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Katie graduated from Middlesex University in collaboration with the College of Animal Welfare, with a First Class Honours in Veterinary Nursing in July 2015. After working in first opinion practice for a year, she made her move to a referral hospital where she now works as a Medicine nurse. Katie is due to start studying towards her Diploma in Advanced Nursing in September this year.

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Vet nurse abroad: Malawi, Africa

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ABSTRACT: Registered Veterinary Nurses are able to provide incredible amounts of knowledge and practical skills to help organisations that are on a mission to rescue Africa's wildlife, and what a rewarding experience we gain from it. Being involved with the Lilongwe Wildlife Trust was such an eye-opening and inspiring experience, in which I was included in the care provided to orphaned mammals, as well as studying the behaviour of the resident lions and much more. I hope this article encourages those of you who are thinking of heading on any sort of adventure like mine to get up and go.

How it started

I love working with our domestic patients here in the UK; however, I have always had a fascination towards large wild animals. It was therefore after a friend and colleague returned home and described their amazing time working out in Malawi that I knew I just had to go and experience it for myself.

About Lilongwe Wildlife Centre

Lilongwe Wildlife Centre (LWC) is situated within the heart and soul of Malawi. The centre first opened in 2008 and was the first project of Lilongwe Wildlife Trust, dedicating its time to rescuing, rehabilitating and releasing wildlife (**Figure 1**, **Table 1**). Many of the animals rescued have spent time in the illegal trade business, or have been kept as pets in nearby homes. The LWC is also a flagship centre for education, improving the Malawians understanding on the impact wildlife crime has towards species conservation and the influence deforestation has on natural resources and wildlife habitats. Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world and pressure is being placed on natural resources; therefore, the work that LWC provides is life-saving for Africa's wildlife (**Figure 2**).

My time at LWC

I decided to travel to Malawi in February, which over there is rainy season! Living in the UK, we are more than used to our fair share of rain; however, in Malawi, when it rains, it pours … and pours. Unfortunately, this causes a lot of young to be left behind in the wild when their parents try to find shelter. Rainy season is therefore a busy time for LWC and the orphan care team is busy with the arrival and care of new orphans ranging

Figure 1. Sitting here is 2-month-old Baboon Port. He is currently in orphan care having his regular feeds and lives with his orphan mother, Kezze, and orphan brother, Thunder

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Table 1. Wildlife at Lilongwe Wildlife Centre.

Baboons	34
Malawian vervets	129
Blue monkeys	7
Lions (permanent residents)	2
Serval cats	4
Jackals	3
Hyenas	1
Antelopes	3
Crocodiles	2
Pythons	1
Birds	6

The number of Malawian Wildlife that are currently being rehabilitated at LWC. Information correct as from April 2017 from Lilongwe Wildlife Centre.

Table 2. Making a corn puzzle. The corn puzzle has the same idea behind it that the Kong® toy classic has with our pets here in the UK.

How to make a corn puzzle – incredibly easy!
(1) Find an empty corn husk
(2) Fill husk with a variety of leaves, uncooked rice and nuts (we would hide seed pods inside ours as a special surprise!)
(3) Tie husk together with long blades of grass (the younger the animal, the easier we would make the husk to get into)

from primates to bushbucks and sometimes even a carnivore or two (**Figure 3a** and **Figure 3b**). I was lucky enough to be included in the care of many of the orphaned primates and bushbucks, which mainly included helping with their feeds, which there were many of during the day, and the cleaning and maintenance of their kennels (**Figure 4**). Just like our patients back here in the UK, enrichment is also a major part of the orphan's care, and many a day I would find myself trekking into the forest with a machete and a pair of secateurs, ready to collect plenty of leaves, branches, soil and grass for us to create our enrichment masterpieces, allowing those little ones to be kept busy (**Figure 5**). The corn puzzles were a favourite of mine, and apparently one of the monkeys too (**Figure 6**, **Table 2**)!

Now, I'm aware favouritism isn't *best practice* ... however, I had to make an exception with the permanent residents of LWC, Bella and Simba (**Figure 7**). These lions have had a rough start in life, but thanks to the Born Free Foundation and LWC, these two now have a loving and caring home. In order to monitor these two older lions on a daily basis, observations are performed where different aspects are recorded ranging from their interactions to how they are urinating.

Figure 2. Kezze – the orphan mother of Port and Thunder

Figure 3a. Orphan brotherly love – Port and Thunder

Figure 3b. Maddie, the 6-month-old Bushbuck in orphan care

Figure 4. It's feeding time for Cape and TukTuk, the orphaned baby Malawian Vervets

Figure 6. Our enrichment masterpieces – corn puzzles!

