This summer, with help from the Expeditions Fund, I was able to go to South Africa for a third-year module: Savannah Ecology and Conservation.

We were based at Wits Rural Facility (WRF), close enough to the village of Hoedspruit but with limited interaction to the people. What we had unlimited interaction to were the animals. Never before have I walked out to go for a shower to see impala under the hot sun, munching on grass, minding its own business and it was a sight to behold. Despite being there for 12 days, I didn’t get bored. It was nice watching them, from a distance so to not frighten them, watch them munch grass and gracefully gallop away.

We had lectures on many different things: the savannah itself, the diversity of animals and plants and sampling techniques. My favourite lecture was learning about the different plant species and then walking around the facility to try and identify them. It was a lot harder as it was not flowering season, but we managed to identify individual plant and tree species based on just the kind of branches they had, the presence and type of thorns or shape of the trunk. Honestly very cool! My favourite field work was setting camera traps around the

*Impala not scared of us anymore and staring right at me. Can see its lovely brown colours, blending into the savannah quite well.*

*Getting ready to go to the (dry!) riverbed to set the camera traps*
facility – we managed to capture a leopard walking past the camera right near where we were staying!

After the lectures we had about the herbivorous and carnivorous mammals found in the area, we went to the famous Kruger National Park for two days. We saw nearly all the Big 5 on just the first day i.e. lions, buffalos and elephants. On the second day, we saw a leopard resting in the tree with its impala kill on an adjacent tree and just as we were leaving the park, we managed to get a glimpse of the rhino. I would love to go back to Kruger National Park and explore more of it.

Furthermore, we did a night drive and got to see the nightlife of the savannah. There was a hippo that walked past a lion and the lazy lion just sat there, clearly not hungry. The hippo was obviously very brave.

Another tourist trip we did was to the Blyde River Canyon and the Three Rondavels. The view was just breath-taking. We were so high up and yet, we could hear the river so far below us; I could sit there all day, maybe would have if it wasn’t 35°C!

Our final three days, we spent time doing our own research project, which was an insightful experience, especially since I was doing a research project for my third year.

I would like to thank Queen Mary for this opportunity, and I hope others too continue to benefit from it, both as an experience to love and learn.