

**Kimberley Slinger**  
**Greater Kruger National Park, South Africa**

This summer I travelled to South Africa to aid the conservation group Operation Wallacea with their efforts at the Balule Game Reserve in the Great Kruger National Park. Whilst at Balule I participated in a Savannah ecology course, which involved daily lectures, awesome practical sessions with insect dissections and the setting up of insect and butterfly traps. By identifying the contents of the traps we were able to understand the insect ecology in the area. I also assisted with bird point count surveys and habitat assessments. Bird surveys involve four people standing in a circle looking outwards in various directions and identifying bird species spotted over the course of ten minutes. Birds are a good indicator species when it comes to looking at how diverse an area is. We had lectures to help us identify bird calls and their distinguishing features. This was great fun! My favourite bird was the African Fish Eagle, which I regularly spotted fishing on the river next to camp.



When doing the habitat assessments we looked into the impact of elephants on the environment. The elephant populations in these areas have become too great; they are now destroying the habitat of other species, which is why conservation efforts are needed. The elephants eat the bark from the trees, stripping it all the way around, this is called ring barking. This ring barking destroys and kills the tree. Losing these trees destroys the environment for other species. Some elephants in other areas are being castrated to try and manage their population. Operation Wallacea takes research assistants out to their sites across the world to gain valuable data which they can then use to identify whether their work is having a positive effect or whether another method needs to be implemented.

*Elephants damaging a tree by stripping the bark*

There were many highlights for me, but my favourite has to be being rushed out of a carnivore lecture to see two male lions eating a fresh kill of a baby giraffe. Being out in the bush whilst studying the lecture material gives you a unique feel that I do not think you could experience to the same degree in a classroom environment. Going out in the 4x4 game vehicles recording game transects was also an amazing time! Driving around the reserve monitoring species, populations and their location, gives you a fantastic insight into the environment you are in and the species living there.

I have gained invaluable experience in conservation techniques, practical skills attaining data and sights I will never forget. The skills in animal behaviour I have learnt will aid me in continuing with my degree. It has been a wonderful experience and I've met some inspiring people from across the world who gave me the motivation to carry on with conservation work.

I am grateful to the Society without the grant I would have been unable to take part in the expedition. It has helped with the continuation of the conservation efforts and I am confident for the future success of this kind of work. The whole reason I wanted to take part in the expedition was to raise awareness of the plight of species such as the black rhino amongst others. I also wanted to show everyone that without the conservation work taking place in countries such as South Africa, magnificent animals such as these would become extinct, which is a great loss for future generations.

*Me out on a game vehicle carrying out a game transect*