Having an interest in behaviour myself, I loved spending my afternoons tucked away at the back of the forest watching Bella and Simba. It was so peaceful and was a great time to catch up on journal writing while they took their afternoon nap. Because Bella and Simba have had urinary and respiratory infections in the past, volunteers had clear instructions to look out for any clinical signs. Therefore, due to our additional medical background and ability to pick up on these signs quickly, Registered Veterinary Nurses are a great benefit to LWC and other wildlife volunteering organisations. Thankfully, Bella and Simba steered clear of these infections during my visit, which meant I was lucky enough to spend my time just watching and studying these beautiful, breath-taking animals (**Figure 8**).

Figure 5. Here, Tabitha and Steph are creating corn puzzles as part of the enrichment for the primates.

To be a volunteer at LWC all you need is the desire to help make a change to Malawi's wildlife, you don't have to be qualified within a Veterinary profession. However, being a Registered Veterinary Nurse, I did have the additional experience of helping within the veterinary clinic alongside the onsite Vet. It was here that I was able to join in on the medical procedures employed on the rescued and rehabilitating primates, including monitoring the sedations during their general health checks, blood-taking and administering medications subcutaneously (**Figure 9**). Medical treatment is not common in primates unless they acquire any fight injuries; monkey politics cannot be avoided all the time! However, the most common treatment implemented, much like our cats and dogs, is for intestinal parasites including hookworm and whipworm. Working in the vet clinic was also a great opportunity to learn about the routine vaccinations and TB tests that are carried out, in addition to discussing the sedation protocols we implement on our patients back here in the UK, versus those used on primates in Malawi. I had many favourite moments during my time in Africa; however, the most surreal moment had to have been while I was recovering Indigo, a 2-month-old Blue Monkey, after her sedation. The memory of me holding her during her recovery to make her feel comfortable and warm until she was awake enough to be placed back in her enclosure, with her large eyes staring up at me and her tiny hands wrapped around my finger, will stay with me forever (**Figure 10a**, **Figure 10b**).

Days off in Malawi

All volunteers are allowed days off to explore Lilongwe or venture out a little further. I decided to spend my day on an adventure to Lake Malawi, and I urge anyone who does decide to travel to Malawi to visit Senga Bay (**Figure 11**). This was a working holiday, so at times there were early starts which meant tiredness caught

Figure 7. The beautiful Simba

Figure 8. Here is Bella, she's a little older than Simba and unfortunately lost one of her eyes to a severe case of glaucoma in her life before LWC

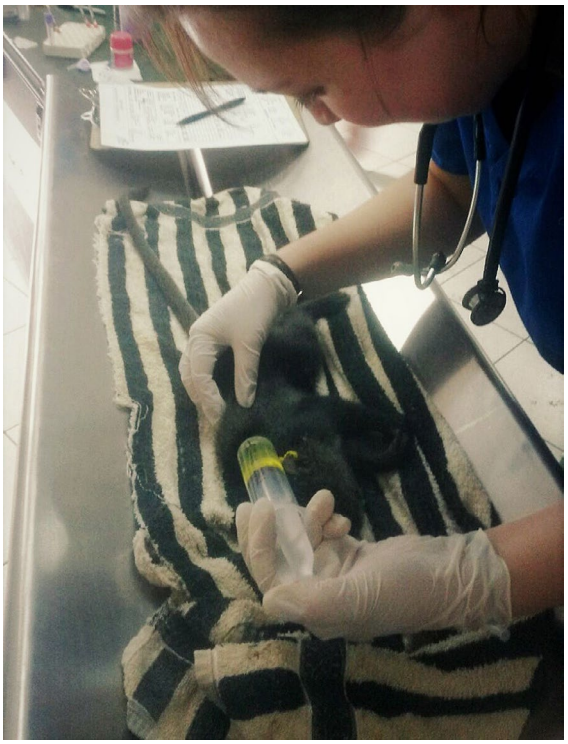

Figure 9. One of my days in the veterinary clinic, giving subcutaneous fluids to a Blue Monkey called Frank. These fluids also contained the Vitamins B and C as part of their routine health programme

