THAILAND JOURNAL 2016

27-28 December (Francie):

The group rose early to get to the MSP airport to catch a 9 AM flight on Delta to Detroit, MI. Everyone made it without a hitch. In Detroit, the next flight was also Delta and it was the long haul to Tokyo. Everyone survived airline food and lots of movies and people started to get to know each other. In Tokyo, it was a quick turn around and then on to the 3rd and final flight to Bangkok. All went well in Bangkok except Donmanic was denied entry into Thailand because, as a Chinese passport holder, he could only enter for 2 weeks; his return ticket, however, was not for another 3 weeks. After some texting with Francie and Dave (Dave was waiting in the airport) he finally bought a new ticket home and they let him through. But, one agent said that he could just stay the extra days and pay the fine instead (which was much less than a new ticket). Soon after he got through immigration, he canceled his new ticket as he made the decision to stay and pay the extra days for overstaying his visa. After arriving at the Fortuna, a few went out to explore BKK while others went to bed. It had been a long 24 plus hours.

29 December (Lauren): Vacation is over and the real reason I've come to Thailand has begun. Tuesday morning my travel partner and I met up with my group in the hotel my class arrived at and we all enjoyed a quiet breakfast together. Because everyone was jetlagged and didn't know one another, very few discussions were had. Once everyone had finished, Dave Smith conducted us to take us to our partner and I quickly and my We drove Chao Phraya aboard an old been converted the vans that would next destination. My said our goodbyes group and I were off! through Bangkok to the River where we hopped Thai rice barge that had for research use. This is where we will live for the next two days. Being our first day on the barge, we learned about the Thai culture by the barge staff and enjoyed traditional Thai snacks. We learned about the history of the river and how its shape was formed. Years ago, the King had thousands of slaves dig a canal through the river, connecting two sides of a bend to enable ships to travel much more quickly and easily. This canal created an
island known as Ko Kret which became inhabited by the Mon people, originally from Burma. Because their new home was surrounded by sand and clay, they used their abundant resources to produce pottery. We docked at the island and toured, meeting some of the skilled pottery makers themselves and were shown how they make their artwork. Some of us got to even try it out ourselves! After seeing the life of the island, we boarded the boat once more and learned more about the river and the problems it now faces. Unlike rivers in America, the Chao Phraya is not seen as a beautiful piece of Mother Nature but strictly as a source of income, providing its people with fish to sell, a means of importing and exporting goods, and as a dumping ground for their waste. Water hyacinths have taken over and the water is completely opaque with little marine life inhabiting it. We then headed to the market to buy food for dinner and were sure not to buy any seafood with the new knowledge of where the fish was coming from...

At the market we were told to use Thai phrases we were taught and were left to our own devices to find, haggle, and purchase our food. We would ask vendors "how much" and then ask them in Thai if they could bring their prices any lower, and then thanked them for their business. Many times we came across the problem that Thai's realized how poor our speaking skills were and would just reply to us in English. This definitely made learning more difficult. Once back on the barge, we made our Thai dinner, served one another, and enjoyed a night on the river. After all the food had been inhaled, everyone decided 8:00 PM to be a suitable time to hit the hay and we all climbed into our bunks beneath the deck.

30 December (Laura):

Even though it’s only our second full day in Thailand it feels like it’s been a full week at least. Part of that is probably because of the limited space on the barge and how busy the days have been. Despite the close quarters, the barge has been really fun, and it’s probably helpful for us all to be a bit confined these first few days to get to know one another. In the morning it was my group’s turn to cook breakfast. Ryan, Lindsey, Kylie, and I spent a few hours in the kitchen making 3 dishes; little omelets with carrot and tomato, fried glass noodles, and morning glory (one of my favorite dishes). I didn’t do much actual cooking, but chopped a lot of veggies and
sat on the floor smashing up garlic. After breakfast we played mafia as it was such a hit with the group the night before. During the day we learned about water hyacinth and the numerous problems it causes as an invasive species. We had been seeing the plant floating down the Chao Phraya and all along the banks, but I don’t know if any of us realized the extent of its impact. It not only causes environmental damage (outcompeting native aquatic plants, using up too much oxygen in the water, etc.) but also has negative economic impacts. The plants can clog up the river making it difficult for the barges to transport goods. To test the water quality of the area we did a biotic index and looked at the macroinvertebrates living in the roots of the hyacinth. I was surprised that the final score put that section of the Chao Phraya in the moderately clean category, but we were farther from the city so there was less pollution. It was interesting to see the changes along the shore as we got farther from Bangkok. Closer to the city the shoreline was densely packed with houses, factories, and temples, whereas today the houses were much more spread out and clearly rural. Most houses had livestock or chickens, and the banks had much more vegetation. After the biotic index we did a little birdwatching. The highlight was definitely seeing the kingfishers, especially the brightly colored ones. They were flying all around, and we saw a few snatch some creatures out of the water. We also saw some herons, sparrows, storks, and egrets. Although the birdwatching was interesting, it was also hard! I’m not a birder, so I had a difficult time trying to ID birds with the bird book after only catching a glance. Luckily some of the other students, Lauren especially, had some experience and were able to help me out. After birdwatching we had a chance to go swimming! Even after doing the biotic index and seeing all the little crabs and larvae hiding in the water it was still a really good time. Most of the morning and early afternoon was spent travelling to the temples at Ayutthaya, a large island in the river. We finally arrived in the mid-afternoon and took a short tuk tuk ride to the ruins of the temple. Even though the island was attacked and ransacked by the Burmese in the 1700s, it was still amazing to see the scale of the ruins and imagine what the area must have looked like when the city was in its prime. We spent a few hours walking around the temples and exploring a few nearby markets before heading back to the barge for dinner and yet another game of mafia.
31 December (Clare):

