

## **Tropical Wildlife Husbandry and Rehabilitation**

### **Anna F's Final Report**

This internship was the first time I have been out of the country (besides Canada), so it was a completely new experience for me. I chose this site in Costa Rica because it was about rehabilitation of wildlife, and, if I'm being honest, it also had sloths. Even though the sloths caught my attention, the toucans became my favorite animals from the internship.

I arrived in San Jose, Costa Rica later in the evening than scheduled. Customs took a while, but it was mostly standing in line. When I got to the kiosk it was quick and easy. Before leaving the IE3 representatives very thoroughly prepared me and other students about risks in other countries. For Costa Rica they warned me that the cab drivers would be crowded at the airport trying to give rides. The ranch had scheduled a ride for me and when I got my checked bag I walked out and immediately saw him. After that I was not bothered by anyone else. I was also very cautious about theft, which of course you should be, but no one seemed interested and I made it through my whole three months without losing anything. Although a roommate of mine did lose her wallet, so it happens. When I got to the ranch Carol drove me less than a kilometer away to the intern house where I would be staying. All the other girls were out, but they had made my bed and left a welcome note for me.

The house itself was very different than what I am used to on the west Coast. The toilet and shower were separated, but very small, only one person could fit in each one at a time. The kitchen had no counter space and was also only big enough for one person. There were three bedrooms and two bathrooms. The marketing intern, who was there for a year, lived in the master bedroom. I shared a room with a volunteer and the sloth intern had the other room. A few months later another volunteer moved into the sloth interns room with her. The house was in a small, gated community, on a slope, so when it rained hard it would flood. One day it flooded three times and a few months later we woke up at 4 am to it flooded again. Some things were damaged, but nothing of much importance. There was no dryer so we would have to wring out our freshly washed clothes and hang them up to dry, which took about three days, and by the time they were dry they smelled like mildew. After a while we got a new washer that spun the clothes, so they didn't come out soaking wet and dried faster without becoming mildewy. We also had a few foster animals for a while, but it was very hard to take care of them because we were all gone during the day.

I worked with everyone I lived with so we all became very close. We were all very likeminded and were there to save animals, and that didn't stop at the ranch, hence the foster animals. We all shared food in the beginning, but we decided we wanted our meals made for us because it was a lot easier than having to go shopping and make our own food, with the amount of work we were doing. We would all go out together and sometimes we would have weekends or days off together and be able to travel around the area or country.

About the ranch; I was surprised about the location of the ranch. I was in the middle of what the Ticos (native Costa Ricans) would call the suburbs. The intern

house was very close, so we were able to walk there everyday. Most of the people working there were volunteers, but there were some paid staff, like the kitchen supervisor, who made the food for the animals and ran the outside kitchen. The sloth team was all hired by the Sloth Institute run by Sam Trull, but were stationed at the ranch. They worked primarily with the baby sloths and tour giving. I was a part of the Toucan Team, which took care of the rest of the animals on the ranch, not just the sloths. Every new volunteer/ intern would have to work in the kitchen for a week to get a feel of everything that goes into feeding all the animals, and it's a great way to see the whole ranch and get to know the individual animals and their diets and personalities. After my kitchen week was up I was trained in the clinic to help out the sloth intern. My duties were to clean and feed each animal in the clinic, while keeping track of weights and behaviors. I was also required to keep the clinic clean and tidy, which turned out to be a difficult task when we were short handed. Some days I felt like I was doing everything, but we were all running around trying to get day to day and weekly chores finished.



A few negative aspects about the ranch would be the release rate. We may have released one or two birds (on purpose) and one sloth while I was there. Most of the sloths were ready for release, but were still in their enclosures. By the time I left the clinic, the house and the rest of the ranch were packed full and there was literally nowhere to put any more animals. That brings us to the farm. Leslie and Jorge have a farm in Sarapiquí that they plan to use as a release site. They were still in the process of building the release enclosures while I was there, so I am hoping when those get done, a lot of the animals can be released into the wild. There is also an intern house out there, where a few people were hired for and are moving out soon. Their job is to observe the animals and their behaviors after release. Another issue I had was that the owner did not trust easily. I did not get as much hands on in the medical aspect of things that I would have liked nor did I get a lot of experience with enrichment for the animals. I did ask to be a part of the enrichment team, but they never met up while I was there. I feel like a lot of the slack that went into that was the fact we all had full

loads and never really finished working. I feel with fewer animals, there would be more time to meet up and brain storm about how to make the permanent residence more comfortable.

There were a lot of differences in cultures, while there were multiple cultures around. Most of them were ticos or people from the U.S., but we had an Australian, a person from the UK, Spain, Mexico and French Canada. The main language at the ranch was English, though the kitchen supervisor did not speak any, but she was very patient with our caveman Spanish and we all communicated very well despite the differences. I loved learning about how everyone else grew up and how many different words and customs we had. Outside of the ranch was a different story. Very few people spoke English and as white girls, we all stood out like a sore thumb. Most were very nice, or left us alone, but we did have a few instances where people would call us names, but we never felt we were in danger. Communication was difficult because everyone spoke so fast and most of us had very basic Spanish. We had a few tico friends who would gladly translate for us, or try to teach us words and phrases, while they worked on their English with us.

