

On Neotropical Migrants and My Own Personal Peregrination

By Ellen Reid [OTS 08-01]

I was walking my dog down the street early one recent Saturday morning when we came across a little yellow-rumped warbler (*Setophaga coronata*) sitting on the pavement, clearly having just struck a window on her migration from north to south. As we stood there watching to see if she might recover enough to fly off, it occurred to me that I have felt a little bit like this warbler a few times in my life. Perhaps especially now during the pandemic – when I had been going about my life only to be struck unexpectedly and become grounded, disoriented, and a little beat up by an unforeseen break in my journey.

But before all that, back in January 2008, I winged my way south from Louisiana State University (LSU) to Costa Rica. I was a new graduate student and I was thrilled to be embarking on several months of ecological field research at the various OTS field stations (La Selva, Las Cruces, and Palo Verde) and other sites (Cabo Blanco, Corcovado, Cuerici, and Barro Colorado Island), working with other like-minded grad students from many diverse institutions, and being advised by brilliant visiting faculty instructors and program staff.

Since then my career has taken a few twists and turns (I have mainly been working in international education), yet some experiences still stand out and stick with me from my OTS course and subsequently supported by an OTS post-course grant that allowed me to carry out my master's thesis research at Palo Verde.

- Adapting and coping: At each site, we designed new field studies to answer a biological hypothesis. Through these rapid projects, I got a lot of experience in establishing, managing, and analyzing field research. What sticks with me still is making the best use possible of the resources around you, being creative, and doing the best with what you've got, e.g., dealing with adversity from the weather conditions to uncooperative organisms or equipment.
- Learning from unique perspectives: OTS offered us a rotating cast of excellent visiting instructors. In addition to advising projects at each site, these scientists shared their research and wisdom with us through field lectures. I recall one field lecture on fungal infections in leaves that changed the whole way I looked at leaves and the forest. My entire perspective shifted in a moment. In fact, in one such perspective-shift, I wound up basing my master's work on a mutualism and associated organisms that I learned about and studied at Palo Verde during my OTS program.
- The OTS network runs deep: The field stations are an incredibly rich web of sites, people, and research. These connections are powerful in developing and sustaining a career. I am still in touch with instructors and students from my program, consider them friends and colleagues, and have benefitted from the OTS network beyond my cohort over the years since I was in Costa Rica.

- Fun: My grad program with OTS was a whole heck of a lot of fun, in addition to being a valuable academic and research venture. Spending time together in big groups – traveling, living, eating, working, exploring, studying, and researching all together – there was no other experience in grad school that was quite as much *fun*. And fun sustains you when you grind through days (or months and years) of hard work.



Photo credits: Ellen Reid. (1) Coreid bug and ant on acacia. (2) Palo Verde sunset.

I consider my time with OTS a watershed moment in my career journey. Afterwards, I changed the course of my career to international education rather than ecology, but I continue to benefit from the skills I honed during the program and believe more firmly than ever in the power of place-based experiential learning to shape educational career trajectories.

Back to the warbler. After some time, she was able to take off again and, I assume, carry on her journey south, though I will never really know. I strive to do the same when I face a challenge or setback: pause, recover, pick myself up, connect with my resources, and do some creative problem-solving to confront the next challenges and opportunities as they come. My OTS field course was a great primer for doing just that.