

Summer Internship Report 2017

Cal Oakley, C'19

Hometown: Boston, Massachusetts



Biology Research Assistantship: Bird Species Survey Haiti

(Cal is third from the right)

Provide an overview of the organization/research project and a summary of your responsibilities, tasks, and/or projects.

I spent this summer conducting a baseline survey of bird species in two separate villages in the Plateau Central region of Haiti. This involved walking transects through both villages at dawn and making note of which bird species were seen and at what distance. This was repeated at least three times in each village. I also assisted fellow researchers Chris Hornsby and Bre Ayala with their work.

During your internship, what did you accomplish or how did you make a difference? In what ways did you grow in your professional and technical skills?

Over the course of the summer, I generated baseline data on bird species inhabiting these agricultural villages in the Plateau Central. The importance of this baseline is that it allows for bird species to be used as an indicator of agroecosystem development going forward. I also assisted Bre Ayala in collecting and pressing samples of medicinal plants used by farmers in the Plateau Central for the beginning of a teaching herbarium at the Centre de Formation Fritz Lafontant.

Describe a problem that you helped to solve at your internship. What skills or knowledge from your education at Sewanee helped you address the problem?

My biggest challenge was designing my sampling scheme for my bird surveys. At first I thought I could visit individual farms and survey each. I also thought that Haitians would be more open to the idea of the bird survey, but many of them were ambivalent about it. I can't say that I used anything I specifically learned at Sewanee to address these issues, but with the first issue I visited the villages and realized that surveys of individual farms would be impossible and so I decided on surveying each village as a whole. In regards to the second issue I simply continued to do my work, while also trying to get Haitians interested in the birds around them, starting with the Haitians on my team.

In what way were your teamwork skills strengthened?

The most specific example that comes to mind comes from during our last two weeks of research. During these two weeks everyone on my team got sick at some point and because of the schedule we'd decided on at the beginning of the summer we each helped collect each other's data. I helped collect soil samples for Chris and Bre collected plant sample while I was ill.

How did your internship affect your career plans?

My internship did affect my career plans. Before this summer I had pictured myself following a career path centered around research and field work, but after this summer I am unsure. I understand that my internship this summer is probably not representative of all research experiences, but I am now less sure of my career than I was before.

In what ways did your internship cause you to encounter people of different backgrounds from your own? What steps did you take to communicate effectively with such persons? What did you learn from such persons' perspectives?

By living in Haiti I had the chance to do this on a daily basis. In the field I not only worked with Chris Hornsby and Bre Ayala, but also with a team of five Haitian agronomists. Our Haitian teammates acted as guides, assistants, and teachers. Each week they would travel to the two villages with us and introduce us to farmers and their families. From there we got the chance to interact with farmers and hear what their daily concerns were with their farms or their families or the Zanmi Kafe program. What I learned from speaking with the Haitian farmers is that it is often hard for people living with as few securities as they do to understand the long-term, far-reaching goals of programs like Zanmi Kafe, but that they do value continued personal interaction with those operating within programs like Zanmi Kafe.

Words of advice for future interns (housing, transportation, etc.)?

My advice is to bring lots of books and to be comfortable asking questions either in English or Creole.

Words of thanks to your internship funding donors:

Thank you so much for the chance to work and travel in Haiti this summer. It wasn't easy most of the time and I often wondered if I had made the correct decision in choosing to go at all. However, reflecting on it, I'm glad I had the chance to get to know many Haitians and my fellow researchers. I'm also especially thankful for the opportunity to experience field research firsthand. This will influence my career plans in the future.