I was running. Just in front of me, our experienced guide was moving at the same pace I was. Only a few - Monica, Brandy, our guide, and I – had kept with this pace. The rest of the group was behind us, out of site. I had read and heard stories about the jungles in India, many of them ending in death. Trampled by an elephant, mauled by tiger, gored by a gaur. But we had been warned about predators before our hike began. These predators would be everywhere along the 12km trail, waiting for the chance to ambush. Their normal diet, as Dr. Tiwari (our professor and connection to Indian biodiversity and culture) explained to us, consists mostly of the large ungulate blood found in those virtually undisturbed forests near Topslip, but they would love to have a chance at “American blood.”

We came to an opening along the trail and rested on one of the few concrete bridges I had started looking forward to. Supposedly, the concrete was the only place in the entire forest you were safe from them. We waited for the others. When Bradley arrived on the bridge he tore off his sandals. His right foot was covered with them. Blood gushed from the wounds as he picked them off one by one.

Leeches. The reason we were nearly running through the rainforest with packs on our back and sandals on our feet. They cover the leaf litter of rainforest floors like the one we hiked through, stretched out and flailing about searching for any bit of body heat to detect and latch on to. The only defenses against them seemed to be loads of 100% DEET, never standing in one spot, and scraping them off of your body before they got their hook-like jaws embedded in your skin. We wore sandals because it made them easier to spot before they latched onto our bodies. Once you do detach the parasite, the wound bleeds for hours because of the anticoagulant the leeches inject into your blood. The dripping blood and warmth of the wound attracts more leeches to attack the exact same point. In Bradley’s case, more leeches swarmed to his foot than can be counted on two hands.

Leeches were definitely not the best part of my time spent in India, but were certainly not the worst either. Our 12km hike as a Study Abroad group through the pristine rainforests of the Anamalai range was a major highlight of my trip, and the leeches only added to the overall experience.

I had applied for the brand new Environmental Studies Study Abroad program for the summer of 2010 in India during the early winter months of 2010. Then, India’s exotic flora and fauna existed to me merely in books, pictures, and movies. Only after being accepted into the program and having a few meetings with the group of students and instructors who would also be on the trip, did the enormity of the task I was about to undertake set in. I was to travel out of the country (United States) for the first time, survive with almost none of the amenities I had grown accustomed to throughout my life, participate in educational field work/studies, and all the while remain open, enthusiastic, and accepting towards the
sights, sounds, and smells of India. What seemed, at the time, to be one of the biggest and most difficult challenges I had ever faced became the most rewarding, fun, and eye opening experience of my entire life.

After we took a few days to get acclimated to India’s time, climate, and lifestyle, we made the move from city life (Bangalore) to rural/jungle life. Forest Trails, our first destination in Indian forests, proved to be an excellent spot for easing us as a group into the rest of the trip. The accommodations were better than most of us expected, with permanent tents on concrete slabs, clean western bathrooms, and an excellent kitchen staff that introduced us to the Southern Indian cuisine. Our days spent there were full of guest professors, mostly associated with ATREE (Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment - a non-governmental organization we worked closely with throughout the majority of the trip), each specializing in their own field of biological sciences. These incredibly knowledgeable people established a basic understanding of plant and animal life in India for us through lectures and informative hikes that proved to be beneficial during our entire trip. The group completed our time at Forest Trails with a self-guided research project that everyone did an exceptional job with. The time there prepared us very well and ultimately made me even more excited for what was to come throughout our next four and a half weeks studying South India’s ecology. From the Forest Trails campus, we packed our gear and headed south to apply our new knowledge and explore more of India’s exceptional biodiversity.

M.M. Hills, our next stop on our tour of India, is a popular religious travel destination nestled between patches of protected forests. Our group was able to experience Indian culture in a unique way by visiting the famous Hindu Shiva temple there, which the town was named after (Male Mahadeshwara). The temple was beautiful and compelling from the outside, but our walk through it, alongside all of the Indians who had made the pilgrimage, as well as our dancing celebration with Indian children outside the temple afterwards, made the experience much more tangible and real. Harisha, our local expert and ethnobotanist from ATREE took us on several hikes through the forests surrounding the city. Along the trails we identified plant species, with some assistance, and classified them into separate categories such as; medicinal, fruiting/flowering, trees/shrubs/herbs. This hands-on guided experience gave us a personal connection with the plants we collected and allowed us to continue expanding our knowledge of the biodiversity inhabiting the lower half of the Deccan Plateau. After our time in M.M. Hills, we headed south into an even more protected forest, Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple (BRT) Hills, with Dr. Siddappa Setty, a scientist also from ATREE who has been working there for over two decades.

