

MY JOURNEY TO BECOME A “GIRAFFOLOGIST”

By: Kait Taylor

Hello! My name is Kait Taylor and I am a third year university student from Ontario, Canada, although I go to school in West Virginia, USA.

JUNIOR KEEPER AT THE TORONTO ZOO



For my 16th Birthday, my parents gifted me with the experience to spend a day as a junior zoo keeper at the Toronto Zoo. I was so excited because I had really wanted to be a zoo keeper, and giraffes were my favourite animal! I spent the entire day helping care for the hippos and giraffes by feeding them, cleaning their enclosures, and doing checks to make sure they were healthy. It was such an amazing experience and I absolutely loved being a keeper for a day, and it started me on my path of developing my passion for animal care and conservation.

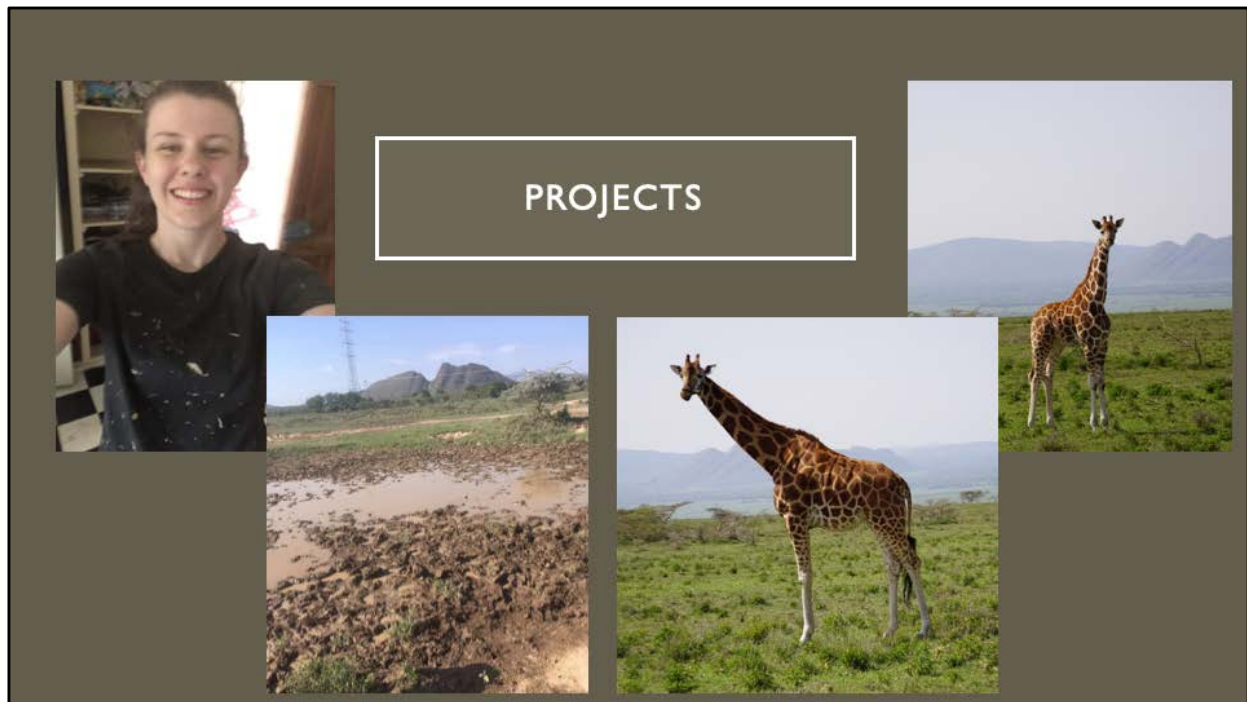
TRIP TO KENYA



After working with the giraffes at the Toronto Zoo, I wanted to travel abroad and get some volunteer experience working with the amazing giraffe in the wild. I discovered an organization called Projects Abroad, that offered a trip to Soysambu Conservancy in Kenya (approximately 3 hours north of Nairobi). The Soysambu Conservancy focused on researching giraffes, and they offered other opportunities to experience the local culture and wildlife, which added to my excitement. It was a long journey to get from Toronto, Canada to the Soysambu Conservancy, and I spent over 24 hours travelling – including two 8 hour flights – until I finally reached my destination.