Today started off bittersweet, as we woke up on the barge and had to pack up to leave. This has definitely started to feel very comfortable, spending most of our time on the barge with little vacations to explore specific areas along the river, having a routine for meals and evenings, with our sleeping spots all laid out and organized. As we packed, the barge crew prepared our final breakfast, and before we knew it we were saying goodbye to people we had come to know and enjoy quite well. After we said our goodbyes and took one final picture with everyone who had helped make the barge home, we visited a temple near where the barge dropped us off. It was incredible: filled with Thai people worshipping, holding lengths of gold fabric, which we learned was for the ceremony of wrapping the fabric about the giant golden monk statue that was seated in the center of the temple. The walls were lined with tiny cubbies, each filled with a little statue of a meditating monk. As we walked around, a monk was blessing the Thai people as they greeted him with small splashes of water over them. As we walked past and greeted him, he doused several of us with the holy water. I guess we needed lots of blessings! Before we left the temple, we got our fortunes for the upcoming year via a Thai tradition: you kneel and shake a cup of long sticks until one stick falls out. On the stick there is a number, which corresponded to your fortune. Each of us did so, and while some got great fortunes, mine and several other people’s were not looking so great. We shall see how our years go! After the temple, we piled into the vans to travel to our new home-away-from-home, a bungalow about 4 hours south of Bangkok. We were met with the Thai kindness and smiles yet again once we arrived. We went to dinner at a delicious seafood restaurant, complete with tiny squids with their arms still in a “curse you!” position. Everything we ate was delicious and sweet: everything is sweeter in Thailand! Humans included!
1 January (Clare):

Today, we woke up at the private bungalow where we were staying and piled into the vans to travel to the beach and nearby markets. The ride in total took a few hours and a few of us did not feel great as we were nauseated from the ride. Fortunately, Thai road trips are different than American ones; they’re a lot more relaxed. The van drivers stopped for anyone needing the bathroom. Usually we stopped for about 20 minutes and we always got to sit and relax for meals. This allows us motion-sick-prone people to walk around, feel better, and maybe get a snack and some Dramamine in us if need be! On the drive to the beach, the place we stopped for food ended up having several puppies there! They were about three weeks old and mostly black and brown, varying both in weight and amount of folds. They totally stole our hearts and possibly too much of our time. They were totally worth it! The restaurant where we had lunch belong to Tom’s aunt and they made us delicious soup out of home made fresh noodles, vegetables and pork wontons. Dave and Tom’s 5-year-old daughter made the wontons. The beach was absolutely breathtaking in every way--from the magnificent view to the charming people and stores to the chilly waves that weighed down our clothes, it took my breath away. The water was crystal blue and colder and more powerful than you’d think. We all wore t-shirts and shorts over our bathing suits as Thai culture is more modest than home. The guys on our trip ended up taking their shirts off, but none of the girls did. Actually, Melissa and I were sitting in the very shallow waves trying to get some sun to our upper arms and legs and two women walked by us a few times pretending to show each other things on their phone but actually photographed us. It was really interesting that the two of us, trying to soak in the sun, were photograph-worthy due to their high value of paler skin. We explored the shops around the beach in groups. There were countless gems hidden in the regular-old souvenirs, and a bunch of us got things for ourselves and others back at home. The ride back to the station went pretty smoothly, and we stopped at a big night market on our way home. Several people bought friend insects to try back at the bungalow and everyone who tasted crickets and grubs was positive about the experience. Back at the bungalow we had a fantastic bar b q and enjoyed some karaoke before bed. Basically, today was filled with the beach, wonderful people, and adorable puppies; what an amazing start to the New Year.
2 January (Melissa):

