Spirits were down for the study abroad group in June 2010. Our hopes were torn after Bandipur Tiger Reserve gave us no sign of its namesake: a tiger. We had all searched fervently from our safari bus windows for two days with no luck. In addition, we were dead tired from these early morning excursions that left us disappointed. A change of scenery was welcomed when we relocated to the Peacock Dorms in Mudumulai. We tried to take our minds off our loss by subsiding into the events surrounding us. We went to a small temple on the west side of the Moyar River and enjoyed the beauty that forever encircled us in India.

The colors on the temple, and any temple, signify so much regarding India’s community and culture. There were so many colors and all of them so bold. Clothing, jewelry, and the cities and towns all reflect this type of coloration. It’s truly beautiful. Brought back to life by the striking scenery, we started on another safari ride with new hopes. Our lecture guest at the time, Dr. Siddappa, had been a good luck charm in the past, so we depended on him now. His luck pulled through. Unexpectedly the bus stopped and out over the hill appeared three elephants walking straight for our bus! Strained and worried whispers began, “what should we do?” “why aren’t we moving!” However, the bustling stopped as ten more elephants appeared. There was an entire herd heading for our bus. Stuck in a state of awe, we watched as tuskers, females, and young elephants simply strode past, 10 meters from our bus. They continued and swerved around us as if we had parked right in their path line. Who needs a tiger when you can see an entire herd of elephants?

Indeed Bandipur offered us more than just bad luck on tiger spotting. It was in Bandipur that we first went animal spotting with the famous Dr. Johnsingh. As a theme of our trip was to plan nothing and keep an open mind, when we picked Dr. Johnsingh up on the side of a random road, no one was surprised. We knew right away from his bone shattering hand shake and obvious passion for knowledge that we were in for an interesting next few days. One of our first activities with Dr. Johnsingh was a safari ride through Bandipur Tiger Reserve. Although we didn’t see any tigers, we did see plenty of other fascinating wildlife. I cannot even begin to count the number of chital, sambar, pea fowls, and wild boars I saw on this adventure. We were even able to recognize many tree species such as the ever present teak trees as our safaris went through mainly dry deciduous forest area – where teak is present.

I find Teak (*Tectona grandis*) to be one of the most beautiful trees in India. It’s large stature and oversized leaves make it stand out among the crowd in the forest. Later in our trip it became even more recognizable because it started to bloom. The white blossoms completely changed the look of the teak, giving it a much more majestic appearance.
However, the most beautiful tree in India is easily the gulmohar tree \((\textit{Delonix regia})\). Although it was seen all over our travels, I remember it most starkly in M.M. Hills. As we would walk down the streets to town we would be serenaded by gulmohar trees on either side of the road. The red flowers catch your attention immediately and it becomes hard to stop looking; their beauty is hard to contend with.

Our day with Johnsingh didn’t end there. After a lunch break of the usual diet of south India, sambar and chutney, and of course the usual tea and coffee, we headed out for a second safari ride. On this ride we were able to see dholes. The bus could hardly stop moving as the dholes were running alongside it, crisscrossing the road.

The dhole is truly an amazing animal. Luckily on the trip we were able to see a documentary called, “The Wild Dog Diaries”, by Kripakar Senani, narrated by Christopher Hook. This film made us truly appreciate our sightings of the Indian wild dog as Senani certainly struggled to find them during most of his filming due to their elusive nature. It seemed very lucky and uncharacteristic of the dholes then to be running beside our bus. Not only did this film cause us to realize the rarity of what we saw, but it caused us to more truly appreciate the brave yet elusive nature of the dhole.

Being one of the only other wild dogs other than the Australian dingo, the dhole has the right to be weary of predators, especially humans. Tribal people within the forest follow the dhole, taking its food once it has made the kill. This makes them very weary of humans. They even go to the point where they’ll drop the chase if they hear a human voice, knowing they won’t receive their own kill. However, this doesn’t stop them from making very grand kills! Dholes can kill very large ungulates including, but not limited to, gaur. There are even accounts of them taking down elephant calves. Certainly their bravery cannot go unnoticed.

Our day ended in an equally exciting a manner. Although this was not as near as significant as the dhole sightings, it was certainly a good end to a very exhilarating day. When dinner time came, the group departed from the dorms to walk the 100 meter trek to the canteen area. A few of us brought our headlamps, prepared for the dark, while the rest of us depended on them. Then, with very little light, we crossed the grassy area in between the dorm and canteen. Strange rustlings came from all directions and the lights started to dart about. We stopped to get our bearings. We were surrounded by hundreds of spotted chital. Hundreds of red eyes stared back at us as we flashed our lights across them; thousands of white spots danced around us.

As we continued forth the chitals moved from their resting spot, parting like the Red Sea. It was astonishing and beautiful. So many chitals, families upon families, resting in a completely human disturbed area; what could be the reason? Dr. Johnsingh gave us the answer. Apparently, these chital rest in this area because it is much safer than the forest next to it. The subtle tiger is on the prowl during the night. However, early the next morning a loud ruckus began. The tiger had found their hiding spot.

The highlight of our trip, however, was not the elephants, the chitals, or the beautiful surrounding, it was the confidence we gained in ourselves. This trip to India put us outside our comfort zone. We were all at our breaking point at some point. For most of us it occurred on June 26th, 2010, the day of our 13
kilometer hike. Dhaval, our guide at the time, told us we would be hiking a 10 kilometer hike through leeches to go stay in a shack with no beds. Then, when the next morning came, we would be hiking 10 kilometers through leeches again to Top Slip. Nervousness, anxiety, and anger spread through our group. What could possibly be the point of putting us through this? But, when the day finally arrived, we were all mentally prepared – we thought. We covered ourselves in DEET, wore sandals and rolled our pants up in order to see the leeches before we could donate too much of our blood to them.

So it began. About 3 kilometers into the hike we stopped at a bridge to eat lunch. We were all feeling fairly good, almost halfway done, and the leeches didn’t seem to be that established. We were able to enjoy the misty haze that surrounded the area and even make a few animal sightings and recognize a few trees. As we were hiking through moist deciduous forest most of the ecology we were used to had changed. *Terminalia chebula* was prevalent, but we noticed a lack of ungulates compared to dry deciduous. However, you could hear birds chirping from all directions and someone even spotted an Indian barbet.

With these things in mind we sat down to enjoy our lunch. However, right during our moment of relaxation, Dhaval broke it to us that we still had 10 kilometers to go. We had been lied to! From that moment on everything went downhill. Our feet hurt from the rocky trail and as sandals were not our usual hiking attire, we had blisters. We were tired and the leeches were getting more serious and scarier. One of our group members had 9 on one foot. How were we going to make it out alive?

But when the moment came, 13 kilometers later, when we saw the beautiful lodge where we were going to stay, nothing mattered anymore. We had made it through what would be the worst hell on earth to most people in America. I’ve never slept so soundly in my life, covered in dirt, sleeping on the floor – it didn’t matter. The next day when we hiked another 10 kilometers through rocky terrain and slight leeches, it was a breeze. We all walked out of that experience with a new lease on life, and a new confidence in ourselves. We had conquered our fears, pushed ourselves harder than we ever thought possible, and made it out to tell the story.

And tell it we did.