As a Wildlife major my opportunities to study abroad are limited, so when I heard that there was going to be a class on wildlife techniques in Belize during the first summer mini term I immediately applied. It was an experience that I will not soon forget. The course was three weeks long. We spent the first half of our time at the Tropical Education Center (TEC) and the second half at Las Cuevas Research Station in the Chiquibul National Forest. There were nine students from the University of Tennessee and eleven from the University of Florida.

We arrived in Belize on May 7th. After we settled into our rooms at TEC, we headed out to Guanacaste National Park for a short hike and to do a little exploring. Half way through the hike, we heard what we thought was a branch falling from a tree right over our heads. However, once it hit the ground and ran off in the other direction we realized that it was a large iguana. What a perfect way to welcome us, right?
We spent the next few days doing some sight-seeing and learning about the history and culture of Belize. We visited a botanical garden where a guide told us about the different species of plants that are native to the country, we took a tour into a cave where Mayan remains were found, and visited Cockscomb Jaguar Preserve. We quickly learned how valuable time spent in the van was as it was the only place with air conditioning, and when the heat index is nearing 100 you don’t mind driving two hours. These are some of my favorite memories from the trip and I’m really glad we had a few days to acclimate ourselves before the class started. The students from Florida arrived in the afternoon on the 10th. After they had time to settle in we visited the Belize Zoo.

During our time at TEC we did mist netting for birds in the morning, learned how to correctly use field techniques, and set up our first experiment. We set out small Sherman traps and baited them with peanut butter to try and catch rodents. We spent three days setting the traps before dinner and checking them every morning before breakfast, but we didn’t catch a single rodent. We did, however, catch a Cane Toad and discover that the fire ants that covered the traps were no joke.
On May 14th we left TEC. We spent a lot of that day in the van traveling to Las Cuevas. Around lunch time, we stopped at a little picnic area and had a lunch that the ladies as TEC had packed for us. It overlooked a waterfall and after we ate we were able to explore. After lunch we got back on the road and hoped that the roads weren’t too bad and we’d make it without incident. It started raining as we left the welcome center and it wasn’t long before the big vans started having trouble in the mud. The van with the Florida students made it to Las Cuevas, but ours broke down and we spent about an hour entertaining ourselves on the side of the road waiting for the other van to come back and get us.

The time we spent at Las Cuevas was by far my favorite part of the trip. It was considerably cooler and because the electricity was powered by generators for only a couple hours in the evening there was really no distractions from our surroundings. We spent the days hiking in the rainforest setting out Sherman traps for rodents and taking vegetation samples and our nights in the dining area playing rummy and spades until the power cut off. We also visited Caracol on our day off.

Rain became an issue during our time in the Chiquibul. We were all supposed to have an opportunity to hike out to a camp that was set up to prevent poaching of Scarlett Macaw chicks, but because of the rain only seven of us were able to go. This experience is something I will never forget. We hiked about nine miles through the forest, led by Pedro and Borris, and then took a boat to the camp. We stayed two nights and by the time we were ready to hike out, we were all wishing we had brought hammocks to sleep in like the guys staying there. We left Las Cuevas the day after we returned from the Macaw trip and headed back to TEC to give our final presentations.
Our last day in Belize started at the Zoo. When we had previously visited some of my classmates and I saw that you could go into a cage inside of one of the jaguar enclosures and have the opportunity to pet the jaguar. Junior Buddy was born in the Belize Zoo to a problem jaguar and is an ambassador for the Zoo. After that we spent the day in San Ignacio and at another Mayan ruins site called Xunantunich.

My time in Belize was incredible. This post doesn’t do it justice. I was a little nervous as we boarded our flight out of Knoxville because I was about to spend three weeks in a foreign country with people I barely knew, but by the time we left I had made friendships that will last a lifetime. So much more happened than what I’ve included in this post because if I included it all it would be 30 pages long, but if there’s anything you took away from it I hope that it was that studying abroad is something everyone should do. I cannot stress enough how amazing of an experience this was and if I was not about to graduate I would definitely find a way to do it again.