

Stewarding at veterinary congresses, a field of opportunity

A gap year spent working with primates in Africa and leatherback turtles in Grenada opened a window to an area of veterinary medicine not previously considered by Matt Bridges, a third-year student at Nottingham university

It seems in the veterinary profession you can often find yourself wondering how you ended up where you are and doing what you're doing. My journey to attending the British Veterinary Zoological Society's (BVZS) 50th anniversary congress in November 2011, began long before I had even heard of periparturient problems in a sloth, let alone be able to spell it. I have always enjoyed the companionship of animals and revelled in the marvellous logic embodied in the sciences. With a number of weeks' experience in various small and large animal practices I felt increasingly sure that veterinary medicine would be my chosen career. But, before plunging into the academic challenge of university life, I took the opportunity of a deferred entry to Nottingham university, in order to extend my work experience.

I was itching to see more of the world and even more so the many great animals that inhabit it. After several months spent working and saving I jetted off to my first country of choice, Africa, a country that struck an instantaneous love. If you're lucky enough to have been there, you may well know what I mean. I spent a number of weeks working at a primate rehabilitation centre, which was my first experience of veterinary care out of the ordinary. After a few other stops, I found

myself working for a couple of months on the small Caribbean island of Grenada, at a centre for leatherback turtle conservation. These experiences opened my eyes to an aspect of veterinary medicine I had not before considered: exotic and wildlife-based medicine.

Now in my third year at Nottingham I have greatly enjoyed the prevalence of exotic medicine within the curriculum. Looking to further my knowledge in this area, I completed a dissertation comprising an investigation into the reproductive seasonality of the Amur tiger and leopard. I also lead an active role in the university's zoological society. It was through this connection that I came to learn of the BVZS; I applied to be a congress steward, and then things really got interesting.

Benefits of being a congress steward

That's how I came to be learning about lemurs and sea horses at the BVZS congress. As a student with limited means, it was a bonus to be able to work as a steward, which meant I was able to attend for free. Whether paying or not, in my opinion, this was an excellent opportunity – one I would recommend to any aspiring, competitive or enthusiastic student/practitioner looking to experience something a little out of the ordinary.



Since its humble beginnings in 1961 when 36 colleagues first met, the organisation has steadily thrived and now has 370 members. These members comprise an array of expertise in the field, with a wide range of backgrounds and experiences that stem from all corners of the globe.

The BVZS offers students discounted membership rates, the lowest price of all its membership categories, (currently £28.50 per annum) as well as discounted attendance fees to its meetings. The society also provides an excellent opportunity for individuals to access a professional field (www.bvzs.org.uk).

To give you a feel for the event, there were a number of speakers presenting on a diverse range of topics, round table discussions and a parallel running practical workshop. Whether it crawls, squawks, snorts or flaps you could be sure there was an appropriate session. From megavertebrates to Mongolian gerbils, the material was highly stimulating, informative, challenging and thought provoking. However, make no mistake, all the content presented is representative of the latest in

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research and case-based experience. Indeed, the talk given on 'Surgical approach to scent gland tumours in Mongolian gerbils' was featured as on the cover of *Veterinary Record's* December 10, 2011, issue.

Opening new doors

Over the course of the weekend, I had interesting conversations with Andrew Routh, chief veterinary officer of the Zoological Society of London (ZSL). During the conversation, amid a dizzying myriad of exotics-based anecdotes and opinion swapping, Andrew highlighted a clinical EMS scheme run by ZSL for students entering their final year (applications accepted from 3rd year students only), an invaluable opportunity as a stepping stone for any aspirational wildlife vet.

Attending the congress made me reflect on the relative difficulty of accessing what is often seen as a niche speciality. Initially I had felt that my ambitions in this direction might



have been slowed by my limited financial means. It's easy to feel dazzled by the many expensive courses or projects that are on offer abroad. This congress assured me that there is in fact a level playing field and opportunities right on your doorstep; what you need is enthusiasm, determination and a willingness to get stuck in. And once you found yourself

studying at a veterinary university then you have already demonstrated those qualities.

Another local opportunity might be to access the zoological society at your nearest university (www.su.nottingham.ac.uk/sb/societies/UNVZS/). Each one is headed by a committee dedicated to sourcing you the best speakers and opportunities to develop your interest. BVZS has a direct link with these societies and has even created a role for a veterinary school liaison officer within its council.

Rarely can it be seen that so many members of the exotic and wildlife community gather, than at a BVZS congress. Whether you have a career set in mind or whether you are just looking to develop an interest, then I thoroughly encourage you to take a look at what the society is doing. Based on my experience at November's congress, it certainly won't be the last one I attend.