I applied for and received the Honors Enrichment Award for my short-term study abroad to South Africa. The educational purpose of this trip was to learn about wildlife management and veterinary care/involvement in South Africa. My program lasted 22 days from May 23rd to June 13th with a group of 13 other pre-veterinary students from across the country, and one recently graduated veterinarian from Germany. We travelled all over northeastern South Africa in the Mpumalanga, Gauteng, Limpopo and North West provinces, visiting both private and public game reserves, and applying wildlife veterinary medicinal and management practices along the way.

Our first few days were spent in the capital city of Pretoria and neighboring Johannesburg. The first day we were introduced to our guides, Hermann Uys and Jacques Lesch. They took us to Ukutula, a lion park in Brits about 2 hours west of Pretoria. The staff at Ukutula introduced us to the practice of lion management, as they had about 50 lions of varying ages. We learned an incredible amount about lion eating and breeding as well as some body language. The highlight of Ukutula was being able to hold 6-week-old lion cubs. After that first day, we moved on to some community service work in Soweto, a slum outside of Johannesburg (or Joburg, as the locals call it). Here, we met up with CLAW (Community-Led Animal Welfare), whose purpose is to serve the local slums with free vaccinations and tick & flea treatment, providing the owner is willing to spay or neuter their animal. After 2 days spent with CLAW, all of us knew how to give simple sub-cutaneous injections and complete paperwork with non-english-speaking residents! It was certainly an education in how even South Africa, possibly the most developed country on the African continent, has many areas that are certainly third-world. Most of the people living in the slums live in shacks made of either stolen or bought tin, with very few left over to care for their animals.

After spending 4 days in Pretoria, we quickly toured the veterinary school at the University of Pretoria – Onderstepoort campus, where a tour guide showed us around and gave us information on how to apply, should we be interested. I particularly liked their equine program, but as an Equine Science major that should be obvious! 😊 We proceeded to a remote game park on the Loskop Dam, which was very mountainous and pretty, reminding me a lot of Colorado. Our accommodation for the four days we spent there was a private camp called Imbambala, owned by a safari company and staffed by two guides, Nic and Cappie. Nic and Cappie were very knowledgeable about the area and wildlife. We were able to learn some basic tracking skills on several hikes through the “bush”, and while we saw lots of rhino tracks and middens, we weren’t lucky enough to see much on foot apart from a herd of wildebeest making a rapid departure. However, by spending several hours on a boating safari, we were able to see
giraffe, zebra, wildebeest, kudu, nyala, monitor lizards, hippos and many species of birds. Unfortunately weather prevented us from going rappelling or stargazing.

After Imbambala we began our travels eastward, towards the famous Kruger National Park. Two days were spent at Swadini, a resort located in the Blyde River Canyon, set in the beautiful Drakensburg mountains. This section of the trip was aimed at conservation of species outside of the parks. We visited two animal rehabilitation places, one for mammals and birds and the other strictly devoted to reptiles and amphibians. The first, Moholoholo Wildlife Refuge, was a great introduction into the problems many private and public game reserves face in South Africa. Our guide at Moholoholo gave us a chilling speech on how many of the eagles have disappeared from South Africa due to habitat depletion, and how this affects many, many other species. Currently, Kruger National Park is not accepting ANY more animals to be reintroduced to the wild, because they are full! Many other reserves have this same problem, as the animals already in residence have territories already set up, and new animals are very likely to be killed in defense. We were able to tour the facilities and see the animals they have in permanent residence, including many different species of eagles and vultures, along with a wild dog breeding pack and cheetahs in training for use in public education. Khamai Reptile Park was the second location we visited at our stay at Swadini, and we enjoyed a detailed lecture on snake identification, behavior and even treatment of snakebite. We were lucky enough to see the feeding of the black mambas, and participated in a snake dissection – in particular, a snouted cobra who had been run over by a car that morning.