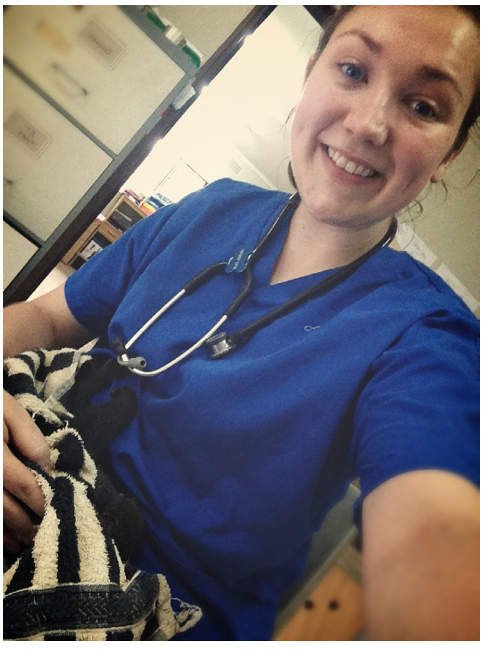

Figure 10a. My favourite moment – holding 2-month-old Indigo after her sedation

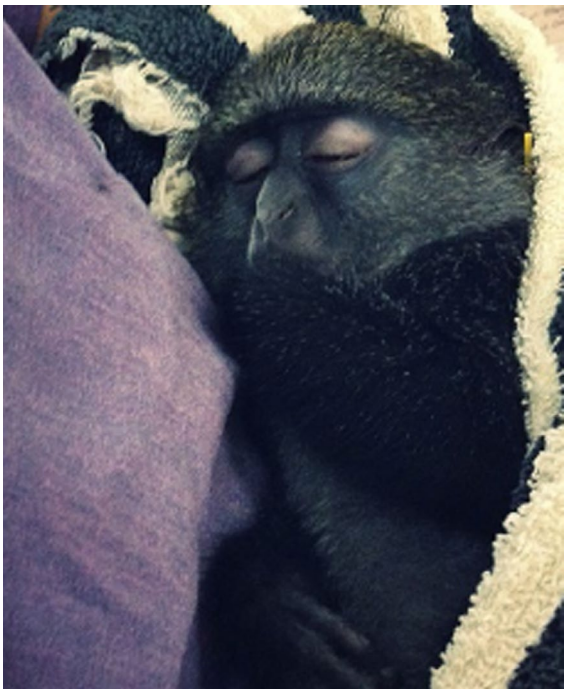

Figure 10b. Indigo sucking her thumb while recovering from her health check

Figure 11. Senga Bay, Lake Malawi

Figure 12. The island in Lake Malawi that we explored

Figure 13. The onsite Vet treating a bat with an injured wing

Figure 14. Me and Cynthia, LWC's onsite Veterinary Nurse. It was great talking with Cynthia and discussing how different our day-to-day jobs were

up on you; however, my time spent at Lake Malawi was all the therapy I needed. We decided to hire a car for our trip as Malawi is extremely low-priced compared to the UK, and meant renting the car cost us £12 for the entire day. Having the freedom to drive ourselves just added to the fun of the road trip and meant we were able to see some beautiful sites on our journey there. Due to it being the rainy season, the landscape was completely green and we had picked a great day with blue skies and a temperature reaching 30°C. We did get a little lost on our way; however, the people that live in Malawi are extremely friendly and are always happy to help!

While spending my time on a sunbed and having a dip in the pool was complete luxury, we wanted to have an adventure and explore one of the nearby islands within the Lake. The staff were more than happy to arrange this for us and again it was very affordable. I had my "James Bond" moment on the speed boat and once we reached the island, we were able to explore (**Figure 12**). I will never forget the view after climbing the rocks to the top; the definition of complete bliss.

I only visited Malawi for two weeks; however, those that would want to stay for longer would have the opportunity to travel to Liwonde National Park to experience an African Safari. However, a little tip, I would recommend doing research before booking your flights, as the animals you see can depend on the seasons out there. Elephants, for example, aren't usually seen in the rainy season.

Has this inspired you?

LWC are always looking for volunteers, and as Registered Veterinary Nurses we are highly valued out there with our additional knowledge and practical skills. I cannot commend highly enough the outstanding work *all* the staff members at LWC achieve, and even though their mission of saving Malawi's wildlife is a big task, they are certainly doing a great job (**Figure 13**).

Not only will your time in Malawi be a once-in-a-lifetime experience, but you will also have the chance to improve on your own knowledge, learn new practical skills, meet new people and it looks great on the CV! I am still overwhelmed at my opportunity for working at LWC, and was lucky enough to meet some fantastic people who made me feel right at home. I am already planning my next African adventure, as the opportunity to make a real difference to Africa's wildlife is priceless (**Figure 14**).

If you would like to learn more about the work LWC accomplish, or are interested in volunteering for them, visit www.lilongwewildlife.org/. They'll be more than happy to hear from you.