

OTS Las Cruces Biological Station
San Vito, Costa Rica
Final Report
Winter 2011

My International Internship is in Costa Rica at the Las Cruces Biological Station and Wilson Botanical Garden near the town of San Vito. Las Cruces serves as a hub for research and classes, as well as tourism and is a very busy place during the dry season. The Garden encompasses about 12 hectares and the Las Cruces Forest Fragment is about 300 hectares. I live in a fancy little cabin right at the interface between the Garden and the Forest.

My internship duties have been to enjoy myself, bird-watch, conduct a small research project, and learn as much as I can about the Garden, the Forest, and Tropical Ecology. Within a few days of my arrival here I had a meeting with the Research Biologist, who has been my supervisor, and he suggested a research project to me. But he also told me that I could choose to not do the research project, or do whatever part of it I wanted, or completely change it. He emphasized that I should spend time enjoying the area and exploring and experiencing other research projects that would be coming through the station. I opted for a combination between thoroughly enjoying myself and conducting the research project.

My research project focus is dispersal of non-native plants within and outside the Garden. There seemed to be some potential for the plants to move from the Garden into the Forest, but very little was known about certain plant species. So I have been focusing on two species in particular to see who their dispersers are and how likely their movement is.

In addition to my own research I have been spending time with other researchers focusing on birds and bats. I've learned to band birds, including hummingbirds, and remove birds from mist-nets, among other things.

My research project is important in the grand scheme of fish and wildlife conservation because it directly relates to invasive species, which is a growing problem globally. Through my research I have set the groundwork for identifying plants in the Garden which have potential to become invasive in the Forest. With this knowledge plans can be made to eradicate plants from the Garden and choose carefully which plants are allowed to propagate. Las Cruces is a rather small fragment, only 300 hectares, but is important to many plants and animal species. Plus, there is a constant effort underway to connect Las Cruces to the nearby La Amistad International Biosphere Reserve. La Amistad is home to every species of feline in Costa Rica and Panama as well as many species of monkeys and birds that require vast amounts of space. For the sake of Las Cruces, as well as the future connectivity to La Amistad, it is important to identify potential problems, such as invasive species, in order to work toward solutions.

This internship has greatly helped my personal development. The travel alone has made me more capable of handling different, diverse situations. Plus being away from everything familiar has made me better at being isolated and independent. I'm more confident that I can be on my own and travel by myself, which is great because I hope to do this more in the future. I'm still a little nervous to go back through San Jose, the capital, on my way back home, but I think I'm more anxious than anything.

As far as my professional development, I have learned a great deal here and developed new skills that I hope to be able to use in my future career with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. My favorite part of this internship has been the experience of banding birds and taking them out of mist-nets. This is something that I had been a minor part of before but I had never gotten to actually band the birds until coming here. Plus conducting my own research project has been an interesting look into the world of research and I hope to be able to build off

of this experience. What has been even more telling though is watching the other research projects unfold. I have become fairly close with some people here who are working on a Stanford University research project that has been going on for over ten years. Even though this project has been long-term there are still many things that have changed along the way and there are constantly things being added and removed from the project. It has been nice to see, and sometimes be a part of, the problem solving that seems to be an everyday part of conducting research in a foreign country.

The cultural differences that I've experienced have been refreshing rather than irritating or shocking. The biggest difference that I continue to be surprised by is the general mindset of Costa Ricans. Pura Vida is the attitude and it means that people enjoy life and all the simple, pure things that life has to offer. The best example I have of this is how I was given a choice as to whether I even conducted a research project or not. But I've also gotten to spend time with a few of the locals, mostly through a research crew because their field crew consists entirely of local men, and they all exhibit the Pura Vida lifestyle. Included in that is being really kind to people and genuinely caring how people are doing and feeling. Because Pura Vida is a really easy concept and mindset to latch onto, I feel that I handled the differences really well. It is pretty easy to have a genuine conversation with people and take time out of my day to be nice. This is something that I could easily do when I'm back in the States, but I fear I will not. I fear that I'll go back to being short with people and brushing strangers off instead of greeting them kindly.

The key learning points from my internship here are things that I've mostly already discussed. I learned a great deal about conducting research, myself, the process of traveling abroad, and tropical ecology. In the future I hope to be able to travel more and conduct research,

hopefully at the same time. I now feel more confident that I will be able to do those things.

The pros of my internship are really easy and obvious to describe. Las Cruces is a wonderful, beautiful place with many opportunities for learning and research. The staff at the station are extremely helpful and friendly, and patient with the visitors. The region consists of beautiful scenery and wonderful people. Costa Rica is an easy place to navigate and be alone. For the first time traveler, Costa Rica is a great place to visit. Also, this is a great place to practice Spanish without feeling overwhelmed because many people speak English and people who only speak Spanish are patient.

The cons are much harder to come up with, but I do have one that stands out for me: I did not experience much of Costa Rica during my stay here. I stayed around this small region and didn't visit the many, many places I would like to visit in Costa Rica. The good that came out of that is that I know this area fairly well and feel quite comfortable here. But Costa Rica has so much to offer and one day I will have to come back to visit the places that I've missed out on this time.

This has easily been one of the best experiences of my life and I would highly recommend it to anyone and everyone. With only a few days left in the country I'm already starting to experience what some people describe as pure grief at the thought of leaving this incredible place. One of my friends who has been here multiple times says that every time she goes back home she continues to feel this grief for a week or so. I can only hope that I'll get to return to Costa Rica, and Las Cruces, before I forget the simple, every day aspects that make this place so amazing.