We set out for Kruger National Park the next day. Only a few hours away from our last camp, Kruger is considered the “flagship” park of South Africa. Boasting “The Big Five” (lion, leopard, rhino, cape buffalo and elephant) as well as many other species of African animal, Kruger was a very cool place to visit. It was very different from the other places I had been on safari in Tanzania during my childhood – compared to the vast open plains of the Serengeti, and deep bowels of the Ngorongoro Crater, southern Kruger appeared to me as a heavily dense, brushy area replete with many thorny trees and studded with kopjes (rocky outcroppings). We stayed at Skukuza Camp, the largest overnight area in the park, and also the headquarters of the Kruger Park rangers. Our five days at Kruger consisted of game drive after game drive throughout the park. Our bus, Jezebel, was too large to foray into the bush on the dirt roads crisscrossing the park, so we employed the help of Skukuza’s safari vehicles for both morning and evening game drives. On one occasion I had the opportunity to go on a bush hike – two guides drove our party out into the middle of the bush and, armed with two high-powered rifles, we set off on a hike. Staying absolutely quiet, we managed to get within 50 feet of a small herd of rhino. What an experience! Because rhinos have very poor eyesight and we happened to be downwind at the time, we were able to sneak up on the group until the bull noticed us, and came closer to figure out if we were friend or foe. Hiding behind a large termite mound only 50 feet away from an alert and tense rhino bull
was something I will never forget, and I can’t say I was the only one who let out a big sigh of relief when the wind shifted, the rhinos got our scent and high-tailed it away. That same day I also enjoyed an evening game drive in which we saw a lioness stalking an impala, and a pack of endangered African wild dogs. Apart from our forays into the park, we were lectured on the problems facing Kruger National Park today, which mostly consists of a severe overpopulation of elephants, anthrax outbreaks, foot-and-mouth disease, tuberculosis in cape buffalo, and poachers. Much like our national parks here in the United States are managed, the rangers there must find ways to combat large outbreaks without involving the general public and their livestock. Tensions over animal management also arise between the public and the rangers, as the local black communities have much less of an understanding on why the animals are protected. Rangers must come up with solutions appeasing both locals and conservationists.

An entire day was spent travelling to our next destination, Kokoriba. Located only two hours away from Johannesburg, it provided a backdrop to our most hands-on aspect of the course – game capture. A South African wildlife veterinarian must be able to chose certain cocktails of drugs and be able to dart any variety of wild animal in case of a veterinary emergency. Most of the time, these veterinarians work for private game farms, on which wildlife is “farmed” either for meat, pelts or in the big cats’ case, circus and zoo habitation. Our vet, Dr. Tertius, is one of these veterinarians and we had the opportunity to travel to a private game farm with him to observe the capture, treatment and release of a group of young lions needing transport to a bigger enclosure, and a young wildebeest with a puncture wound. We also “endured” a day-long lecture into the uses of different drugs and drug cocktails in almost every category of African animal possible. While very interesting, it did become a bit dull after a few hours and we were all glad to go out into the field. Target shooting was also included, and we spent an afternoon learning how to load and shoot the dart gun, with a competition afterwards. The next day, we went to another private reserve in which helicopters were waiting for us. A “mock darting” was set up for us in which each person got to shoot the dart gun out of a helicopter at a target set up on the back of a moving truck. I am very proud to say I was one of the better marksmen in the group and succeeded in getting a bulls-eye!

Our last camp was an hour away from Kokoriba at a place called Sondela. Sondela is run by the University of Pretoria’s wildlife management program (through which we were enrolled) and serves as a “weekend getaway” for people from the city in which they can camp and observe Africa as it is in the bush. Sondela also had a wildlife rehabilitation center which we were able to tour. Although not large as Moholoholo, they did have many different animals which we were able to view at feeding time, including a litter of caracal kittens, two baby rhinos, many baby antelopes and zebras, and several cheetahs that had just been captured off of someone’s ranch and were on their way to a reserve. The rest of our time at Sondela was given to us to do what we wished, as we had an essay test the next day. As
an equine science major, I of course jumped at the chance to go on a horseback ride through the reserve, which was very enjoyable although we didn’t see any animals. After that, it was study time until the test. The test gave us a fictional game reserve with a specific climate and geography, along with several problems we had covered earlier in the trip which are common to most parks in South Africa. Our job was to explain how we would manage this reserve given the knowledge we had learned throughout the trip. After the test, the group all enjoyed a beautiful catered dinner at sunset where we all received our completion certificates. We were all taken to the airport the next day to fly home.

I really enjoyed my stay in South Africa and I wish I would have been able to stay longer! I felt the few days we stayed at all the different places really did not do the country justice. South Africa was a very interesting place culturally as well, with apartheid only 15 years in the past and tensions still visible between races and cultures. As an equine science major, many of the issues discussed with wildlife management really did apply – things such as grazing management, disease, domestic livestock practices and veterinary practices were all very similar, just applied to different animals and situations, which was very interesting. This trip strengthened my interest in possibly joining the Peace Corps after veterinary school to see what I can do in treating equines (and maybe other animals) in places where there is not a lot of knowledge about them in the local populations.