

SATURDAY JULY 16, 2016

Michelle Bounkousohn

I'm still feeling the spins from our long, bumpy car ride back from base camp today. No matter how many times I binge watched Jurassic Park, Planet Earth, or other nature (pseudo-) documentaries about what my life could possibly look like once I got to Kenya, nothing could prepare me for the stillness, the heat, the dust and the liveliness of being out in Buluk. I am still adjusting to being out in the field and accepting my temporary home in Kenya's Turkana Basin, and my daily emotions usually flit between a quiet gratitude, restlessness, exhaustion, and a wide-eyed hunger for learning.

Yesterday concluded the first week of fieldwork, and today will begin yet another week of making new friends, sifting through mounds of dirt for tiny fossilized teeth, excavating through layers of clay and rock to uncover bone beds, constantly hearing the buzz of flies and wasps, eating delicious food, and trying to kill downtime with books, hula hooping, and spirited political discussions.

As I reflect on the first week of being in Turkana, I must say that despite the homesickness and occasional carsickness, this is such an amazing and truly life-changing opportunity. Through meeting and bonding with college educators and with seasoned professionals like the men who comprise the Buluk fossil-hunting crew, I have come to genuinely appreciate this improbable opportunity and the doors it has opened for me. I came here knowing that I would be a lifelong anthropology student, but never fathomed that I would be physically involved in conducting such cutting-edge research and having the blessing of meeting the most experienced fossil hunters in the world. This week, I've heard over and over again that this is an opportunity that is never afforded to undergraduate anthropology students, so I am humbled to my core to be out here learning and understanding what life was like 15-17 million years ago.

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Viana Roland

Although everything felt strange at first, I have become used to our daily routine. I wake up at 5:45 a.m., eat breakfast at 6:20 a.m., head out to the site at 7 a.m., return at 12 p.m. for lunch and rest until 3 p.m. and back to the site to work for two more hours and make it back to camp for tea time at 5 p.m. It has only been 7 days and I haven't sweated this much or worked this hard in years since I was a gymnast, training everyday. I have so much respect for paleoanthropologists and the other crewmembers that allow this significant scientific process to happen

Being on a strict routine has proven to be very good for me; I have never felt so normal in my life. It's only been a week but I've learned so much about the miocene era and the different flora and fauna in this region during that time period. I can now correctly identify gomphothere and dinothere (extinct elephant species) teeth, as well as crocodile teeth even if it's just a fragment, by just picking it up from the ground. I'm really hoping to discover primate teeth, particularly monkey teeth because it is so important for this project, and science overall.

I've now learned the process of clearing a site of rocks and collecting any bones found on the surface, while deciding if they can be identified or if they are too fragmented to be of any use. Those that can be identified will have an end, or an articulative surface, and can be useful for either storing, teaching or discovering a species.

After a site is cleared of all rocks and larger bones, we perform what is called a 'hill crawl', which is my favorite part. It requires us to be on our hands and knees while our face is about six inches from the ground. We must use a tool resembling a screwdriver and dentist tool to shift the dirt and pebbles around slowly to look for any significant bones, particularly any teeth. I've learned that teeth are basically the fossils of the mouth, which is why they are much more commonly found at the site. To be able to hold the fossilized remains of an animal that was living millions of years ago is absolutely baffling to me. I've learned more in the past week than I could have hoped to learn in an entire quarter sitting in a classroom. I've been picking up some Swahili words and phrases from our crewmembers and the other excavators, which is great. I had the opportunity to learn the excavation process, which requires patience and careful visualization. You use a pick and brush to slowly chisel away at the side of a mountain while brushing away the excess dirt. This work is not for the faint of heart.

The dedication and sweat I've put it makes me feel useful to the project and it has only been a week! The first few days was a little difficult, because I felt redundant and put of place due to the fact I had absolute no experience and very little knowledge regarding paleoanthropology. Now, I can see how much I've learned and realize that we all must start somewhere. I plan on getting to know the other crewmembers better in the coming weeks, and hope to interview and write down details of their lives and tribal history, since many are from the surrounding region and the local community. This is truly a once in a lifetime opportunity.

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Vincent Gomez

The three-hour car ride to Buluk was something out of this world. It felt like I was on a rollercoaster. When we arrived to camp, the crew greeted us warmly. John, the supervisor of the excavation team, has helped us a lot with our sleeping arrangements and all around camp conduct. We quickly settled into camp life. It was extremely hot the first day at camp and I felt like I was going to melt. After a couple hours, my body began to get used to the heat. The food is amazing at camp also which helps makes the work bearable. Everyday we get up at 6, leave camp by 7, return at 12, go back to the excavation site at 3, and return at 5. By then, it would be teatime and the day is almost over.

The first day walking to the excavation site, I was already out of breath. I couldn't help but notice how out of shape I was. I worked on helping the excavation team find monkey teeth and other bone fragments near the sight. After a couple of days, I got used to the walking and excavating. It has become easier and easier for me to identify teeth and fossils. The week quickly went by fast and I've gotten closer to the excavation team.

Overall, I can't help but think about how much I miss home. I miss my family and my friends and the aspects of tight community I've been accustomed to. I know for certain that these next couple weeks will be difficult, but I will only get closer to the people I'm surrounded with and camp will soon begin to feel like home.

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Chris Mayes

The ride from the Turkana Basin Institute to Buluk, where our campsite is, is a tremendous one. It takes roughly two and a half hours each way and is an extremely bumpy ride. Arriving at Buluk the first day, we were introduced to the crew of police officers, fossil hunters, chefs, drivers, and expert paleontologists before sitting down and having our first meal. After, we were given a tour of the camp before being shown where we were going to be sleeping for the time being.

The camp itself consists of many tents, a mess hall, a kitchen, three showers, two toilets, two trucks, and the main tent where the fossils we find are stored and catalogued.

I wake up everyday around 5:45AM to get ready for teatime at 6:15 a.m. Breakfast is served at 6:30 a.m. and by 7:00 a.m. we leave for work. One of the sites we worked was a five-kilometer hike from Buluk but the main site we've been working at everyday, which I believe is called Ileret, is just a ten to fifteen minute hike from Buluk.

Ileret itself consists of many fossils but the ones we are interested in are buried in a layer of clay within a huge hill. The crewmembers from Buluk chiseled to the layer containing the fossils of interest by hand so that excavation could begin. Our first task was to clear the hill of fossils, as well as rocks, so that people wouldn't crush any fossils while trying to reach the layer of interest. We ended up clearing the whole hill within two workdays. Next we sifted through the loose dirt in order to spot any small fossils that were overlooked during the initial clearing. During the sifting I actually found half of a tooth that belongs to an unknown rodent along with lots of enamel and fragments of fossils. On the other side of the hill there is a sort of ancient elephant graveyard where people are finding huge complete bones from ancient elephants, one of the crew members even found a beautiful tusk in the clay layer.

The last two days have spent doing hill crawls where we scour every inch of the hill from the bottom to the top further looking for small fossils that may have been overlooked. During the hill crawl yesterday one of the crewmembers discovered a complete monkey incisor, which was exiting for all of us because it reminds us why the little things are so important and can have a huge impact. I've never been apart of anything this great and I am truly honored to be here doing this.