Today we left Thap Sakae in the south of Thailand and started our journey to the Khao Nang Rum research station in Huai Kha Khaeng. Our day started off with the usual breakfast rice soup and mini bananas before we loaded up once again into the vans and headed out on our long day of traveling. Along the way we stopped at a restaurant owned and operated by a man with seven wives. I had the rice noodle soup which contained fish balls. When the fish balls were avoided it was a really delicious soup. Then we loaded up the vans and drove another couple of hours before we stopped at a gas station to load up on snacks. Right before reaching Huai Kha Khaeng we stopped at a 7/11. Some of the group found French fry chips with “American cheese sauce”, since we were all cheese deprived at this point they decided to buy it. Turns out in Thailand, “American cheese sauce” is not cheese at all but some strange BBQ sauce. Finally, after hours and hours of driving our vans dropped us off at the HKK Sanctuary headquarters pickup trucks needed to transport us and our luggage over the rough road, bridges and even through a river. We loaded both our stuff and ourselves into the back of these pickup trucks. As the sun was setting, we journeyed along a bumpy dirt road, ducking from hanging branches and looking out for the wildlife. We did spot some sort of canines or small cats (probably civet cats) crossing the road. After about an hour we arrived at Khao Nang Rum research station and were promptly showed to our bunkhouses and fed dinner. We ended our long day falling asleep on our sleeping mats/cushions in our electricity-less bunkhouse.

3 January (Melissa):

The first thing we heard this morning were Gibbons screaming in the jungle surrounding the research station complex around 6 am. Eventually, I gave up on attempting to sleep through the racket and got ready to go down the hill to the kitchen. It wasn’t much of a surprise that once again we were served breakfast rice soup, however I kind of enjoyed this and here at the station the soup was even better than before. After breakfast we headed up to the
classroom area, which is a tile floor, with no walls, covered by a roof, and tables and chairs. Francie lectured briefly on the mammals we might encounter in HHK and Dave lectured on the natural history of the tiger. Then we were shown animal tracks and scratches and told how to identify the common tracks we might find. After that we were split into groups and given a GPS and coordinates that our group was supposed to navigate to. After this practice exercise we actually went out onto trails with Thai guides and applied what we had learned in lecture. My group found a lot of different tracks, scrapes, scats, and dungs such as sambar, wild boar, leopard, elephant, and tapir. Once we came back from our hikes we had some down time and dinner before bed.

4 January (Ryan):

Waking up on the third of January, we heard the singing of the white-handed gibbons in the canopy right outside of our houses. However, this morning the gibbons had moved away, and we could barely discern the various tones of whoops of the primates between those of the local birds. All sixteen of us had read the MacKenzie paper, and neither Dr. Smith nor Joob believed us initially. That is of course, until our collective knowledge answered their opening volley of questions to Joob’s presentation with flying colors. We proceeded to learn about conducting occupancy surveys, which I’ve discerned as the statistics of surveying for signs of large vertebrates in the field. We also learned of the dangers of false absence, which occurs when some field technicians may (for instance) mark a tiger absent from a habitat, simply because they did not see one. Thusly, many past occupancy surveys have been drastically underestimated due to false absence. Our hike for today was set for less than a handful of kilometers through fairly accessible dry dipterocarp. Half of our sixteen-person crew hopped into a single pickup with a few Thai technicians. We managed to fit fourteen people into one truck (See figure 01). The driver must have been a master of Tetris while growing up. After what felt like half an hour of driving through rough terrain, our team reached our jungle insertion point. Carl, Abby, Ryan (me) and Lauren formed team CARL, along with Joob. I quote Abby in reference to our session abroad thus far when I say “Time is an allusion.” The jungle itself though, to those of you video game enthusiasts out there, was in essence akin to the jungles of Kyрат in Far Cry 4. Our mission (as we chose to accept it) was to scour a jungle-road for signs of tigers’ prey and for signs of tigers themselves. While walking through segments would record signs of tigers or their prey.
Signs included tracks, scats and claw or scent marks. Each hundred-meter segment into the road we would stop, record G.P.S. coordinates and start a new segment. Ten segments together added to one kilometer, and we called them one replicate. Joob has been collecting data in this way for two years for her PHD at the University of Minnesota to study occupancy of tigers and their prey. Our coolest find of the day was a neat-looking leopard track (See figure 02) and a ten-foot spider web spanning across the road. Eventually team CARL returned to Khao Nang Rum research station and reported their findings to the rest of the crew. Melissa, Michael, Lindsey and Donmanic found tapir track, fifteen tiger spray marks and saw a banteng. A banteng is a wild cow with an orange coloration. Laura, Breanna, Tatum and Ellie found some tiger scat and a dung beetle. Kylie, Clare, Veronica and TJ found a tiger bed, a monitor lizard carcass and boasted a naïve detection rate of two-thirds. This team also managed to walk eight kilometers in the heat of the day, an impressive feat to say the least. Each team turned in their replicate papers to Joob. After the debriefing, we all took the night off. Some of us wrote in our journals, others played mafia in one of the houses. Two barking deer like to browse around the guys’ house. Ryan walked up the hill by himself that night and was startled when he caught a barking deer in his spotlight between him and the house. Everyone had a productive day and a great evening as well. Another day in paradise!