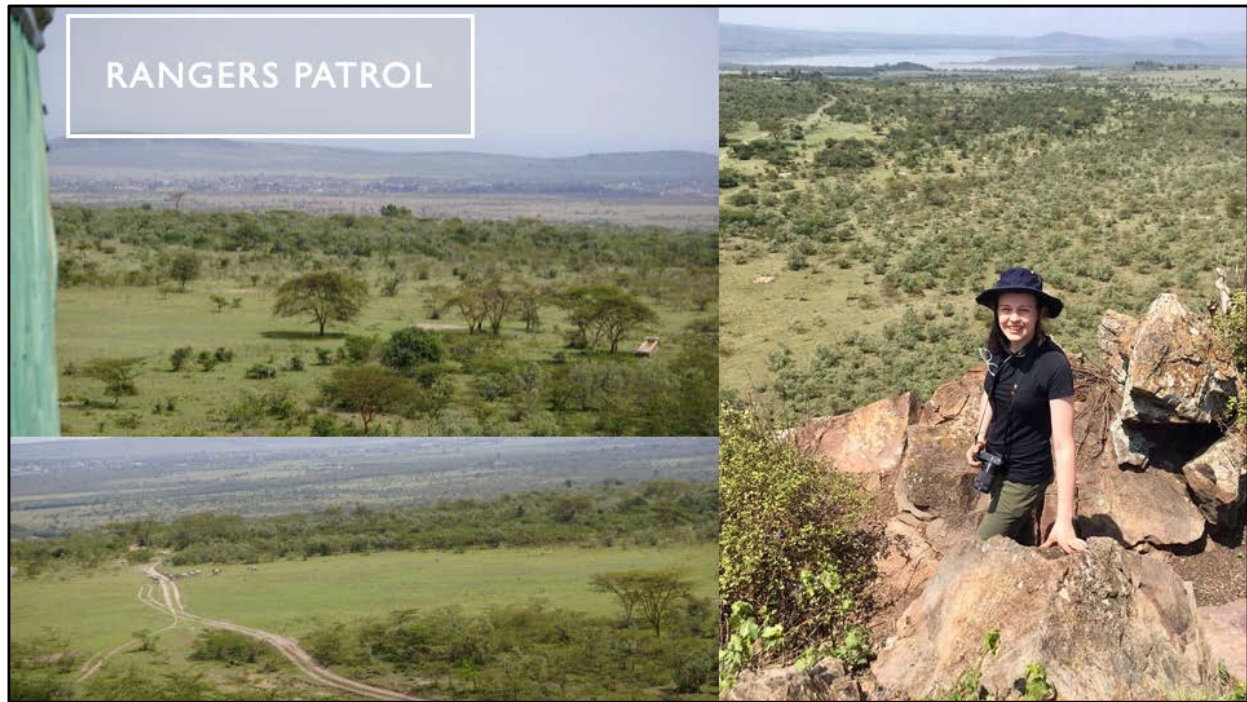
I was so excited to get started, and on the drive into the Conservancy, I saw my first giraffe. It was very far away, so I quickly grabbed my binoculars and they stopped the vehicle so I could watch them. We stopped for about 10 minutes, and seeing these amazing animals in their natural habitat was a real “pinch me” moment. I couldn’t believe that I was actually looking at a giraffe in the wild! I remember I cried a little out of the excitement and joy I was experiencing. The driver told me we would see lots more and we had to get to the camp, so we moved along. Every giraffe I saw after that, I felt the same excitement – even after two weeks and going out looking for them nearly every other day, I was always so excited to spot one.



