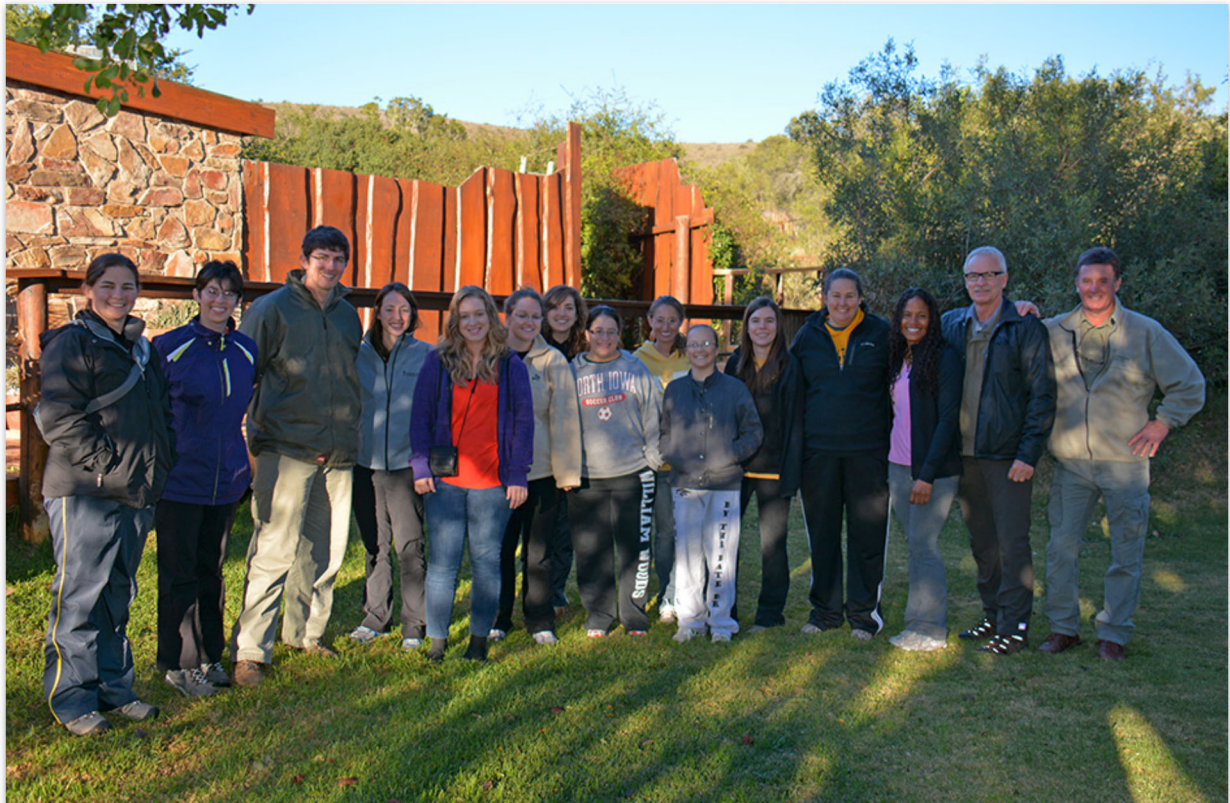


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African Queens

Twelve vet med students traveled to South Africa for a wild experience.



Participants in the 2013 South Africa Summer Program are, from left, Kate Miluski; Cheryl Walker; Luke Abbot, guide and driver; Erin Murphy; Anna Blick; Kristen McCullough; Nicki Freeman; Rachel Weber; Jamie Diddle; Amy Lack; Elena Rodriguez; Taylor Cragen; Yaira Rivera-Rivera; Ron Cott, associate dean of students for MU's College of Veterinary Medicine; and Geoff Leathem, guide and driver.

Story by Marcus Wilkins

Photos courtesy of Ron Cott

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A dusty pickup truck rambles over the South African plains in pursuit of running rhinoceroses, cape buffalo, springbok and lions. For many travelers, that kind of adrenaline-charged chase would be the highlight of any intercontinental vacation.

But for 12 female students on MU's South Africa Summer Program July 4–23, they were just warming up.



Students Nicki Freeman and Rachel Weber attend to a tranquilized white lion during the South Africa Summer Program.

Each year, Associate Dean of Students Ron Cott, DVM '73, accompanies a new group of Tigers who spend two weeks helping with tasks such as vaccinating and tagging exotic animals with microchips, drawing blood for DNA samples and dehorning rhinos to discourage poaching. Led by a pair of South African veterinarians, the first group in 2010 spayed a lion [to control breeding lines] on the tailgate of a truck.

“That first year, we were blown away,” Cott says. “It is hands-on, clinical experience. It is not demonstration and it is not necropsy. This year we captured or immobilized more than 60 animals [for treatment].”

For the 2013 group — all third-year veterinary medicine students — no two days were alike. They

lodged in the mountains and near the ocean, and once spent the night in a cave trading stories by a campfire under African skies.

“We got to experience it all,” says Kristen McCullough of Pittsburgh. “While we were feeding the elephants, they would hold their trunk out for a long time, begging for more and more food, just like a toddler. We would have to tell them no.”



An African elephant splashes in a puddle in South Africa.

Students earned 60 hours of preceptorship (training and observation time) toward the 320 hours required for their Missouri veterinary license once they get their doctorate in May of 2015. They also witnessed South African culture, learned from lecturing veterinarians and bonded in the brush.

“My biggest takeaway from the trip is that I can pursue any type of veterinary work I can dream of,” McCullough says. “The veterinarians we worked with in South Africa practice on all species. It was inspiring.”

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