5 January (Ellie):

Today, we woke to a quiet morning. The gibbons spoke only a few howls through the trees, far from the cabins. We prepared for the day, which held presentations in the morning, and hiking to tiger kill sites in the afternoon. Like most mornings, the group met Francie for breakfast at 8 a.m. We were served rice, and a warm soup with cooked radish in it. After breakfast and dishes were done, everyone walked up the hill to the classroom. Tome gave a short presentation on how the research station immobilizes (darts) tigers after catching them in the snare. Then, Soumaya Dodge gave a presentation on bird migration, and gave examples how methods used with bird movement can be used to track tiger movement as well.
After the morning presentations, the group prepared for our hike to the kill sites. We loaded into trucks, and spent about an hour and a half in the truck beds acquiring aches and pains from the bumpy, gravel road. Once we were out of the trucks, we ate lunch, and split into two groups. The first group hiked into the jungle, and the second group got back into the trucks to go to a different trail. The day was warm and sunny. Once we began hiking, the group started to shed layers of clothing that were needed in the morning. The kill site for group one was several weeks old, so we all hoped there were still remains to see as we hiked towards our destination. As we neared the destination, the terrain became rocky and followed a stream. We had to pay close attention to our footing so we would not fall into the stream. Once we were at the site, the bones were spread out instead of being all together. Our guides explained that a bear may have spread the bones around. Once we found and examined some of the bones, they looked to be the kill of a wild boar. The bones were very bare from being killed weeks ago. The second group heard a kill while hiking to their site, and found a bed where a tiger had slept. It is possible that what the group heard was a tiger attacking and killing its prey, which sounded like a wild boar. After hearing the kill, the group kept hiking towards the kill site, but couldn’t find any remains at their destination. They were still very excited to have heard a tiger kill its prey and to have seen where a tiger slept, likely just days before. Once the groups hiked back and took the trucks to headquarters, it was approximately 4 p.m. We had a few snacks, and then loaded into the trucks for the journey back to camp. The time of the day was perfect for seeing wildlife. We saw barking deer, a male peacock, wild chickens (Jungle Fowl), a wild boar, and macaques. We all became quiet as we watched the monkeys, who were walking on the jungle floor and swinging above us in the bamboo. For dinner, we dined on rice, fried vegetables, eggs with onion, and “dragon eye” fruit for dinner. Each group shared with the other what we had seen (and heard) during our hikes. There were no evening activities scheduled, so we all met in the cabins to play card games before settling into bed.
6 January (TJ):

Today we woke up around 8 o’clock and headed down to breakfast at the usual time of 8:30. After eating our meal of rice, chicken wings, vegetables and guava, we headed up to the classroom to get ready for a lecture by Mai on camera trapping. The lecture focused on what is possible with camera trapping, as well as what alternate methods are. For example, she mentioned that in India, researchers used to count tiger footprints to estimate the numbers of tigers. However, they realized that this is not an accurate way to estimate populations when they started to not see many tigers, but still saw footprints. With camera trapping, estimates can be more accurate because you can see if the same tiger is in different areas, rather than counting multiple sets of footprints as different tigers. Following the lecture, we were given the opportunity to purchase T-shirts that advertise the Thailand tiger project. Lauren and I were fortunate enough to buy the only two hats they had for sale as well. Once everyone picked out their clothes, it was time to learn how to set up the camera settings for the camera traps. We were joined by several of the Thai technicians who helped us through the steps of getting multiple types of cameras ready for our camping trip. Even though there were many cameras not yet set, we had to stop because we ran out of batteries for them. Finally, we were given some free time to use the internet to give final goodbyes to our friends and family before leaving on our 3-day camping trip where we would have no service. Although, shortly after connecting to the Wi-Fi, the internet crashed so Dave told us we’d be able to stop by headquarters in the morning before heading out. It was time for lunch anyway, and we had quite a surprise when three gibbons joined us in the trees near the eating area. We watched them for a while as they swung from tree to tree effortlessly. And they watched us as we filmed them and took pictures. Shortly after lunch we headed up to the museum where Dr. Smith gave us information on all the different animals of the skulls that are kept there. He helped us to distinguish between gaur and banteng skulls and talked about how elephants use their teeth. Once we finished up there, we grabbed the tents and set them up to make sure that everyone knew how and that all the pieces were there. Then, a hammock was set up so that the students interested in using one were able to see if it was comfortable enough. As the sun began to set, Dr. Smith gave us another lecture on female home ranges. He talked about how they are much smaller than male territories and explained what the offspring do to establish their own territories once they leave home. As this lecture ended, the night was filled with reading papers, packing for the camping trip, and stargazing.
7 January (Michael):

Thailand mornings are always slightly more frigid than I would like. As I do my basic morning routine I weigh the costs and benefits of changing out of my pajama pants before going to breakfast. After fierce internal deliberation, I come to the conclusion that my smurf pants are too much of an asset to disregard at this time. At breakfast, I happily indulge in what I previously considered an oddity before venturing to Thailand: breakfast soup. The soup is essentially a broth with veggies and some meat from an unknown source that you pour over rice. It turns out that soup in the morning is a great way to warm up and get ready for the day, and it would certainly be a day that needed preparing for. Today we are leaving the research center and have a long drive ahead of us. We will be heading out to Nang Ma to camp and set up camera traps. Our adventure starts with a cozy ride through the jungle in a truck. Eventually we arrive at a rest stop type area where we ditch our lavish pickups for commuter vans. Upon arriving at Nang Ma we are treated to a dusky view of the nearby creek within a small gorge of sorts. In the surrounding grasses little frogs and toads scramble to safety into the nearby water. A little later I stumble upon, and catch, a cute little gecko. This is my kind of place.
January 8 (Brea):