When we pulled into the gates of the BRT, we were surrounded by scrub forest, but as we continued along the thin winding road towards the ATREE field office and our sleeping quarters, we entered the moist and dry deciduous forests that we as a group had been anticipating for our trip. After getting settled in and unpacked we took a short evening drive through the forest in hopes of seeing some of the wildlife that thrives inside the protected area. We were rewarded in the most amazing way with our first wild elephant sighting! At first, it appeared to be three adult elephants congregating around a watering hole in an opening just beside the road, but upon closer inspection we spotted an infant elephant, said to only
be about two months old, inside the protection of the encircled adults. I was speechless. We had been driving for over an hour and had only spotted the back end of an escaping barking deer, and not more than a quarter of a mile from where we would be sleeping that night were wild Indian elephants displaying and trumpeting their discomfort with our proximity to their newborn. I never in my life thought that I would have the opportunity to observe wild elephants in their natural habitat; I could hardly contain my excitement as I snapped what had to have been fifty pictures, none of which could capture the sheer intensity of the moment. The rest of our time in BRT was filled with off-road jeep rides through several of the forest types found in India (scrub, moist and dry deciduous, evergreen, and shola), spotting ungulates (chital, sambar, gaur etc.), and interacting with the native people who still inhabit those forests, the Soligas. Our time spent interacting with the Soliga community gave our group an inside look at how simply they live, but also at how happy they are with the simplicity of their lives. In a western sense, they owned almost nothing, but offered everything they did have (food, shelter, community, knowledge of the forests) to us without a second thought. To see these people so open and caring towards us was very humbling, and offered a new perspective on my own lifestyle. Although I was loving jungle life, and everything that came with it, the city of Mysore was our next destination, and I was looking forward to it.

Our days in Mysore were mostly filled with recuperation and internet access. For many of us, Mysore offered the first opportunity to contact friends and family in the United States. Due to a death in the family of one of the NCF (Nature Conservation Foundation) members, some of our scheduled lectures were cut out of the itinerary, but Dr. Tiwari made it up to us by assigning a paper that was to cover what we had learned about the different forest types of India. Although some of us groaned and complained about the task, I think most were happy with the chance to demonstrate to Dr. Tiwari and Lisa (our G.T.A. for the course) our capacity to absorb so much information in such a short amount of time. After a few days of the comforts of city life, we headed back into the forests.

When we arrived at Bandipur Tiger Reserve, Dr. Tiwari hopped out of our 15-passenger van to check in for our sleeping arrangements. As we were waiting, a bonnet macaque (a monkey found in South India) jumped into our van through an open window, snatched a bag of mangos, and jumped back out to enjoy his bounty. We had been told not to feed the wildlife, especially monkeys, because they had become aggressive and will stop at nothing to acquire food, even if it is not offered to them.

Accompanying us in Bandipur and Mudumulai Tiger Reserves was Dr. A.J.T. Johnsingh, a world-renowned field biologist and author with whom Dr. Tiwari studied under. He served as our guide and instructor as we toured the Tiger Reserves in safari buses and jeeps. Tiger reserves in India are so protected that the only way we were allowed to explore them was from the inside of one of the safari vehicles. Although we were confined to the vehicles, Dr. Johnsingh helped us spot and identify many plants and animals; more wild elephants, peacocks and peahens, dhole (a rare wild Indian dog), mongoose, and plenty of ungulates filled our voyages. At the end of one jeep safari, we were allowed to exit the vehicles and explore the countryside between Bandipur and Mudumulai Tiger
Reserves on foot. That was when we spotted a single cow elephant. All of our previous wild elephant sightings had been from the comfort and safety of a vehicle, but this time we were on foot with one of the biggest names in field biology. It was a once in a lifetime experience that filled me with such joy and happiness I had to fight back the intense emotions building up inside me. I was so privileged and blessed to see such a majestic animal going about her business in a natural way, as if humans had no interference in her life; just as it should be. We were in her territory.

