

Two South African Weeks with the CVE

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None of us really knew what was in store as we were standing jetlagged in the main hall of Joberg airport with 18 people that we had never met before. Vague visions of wrestling the famed 'Big 5' danced in our heads as we headed out for the CVE's 2 week South Africa Field trip in Dinokeng Game Reserve. We soon found out that we were to be working with WEI (a South African based not-for-profit) as a team to assist with the gathering of data for the ecological management of the park and its game assets. Mixed in with this was involvement with the implantation of contraceptive implants into lionesses, game drives and learning to live, work and get along with a bunch of strangers in a way that no-one had done since school camp!

The 2 weeks consisted of some long hot days with early starts (6am often) and late finishes (close to midnight a couple of times). The days were filled with a variety of activities including:

1. **Bird point counts** – the identification of every bird that could be seen or heard at a specified GPS location and its distance, position and bearing meticulously recorded.
2. **Game transects** – driving a specified 10km route and identifying every mammal seen: number, sex, age, condition, bearing, distance, latitude and longitude were all recorded.
3. **Lectures** – on a broad variety of subjects relating to wildlife and exotic species.
4. **Lion breeding management** – assisting a wildlife vet from the University of Pretoria to dart lionesses to be implanted with Superlorin® for contraceptive purposes. We assisted in constructing the bomas to aid in the capture and then retrieval and assessment of the lionesses when they were down. This included blood collection and pregnancy ultrasound.
5. **Veld condition assessments** – a much vilified activity that haunted us with the ghosts of second year agronomy. It involved assessing a 1 hectare plot of the African veld to determine grass types and pasture availability as well as tree species and damage sustained by them from elephants and other sources.

These duties were interspersed with cooking or washing up for everyone or doing data entry on a rotating roster. Many meals, beers, wines and conversations were shared with a great group of people, mostly vets but a couple of ring-ins.

Overall the trip was a fantastic experience that gave some fascinating insights into the management of Africa's 'wild' animals. Hard work and cooking for 22 people in a camp kitchen is surprisingly fun when you are engaged in a worthwhile, rewarding and educational experience. As with most things in life, it was the people that mattered. Thanks to the CVE and all the participants that made the trip a great one.