Today is the first morning waking up in Nang Ma. Three others and I spent the night sleeping in hammocks we set up the night before while the rest slept in tents spread out in various areas throughout our campground. Everyone starts the day by taking a ‘nature pee’ in a secret hidden place somewhere in the jungle surrounded by thorny bamboo followed by brushing their teeth in the beautiful stream located only a few feet away from our tents. Dave, being the chef that he is, made fried eggs in the giant wok over the burner. Francie made coffee by the fire using the French press and Kylie prepared toast over the fire for the group. Some of us from the group took seats on the blue tarp on the ground after taking our shoes off and ate our breakfast. A few from the group then washed dishes in the stream. The it was the Thai’s turn to eat their breakfast on the tarp as well. Dave then organized us into our hiking groups for the day. We split up into five or six groups, with two Thai guides and loaded up four camera traps and their cases into our bags. We plotted the GPS points of the locations where each group is setting up their camera traps and we headed out. We started with a long bumpy ride in the back of a truck and then we were eventually dropped off at our starting point. Some of the groups hikes went up a mountain or followed a river and it took groups anywhere from three to six hours to complete their tasks, which were from five to ten kilometers long. My group got to our first GPS point after about 3.5 kilometers. Our guide showed us appropriate spots to put up our cameras and how to set them up. After we tested the cameras to make sure they worked properly, we ate lunch under a tree only a few feet from where we set the cameras up. Lunch consisted of your typical rice in a bag with some meat and vegetables. Then we packed up and were in a much better mood because setting up the cameras meant we were carrying a few less pounds in our backpacks. Then we trekked another 2.5 kilometers back towards our second point through the partially dried up riverbed and thorny bamboo. The day was getting slightly cooler as the sun went down as we set up our last two cameras and then we walked another 1.5 kilometers back to the road where we were initially dropped. After waiting for a bit, the truck picked us and another group up to drive us back to the campsite. As groups got back to camp, most went down to the stream to take bath/showers. We were all happy to be in cool running water, much better than our previous showers that consisted of dumping buckets of water onto ourselves. After hanging out in the stream for some time everyone hung their clothes out to dry and we got ready for dinner. A few people volunteered to help make the food and the rest of us circled around the fire talking about what we did or saw on our hikes. Then we all sat down on the blue tarp on the jungle floor and passed the plates and spoons around and served everyone rice. We all very hungrily ate rice, fried vegetables and various meats made under the supervision of our Thai companions. After dinner, some people stayed up late to hang out in each other’s tents while others, like myself, went to bed pretty early to the sounds of all the jungle animals.
9 January (Kylie):

You could say that this morning was a bit chilly. And by a bit chilly, I mean I woke up shivering again, even in my three layers and sleeping bag. But even though I woke up freezing in my hammock, I was still in awe of the incredibleness that comes with waking up in the jungle. Birds were singing already and the jungle was alive. Even with waking up countless times because I was so cold, I would never trade this experience for anything. I don’t know many people who can say that they have camped in pure jungle. That’s pretty cool, if I do say so myself. Once I got dressed and warmed up a bit, it was time for breakfast. French toast! That doesn’t sound that exciting, unless you understand the sheer amount of rice that we have consumed in the past couple of weeks. French toast was a very welcome reminder of what food tastes like back home. We gratefully ate our reminders of home, then started preparing for our hike. As we set our GPS units, Dave promised groups of elephant sightings (promises that we were all sure would not come true...). Even though we were sure that Dave was teasing, we found out later that one group actually did almost see elephants! An exciting and, I’m sure, terrifying experience. Our group also came pretty close to elephants. We came across fresh dung and tracks. It didn’t really hit me how close we were to them until one of the field technicians told us to watch the other field technician closely so we could see which way he runs... Then it was pretty real. Thankfully, we did not actually see the elephants, for I’m sure if we did, I would not be able to sit here and write about it. Elephants aside, the hike was overall good. We set four camera traps, both in the jungle and along the road. Then it was time to hop back in the back of the truck along with the 10 or so others, and make the slightly terrifying journey back to camp, dodging bamboo all the way. Once we got back, everyone ran to the river to take an ever-anticipated bath. The river was much warmer than the bucket showers we were used to, and much more pleasant overall. When we got out of the river, one of the groups was just getting back. They were extremely excited because they had seen a leopard on their hike!
Then came time for dinner. We had some interesting ‘fish chips’ for an appetizer. They were literally like chips that were made out of fish. That sounds horrible, but they were actually quite good. Then we had some delicious curry, and of course, rice. Many of us stayed up for a while longer around the campfire talking about our hikes and reminiscing about things that reminded us of home, like French toast. We eventually made our way to our tents and hammocks. As I lay in my hammock, I thought about my day and how I would not change a single thing about this crazy experience that I have been able to have in these past few weeks. Except, maybe a warmer sleeping bag.