Another interesting difference was the transportation. None of the volunteers had cars, so we would have to take the buses, cabs, or ubers everywhere. Even when we traveled to the coasts we had to get to a bus terminal. This was extremely new to me, since I have always had a car and can drive everywhere in the states. After a while it was just natural and less stressful. I would not want to drive there because their road rules are way more relaxed than in the U.S. It is hard to explain everything, but there was no taking turns at stop signs, and bridges were only one lane, so one of the lanes would have to stop to let other oncoming cars go over the bridges. It was all very chaotic to me.

My duties at the ranch, besides working in the clinic, consisted of chopping papaya, feeding the animals, usually just the front half, which were all the parrots and some toucans, preparing the next days food, and chopping more papaya. Papaya now reminds me of toucan poop and I will never eat it. The ranch went through 800 pounds of papaya a week, and every Friday was delivery day so the truck would pull up and we would all have to stop everything we were doing and unload everything. Fortunately, we all worked very well with each other. We would have two breaks, a coffee break after all the animals were fed, and a lunch break, after we had prepped all the food for the next day. We would usually get done with everything around 2:30 or 3 in the afternoon, depending on how many people were there to help.



Costa Rica is expensive. It is really easy to spend a lot of money in a short time, whether it's on food or entertainment. A lot of our money went to ubers, which was the most convenient way to get around. They were cheaper than taxis, faster than

buses and could be ordered online. At first switching from dollars to colones was difficult, and every once in a while I would get them mixed up. If something cost three mil in colones, it was usually about six dollars. If you weren't paying attention you would think something was a lot cheaper than it really was. Traveling and touristy things were pretty expensive also. There were a few things I wanted to do, like snorkel and zip line, but I could not afford it. We found a lot of cheap things to do also, or just hung out at home together.

One thing I highly recommend is making time for a border run. The country only allows foreigners to be there for 90 days total without a visa, so we took border runs to the nearby countries. We usually took five days to a week off to travel. I extended my stay by a week so I could take a border run to Panama, which was so amazing. I went with the Australian girl to Bocas Del Toro and the neighboring island of Bastimentos. It was expensive, but it was highly worth it. I finally got to experience the Caribbean. We also had a nature hike where we stayed and saw a lot of wildlife. We needed a boat taxi to get anywhere on those islands, so we met a lot people. They do require proof of exit from Central America to get in and out of each country, which my Australian friend had to fake. If we didn't have one it was simple to fake or use someone else's, but it was way less stressful if you already booked your flight out. I knew I was only staying for three months, so that wasn't a problem for me.



As for coursework preparing me for this internship, I felt my experience with volunteering helped a lot more. It was hands on and I knew what to expect. If someone never volunteered at wildlife rehabilitation, most of the time they don't realize that the majority of the work is feeding and cleaning. It's not all cuddling animals, which is also frowned upon because they usually need to be released. There were a lot of animals that could not be released. One of which was a scraggled toucan named Willy.



He came in severely malnourished and missing an eye. He became my favorite animal at the ranch. I took care of him while he was in the clinic. I gave him protein supplements to help him gain weight and grow more feathers. I taught him how to get on my hand so I could set him out of his cage into a perch. He was very sweet and people even said he protected me when other people were in the clinic. Towards the end of my internship he had gained weight and grew new feathers and I was able to get him outside of the clinic. For a while we would take him back inside when it rained, which he hated and would bite hard. He usually nibbled and looked at everyone sideways. A few days before I left I hung out with him in his enclosure and he cuddled with me. It is a good idea to not become attached to any of the animals, but it was really hard to leave him, along with all of the people of course.

Willy Before



Willy After

What I learned from this experience is that you need to speak up for yourself. You cannot rely on people noticing the work you do because they are usually busy with their work. If you want to do something, ask for it and they are usually very accommodating. I also learned that I have way too much stuff. When I got back to Oregon I donated or threw out half of my belongings because I didn't need them. The adjustment when coming back is very hard. The first day I was ecstatic to be home, but since then I have struggled quite a bit. I miss it there and I would still be there if I could. They want me to come back when I graduate, but it's very hard traveling when you have pets, so I recommend not having those.

Jamie and the IE3 staff are very helpful. At first I felt crowded and coddled by them, but I know they were just trying to prepare us for any situation we might encounter. While I was abroad, Jamie would check in once a month and send questions for me to answer. She also checked in when there was a hurricane warning. She is very knowledgeable about Central and South America and very helpful with traveling emotions. She did warn me that coming home would be hard, and at first I brushed it off and figured I would be fine, but no, it's very hard and emotional, especially since I became so close to the people with the people around me, and when I got home everyone was gone for the holidays. I think being alone made it the hardest, but I still miss everyone and even the work I did. I do still volunteer at the local wildlife rescue, which helps, and I do more hands on medical there.

This was a great experience with many challenges, but I was not alone and we all supported each other in this new environment. This is a great institute, where the animals are well taken care of, and hopefully will become better when the release site is up and running. The country is amazing, intimidating and challenging. There are so many places to travel to and a lot of wildlife to see.

