to create a survey to be sent out to volunteers, many of whom I met and got contact information from while working at the centre, as the main method of data collection.

The most useful part of my trip in terms of my dissertation research was actually just being there and taking part in volunteer activities. Getting fully involved allowed me to firstly get to know how the centre is run, as well as the work volunteers actually do, gaining an insight into their experience, and I was also able to observe the behaviour, reactions and conversations of volunteers which gave me a good idea of general opinions on certain aspects of the experience without having to ask everyone directly.

Alongside providing extremely valuable research towards my undergraduate dissertation, my time at the Costa Rica Animal Rescue Centre has inspired me to potentially pursue a career in wildlife conservation. Being my first time travelling abroad alone without mishap, I feel a lot more confident
and am hoping to travel by myself again next summer. I have also made so many friends from all over the world who I hope to keep in contact with, we are already planning a reunion trip next summer!

Although I can’t say I miss the cold showers, eating rice and beans for every meal of the day or being constantly covered in mosquito bites, it really was an unforgettable experience, made possible by the receipt of funding such as that provided by the Girton College Travel Award.

Some of the animals at the centre (photos selected from about 2,000...)