10 January (Carl):

The day started with Dave shaking the tents awake. Time to get up, stretch away the nighttime cold and aches and start packing, because our time spent camping was done. Our reward for packing up our tents and belongings so quickly was French toast for breakfast. Or a fried egg on toast if that was your preference. With happy bellies we loaded into the all-too-familiar trucks for the bumpy drive out of the jungle. We were returning to Huai Kha Khaeng.

We stopped for lunch in Ban Rai at an open restaurant that served amazing pad thai. We practiced our skills with chopsticks until hunger overcame us and we did whatever it took to get those noodles in our mouths. We tried traditional Thai sweet tea, which was a creamy orange color and came in mason jar cups. It tasted almost like a green tea latte. We made a quick stop at a 7-eleven on our way back to the research center to stock up on all the necessities (potato chips, Cheetos, crackers). We were well prepared. We were able to stop by the watchtower on our way back. We were led there in ninja silence after being told, “You won’t see anything if you make any noise.” As silently as possible, and with a few scolding looks to those who stepped too heavily, we climbed up the metal stairs and situated ourselves throughout the three decks. The
watchtower overlooks a small prairie, with the jungle behind and a salt lick (a muddy mineral deposit) to the right. We saw banteng grazing in the field. One mother was being followed by an overeager baby. There were peacocks as well, doing whatever peacocks do. We continued to watch the wildlife until someone noticed a movement from behind the trees. Every once in a while a trunk would swing into view then vanish. Just as you began to think your eyes were deceiving you it would happen again. There was an elephant slowly making its way toward the salt lick. We held our breath and winced at how loud each camera click sounded until he was in full view and digging in the salt lick. It was amazing. We were fortunate enough to be in the right place at the right time when this lone, tusk-less male decided to visit the saltlick. This fortunate sighting came to an end when Joob decided that the elephant was likely to get closer, which would make it potentially dangerous for us to leave our tower. Not everyone was distressed by that news though. There was a strong vote to spend all night at the watchtower. But our votes counted for very little in this decision and we were soon retreating just as silently as we had come, back to the research center to celebrate our good fortune.

11 January (Lindsey):

January 11 was a very special day for all of us students. It was our first day back from camping in Nang Ma but it was also our last full day at the Khao Nang Rum research station and in the Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary! It was also the day that we put together most of our final project which was to be presented to the research staff the next day. Breakfast was at 8am per usual. We ate rice, fried vegetables, and chicken soup with potatoes and tomatoes. We had just gotten back from camping the previous evening and we were very grateful when we were given some time to hand wash our clothes before starting class at around 10:30am. After washing clothes, the students gradually trickled back to the classroom to discover a rare treat: internet! We had a whole hour to update our families after the camping trip and tell them all about the wildlife we had seen. At the start of class, since it was our last full day in the wildlife sanctuary, we created a list of all of the mammals we had seen. The list included the Asian elephant, leopard, banteng (type of wild cattle), gaur (very large type of wild cow), wild water buffalo, hog deer, barking deer, sambar, wild boar, giant black squirrel, large Indian civet, masked palm civet, gibbons, pig-tailed macaque, long-tailed macaque, crab eating mongoose, langur, and one student even discovered a bat in one of the bathrooms! As a group, we also encountered evidence (dung, scat, sprays, or tracks) of other mammals including tapir, tiger,
otter, crab-eating mongoose, and East Asian porcupine. Next, we discussed the possibility of tiger and leopard competition and made the decision to focus our final project on a variety of papers that provided evidence supporting this idea. We created histograms based off of what time of day leopards and tigers are active and compared the two. Then, we learned more about the overlapping diets of the two big cats. This was one of the only days that we did not go into the field and it was quite a change. Sitting still at a table and doing school work surprisingly seemed like much hotter work than hiking in the jungle doing field work. Some of the Thai researchers must have noticed us getting hot and they took pity on us by bringing some cold Cokes to the classroom. After that, people seemed refreshed and ready to work! After working on the final project presentation for a few hours, we loaded ourselves into the trucks with some snacks. We were taken up to the viewpoint, which has an interesting story behind it. Quite a while ago, the princess of Thailand was travelling and stayed in Huai Kha Khaeng for a single night and an entire building was constructed for her on the hill with the most beautiful view of the park. And it truly was one of the most beautiful, breathtaking, and rare views: one seamless mass of trees from horizon to horizon. We enjoyed our time at the viewpoint, taking photos, snacking, and watching the sun setting behind the mountains. Eventually, it was time to head back to Khao Nang Rum research station for dinner. Earlier, we had moved one of the long, heavy tables (yes, it took 16+ people to move one table) closer to the fire pit for our farewell barbecue and party. The food was absolutely delicious! We had barbecued chicken wings on a stick, sticky rice, beef, and vegetables. Then, I was on dish duty for the evening. I was a little sad at first that I’d be missing part of our farewell night, but our dish crew definitely still managed to carry on the fun. When we were done, we joined the other students and researchers around the fire, enjoying our last evening at the station.