I participated in many small and ongoing projects during my time at the Conservancy. My first project was helping to dig a water hole for all the animals on the conservancy - not just giraffe. It was extremely dry during the time I was there, as it hadn't rained in a while, so it was critical we provided the animals with access to the ground water. As seen in the two pictures on the left, it was very muddy! The picture on the bottom left was before we started, and after a long days of work, we dug about a foot deep.

The second project that I helped with was conducting a giraffe survey. We would drive around the conservancy until we found giraffes (either a group or an individual). The driver would position the vehicle so that I could get a picture of the side profile of the giraffe and try to circle around to photograph the other side as well. We would record data on the giraffe, such as the GPS coordinates where we found them, their sex, their age, and if they were in a group or alone. Once we finished the field work, we would return to the office to go through the database and match up the individuals we found to those who were already recorded. This was done by matching coat patterns, since each giraffe has a unique pattern. A fun fact is there was a juvenile giraffe that didn't have a record in the database, but we spent over an hour and a half looking for this one giraffe in the books, since we couldn't find it in the

existing logs, we determined it was a new giraffe and the team at the conservation ended up naming it after me!



One day we went for a hike to visit one of the ranger patrol stations that was on the highest peak in the conservancy. The benefit of having this station on the top of the mountain is that it provided the ranger with a perfect 360 degree view of the conservancy and they are able to detect any activity – whether it be a poacher or unusual animal activity. If the ranger noticed suspicious activity, they would tell the rangers on the ground about it, and the ground team would then go and investigate the situation.

BIRD SURVEY



In order to fully understand the animal you are researching, it is important to have a good understanding of the ecosystem it lives in. So, one day I helped with a bird survey which included counting the birds in the lake that was on the Conservancy. This may seem overwhelming, but the technique they taught me was to make an imaginary grid that is split into equal parts, and count how many individuals are in one section. Then you can multiply the number of individuals in one section with the total amount of sections that are in your grid. So if you have 10 birds in one grid, and 30 grids, you can guess there are around 300 birds. This technique makes counting much easier! We counted thousands of pelicans (left) and greater and lesser flamingos (right).



Giraffes weren't the only animals I saw while I was in Kenya. We went looking for lions very early in the morning and late at night – mostly while the sun wasn't up. Also, I was lucky enough to come across a leopard (bottom middle) and she ended up stalking and trying to hunt a herd of impala. We watched for over an hour and it was so amazing! She didn't catch anything, but she was close, and she was really fascinating to watch. We also saw lots of water buffalo, zebras, warthogs, some rhinos, and a tortoise.

LEARNING LOCAL CULTURE



It is really important to understand the local culture, and every Wednesday the project would have activities that involved the culture. While I was there, the local Maasai Tribe visited, and performed a traditional dance, and afterwards invited us to join. They were extremely welcoming, as they even started putting some of their necklaces and shawls on me. I learned that they made everything by hand, which was incredible because there were thousands of beads on one necklace!

COMMUNITY EDUCATION AND OUTREACH



We also visited a local elementary school (aged 6-12). We taught them about giraffes in the morning, and in the afternoon we planted 50 trees together. It was such an amazing time getting to spend with the kids, as they surprised us with a poem that they had prepared about their love for giraffes.



This is an image of two giraffes fighting. The one giraffe has a skin condition where his skin turns white (as you can see in the picture his neck is all white).



During my search for a university, I was looking at all sorts of majors. They ranged from Zoology, to Animal Behaviour, to Ecology, to Zoo Science. I ended up finding West Liberty University which is a small school in Wheeling, West Virginia, USA where I am currently double majoring in Zoo Science and Applied Conservation and Environmental Stewardship and Education. At the beginning of my university search, I wanted to become a zoo keeper, however through my schooling I have developed a passion for conservation and I would like to do research in the wild. I really value all the different tools and skills I am learning through university and can't wait to apply them in the future.