After leaving Bandipur and Mudumulai, Dr. Johnsingh left us and we acquired a new young and enthusiastic resource person, Dhaval, who was to help guide us through the rest of our trip. We headed further south along the Western Ghats mountain range to a national park in the state of Kerala called Silent Valley. The beauty was unparalleled. When we reached our destination we were surrounded by rainforests with towering peaks of jagged rock dispersed along the horizon. Our only full day consisted of a long hike through a village, into a rainforest, and ended at a spectacular waterfall. None of the group members knew our final destination, so when we arrived, everyone was beyond excited. As the water rushed past us we were allowed to rest and admire the absolute beauty of what was before us. It was at this point that the reality of what I was doing really set in. I was in India, enjoying a picturesque waterfall in the middle of a jungle. It was real, and I was loving every minute of it. Although our stay in Silent Valley was rather short, it got us that much closer to what was to be our final destination of the trip, Topslip.

Topslip proved to be the most challenging portion of our trip to India, but for me, it was also the most rewarding. We started out with a long hike (roughly 12km) that began outside of Topslip and continued on through dense rainforest. We knew we’d be staying in a small shelter that night, but rumors of the cleanliness and quality of our sleeping arrangements flew wildly about the small group of 11 students. Earlier in the day we had rationed out our food we would be packing in for dinner and breakfast the next morning between everyone’s packs. My pack was stuffed to the brim full of rice, some of my personal items, and other random bits of food. Before we started the hike, we split up into two groups. We were told to record any plant or animal (or sign of animal) that we could identify. We did well to stay separated and kept up with our recording for the first half of the hike. There were leeches, but as long as you kept walking at a decent pace, did not stand in one area for more than a couple of minutes, and kept an eye out for any inching their way up your legs, they were not a problem. We stopped on a leech-free bridge over a fast flowing stream to eat our lunches that consisted of different kinds of traditional Indian rice wrapped in banana leaf newspapers for transportation purposes. The meal was delicious, and the break afforded us time to regain enough energy to complete the rest of the hike. After washing up and taking a long drink from the stream, we headed out again. Within 100 meters of the bridge we ran into a much denser forest, higher humidity, and rain. Along with those three elements came the extreme number and density of leeches. At first, I saw a few here and there waiving their bodies about along the trail, but as we trekked further into the dense canopied forest, I began seeing four, five, six leeches at every place I took a step. Pretty soon a slow walking pace was not enough to keep them off of you. That’s when we
stepped our tempo, stopped recording data, and almost started running. When we reached our destination for the evening we broke out of the dense forest and into a small opening, leaving the leeches behind. Most of the group, including me, was bleeding somewhere below the knees thanks to the inescapable leech population, but none of us cared anymore.

That night, the guides and a few of the people who inhabited the old elephant camp we were staying at, fixed us the food we packed in. It was such a team building exercise to carry all of our own food on a hike, and then eat it together. It reminded me of the hiking trips I take with my friends in Colorado. The next morning we packed up, and headed out for another long hike (around 10km), with our final destination being Topslip. We took several shortcuts along the way, apparently cutting off a majority of the hike’s distance and leech populations. Along the way our lead guide found fresh signs of elephant (dung and tracks), and said it was nearby. Not ten minutes later I heard the deep low frequency growl of an elephant just off of the trail we were on. I could feel its calls vibrating in my chest as we hurried along to avoid any close contact with the giant, which could have been dangerous. After a few hours of hiking we began seeing captive elephants on and along the trail. We broke out of the dense forest once again and walked into a working elephant camp. I was instantly greeted by one of the locals and given a handful of jamun, a deep violet fruit popular in India. We waited several hours for a ride into Topslip, which was only a few kilometers away now. Tourists piled in and out of safari buses, snapping pictures of the captive elephants in the camp. It was amazing to be surrounded by so many elephants, but at the same time it was disheartening because we had seen elephants as they should be; wild. Our ride came, and we were taken to Topslip. We spent our few days there going on short hikes and learning about the flora, fauna, and history of the region. It is an area that, like so many in India, was previously exploited by the British, but is now a sanctuary for plants and animals. After a few days, it was back on the road again. This time, we were leaving the Indian forests for good. I was sad to see it go, but I know I’ll be back someday.

After driving all day (since before sunup until sundown) we reached Bangalore. It was our last stop for the trip, but just another launching site for many of the group members’ secondary adventures. My time in India can be described as nothing short of amazing. I am extremely honored and feel privileged to have had the opportunity to study abroad with that wonderful group of people in such a remarkable setting. The biodiversity of the area was unmatched from anywhere I have been, and the efforts to keep that biodiversity impressed me. The people of India were so welcoming, accepting, and humble. Even our resource people, who guided and taught us along the way, were incredible. The trip was a huge undertaking for me, but I have no complaints other than that I wish I could have stayed longer! I learned a lot about myself as well as India’s people, biodiversity, and culture. I left some blood in India, thanks to the leeches, but I wouldn’t have it any other way