12 January (Donmanic):

I woke up at 7:10 and this morning was unusually cold. I went to our classroom before breakfast and read my novel for a while. A Thai I got to know last night stopped by and we greeted each other. At breakfast I talked to Dave regarding one research-related idea. Later he talked about his idea on pellet counts and how to obtain a sambar population estimate. He also discussed how it is important to work with people in a wildlife career, not just wildlife. We
went to the classroom at 09:00 and started preparing for the final project. I helped as much as I could. Then it was time to give the shared presentation by Ryan, Veronica and all of the others. It came across as coherent and prepared. In the end, Francie and Dave emphasized stating ethical or mildly appealing conclusions for published studies. That’s important!!! I also realized later that I should have asked the Thais what they thought about our group’s presentation. Then lunch. Ryan picked up a beautiful dead butterfly from somewhere and I hope he kept on to it. Michael took some pictures with the butterfly on his head. We should get the pictures afterwards. Then we loaded into several vehicles and hailed the Thais goodbye as we headed to our next location, Bungboraphet, the largest freshwater wetland in Thailand. It’s a shame we didn’t farewell all of the other Thais on our last day but we had left most of them behind at our camera trap site in Nang Ma. We stopped by a 7-11 in Lansat and the 20 baht pies were amazingly good. Melissa got a Hawaiian pizza pie which she enjoyed greatly. Then we arrived at the research station at Bungboraphet where we will capture and band birds. One of the banding team staff, Pam, gave a thorough briefing about our mission tomorrow. Her speech was extremely useful and it was worthwhile to take notes. As I was walking with professor Cuthbert she told me most of the students in our group are not clear about their career path. To me it was unbelievable because I know the direction I am heading. Then dinner. When everyone discovered there was congealed blood in the meal they were interesting to watch! This is an excellent example of cultural disorientation. And the eggs were as nice as the first day we ate in Thailand. After dinner I asked professor Francie and Dave about some places to go during the free day we have in Bangkok. They had a lot of suggestions: snake farm, skytrain, electronic center... They were very helpful and my time in Bangkok was very fulfilling thanks to them.

13 January (Tatum):

Today was one of my favorite days on this trip. We had to wake up at 4 a.m. but it was definitely worth it for the experience. I was very excited because I had never done much with birds, and I was really looking forward to the hands on experience. We woke up early and drove out to our group spot. I decided to sit in the truck bed because I thought that it would be cool to be able to look at the stars and feel the breeze. It was an easy trip compared to our jungle rides, but it was definitely a lot colder and windier than I had expected. When we arrived at
our spot it was still fairly dark out and chilly. We seemed to be in some sort of a field and there was a group of people a little way in the distance around a fire. The mist nets were set up in the fields so we went in with our headlamps to prepare them, which went fairly quickly. Once this was finished we returned to where we had parked and waited. We laid on a tarp as the sun was rising and eventually received some coffee and snacks. After a little while had gone by we finally got to go out to retrieve birds out of the mist nets. I was a little nervous while getting them untangled, because they feel so fragile, but you also don’t want to let them go. I ended up not letting any birds go from the net so I was pretty proud of myself. Eventually we got to handle the birds, record data, and let them go. My favorite birds were the ones with the ruby throats (Siberian Rubythroat). They seemed so much more calm than the others, and they were so beautiful. I loved getting to handle the birds and learn from the Thais. It was a wonderful experience, and I never knew that I would be so interested in birds. This part of the day went so well that I was excited for the next day when we would band birds again. The rest of the day was pretty chill. We got back, ate lunch, and had a little bit of free time before we had to set up more mist nets. During our free time I explored the area a little bit, which was very peaceful. I walked along a bridge and up into a small tower on the water; there were a lot of birds and pretty flowers to look at. Once the free time was over we got back into our groups and put mist nets up near where we were staying. Then we had the opportunity to go on a bird watching boat ride. It was a very calm ride and we saw some very cool birds and sites. I was very tired by the end of the ride and was ready to go to bed after dinner. Overall I found the day to be very exciting and I enjoyed having such a new experience, even compared to our previous fieldwork.