I am on the women's varsity soccer team and also getting lots of animal experience while at West Liberty University! Some animals I have worked with include snakes, skunks, geckos, crayfish, and insects like praying mantis – just to name a few! I wanted to make sure I went to a school where I could get experience while learning so I could apply what I learned in my class readings to real animals. I now know how to interact with and care for a wide variety of animals and I'm hoping I can use these skills in the future caring for more animals!



I have participated in many research projects, which include:

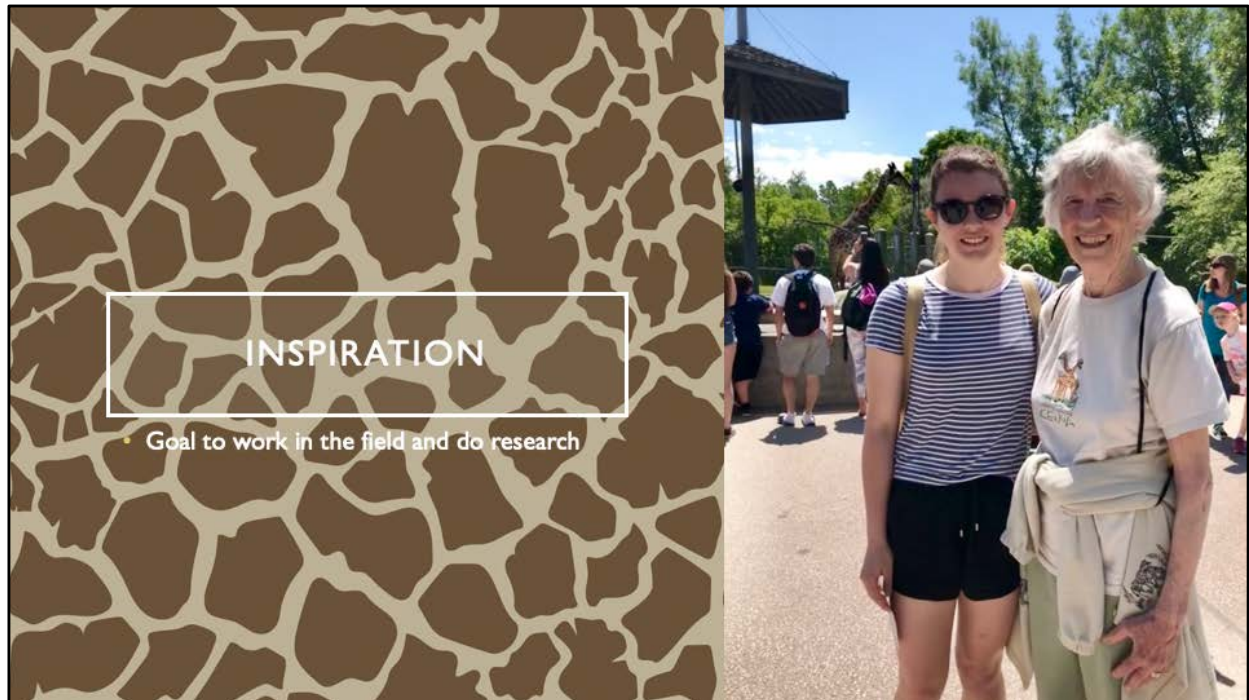
Earthworm research – where I learn how to identify the best collection method and identify the different species of earthworm present in the local forest.

Turtle genetic analysis – where I am examining the genetics of a group of turtles to determine if the population we are looking at are related to each other. This information will then be used to specifically breed non-related individuals and eventually release them into the wild to help with their conservation and population growth.

Crayfish biodiversity – we identify the environmental factors in the local ecosystem and collect crayfish for identification and research.

Tick survey – we collected ticks from different habitat types and identified their presence within each different type of habitat.

Salamander research – I am collecting and identifying salamanders in order to determine the population abundance in a given area.



I hope to one day work in the field and do research directly with the giraffe, and educate others to make a difference!

QUESTIONS?