14 January (Abby):

Today started with us waking up before dawn to open the mist nets we’d set the day before. My group had set ours up on the canal so we took a boat to our site. While we were opening the nets I noticed that we were surrounded by massive mimosa plants and one of the guides told us that they’re an invasive species in Thailand. This surprised me considering I was able to kill my own mimosa plant back home entirely by accident. However, Minnesota is considerably
more inhospitable than Thailand at least with regard to plant life. After setting the nets we went to our base camp, which was on a barge-like boat wedged across an offshoot of the canal. There we snacked on flavored cakes and waited for the sun to rise. There was a ton of bird activity and we caught lots of Great Reed Warblers and Siberian Ruby Throats. Unfortunately the local Koel was also using our net and killed and ate several of the warblers and a sunbird while they were helpless in the net. We got called back from the field early because we had to pack for Bangkok, but by 11am we had caught over 50 birds. After packing, the drive back to Bangkok wasn’t very eventful. Most people slept nearly the entire way. After so many days in HKK, the Fortuna hotel seemed like an oasis of luxury, and I took a nice hot shower as soon as I was able. After that shower I felt the cleanest and most refreshed I’d been the whole trip. Shortly afterward we filed down stairs to meet up for the farewell dinner. We had to ride the sky train a few stops over to go to a really fancy Chinese restaurant, The Greater Shanghai, where they took us to a private room. We were served pickled cabbage, steamed pork dumplings, fried duck skin with hoisin sauce (Peking Duck), and duck lo mein. Everything tasted delicious, though the fried duck skin was kind of intimidating at first. After dinner Francie, Dave, and a few other people headed back to the hotel, while the rest of us went with Peachy to find the tattoo parlor she had helped us pick out. Once we got there the tattoo artist spoke almost no English so Peachy helped translate everyone’s tattoo ideas. It was taking a while for things to get going so Ellie, Mike, Ryan and I decided to wander through the street vendors for a bit and then come back later. We bought a bunch of elephant pants and Ryan found a cool antique pipe. We then stumbled across a gelato place that was just about to close and everyone bought some to eat before we headed back to Giant Tattoos. When we got back, Donmanic was in the middle of his tattoo and it looked great but he had to take a break for a while because it was so painful. Since there were still a lot of people waiting to get tattoos and it was getting late, Ellie, Mike, and I decided we would rather just come back the next day so we left. We spent the rest of the night walking through the seemingly endless rows of street vendors before finally heading back to the hotel to sleep.
15 January (Veronica):

On the last day in Bangkok we split into different groups to explore the city. There were a lot of different ideas on how each person wanted to spend their last day. Many of the students decided on getting tattoos. There were sharks, tigers, elephants and other cool ideas. The prices for tattoos were even more surprising to all of us college kids. The people who did not get tattoos decided to scavenge the city for great market gifts. Ryan, Melissa and I were all set on finding the new Star Wars Movie on DVD for $3. I was so excited to find it that I bought two copies. Carl came back with 2 of the same wallets - one for her sister. There were many other amazing finds such as: fake designer clothes, pocket knives, elephant pants and so much more that it’s impossible to name. The idea of the night was to pull an all-nighter. Most of us wanted to do this because the flight was so early that we’d be able to sleep on the plane. Plus, that means we’d hopefully have less jet lag. The last day was very memorable and relaxing. Besides the tattoos, market shopping and getting massages there was so much that was left for a next visit to Asia.
16 January (Veronica):

The morning of the last day was hard for different reasons. First, it was 4 in the morning. Everyone was exhausted, especially after a fun last night in Bangkok. Most of the students went to markets until very early in the morning. The game plan was to stay up as late as we could so we could sleep on the first flight, which was going to be 6 hours. However, I don’t think most of us anticipated how tired we were going to be. Everyone met in the lobby of The Fortuna Hotel. We all had a soup of emotions going through each of us. There was excitement to see our pets, friends, families and own beds. There was a mixture of gloom for the 20-hour flight ahead of us, the fact that we had to make it through the airport before sleeping more and our bags were heavy with goodies. I think the biggest feeling around the room was a surreal disappointed feeling that the trip was actually over. Leaving the professors in Thailand, soon to be separating from our new friends and departing from a country we fell in love with was too much to express. However, the bittersweet feeling was easier to handle as we all communicated the same feelings together.

Our newly formed family then departed to the airport. For many the airport was no longer a scary new feeling and we navigated through it together. A majority of the group fell asleep immediately once we took off. If anyone wasn’t asleep, there was a group understanding formed by Ryan that we should watch Mad Max. There were also many other great movies provided by Delta that kept everyone entertained. The plane landed in Tokyo, Japan, 6 hours later. The next flight was going to be 10 hours. Many of us tried to take enough time to walk off our restlessness before heading to the next terminal. Our flight departed around 5pm and was heading to Los Angeles, California. On this flight I sat next to a mother and daughter. Part way into the trip there was a realization that a small puppy was in a pet carrier next to her. I do not think the mother realized the happiness this unexpected puppy brought to other students who immediately fell in love from puppy cries. When we landed in Los Angeles we had a 2-hour break to get food and rest. A small group of us was able to see Emma Roberts at the airport. The rest of the break was spent people watching to see if we could find more celebrities. Many students grabbed a good ‘ole burger and fries as soon as the opportunity presented itself- regardless of the prices. The first thing many of us saw in Minneapolis was Carl’s mother with pizza. The rest of the families/friends were in and out helping grab bags and talking with the students. A few of us carpooled home and were already planning get-togethers for the future. The emotion-soup feeling was still present by the end of the last day for many of us. However, everyone agreed that this trip, our professors, the people we met in Thailand and the bond we formed together was something we will always cherish- even though our 3 weeks were now over.

“I am not the same, having seen the moon shine on the other side of the world”

~Mary Anne Radmacher