

Organization for Tropical Studies eases way for field research

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For scientists who go to places like the tropics, how things go in the field are often quite different from what they'd imagined when they were sitting in their offices planning their research projects.



Tropical biologists (left to right) Deborah Visco, Julie Denslow and Tom Sherry are Tulane University researchers who have each benefited from their association with the Organization for Tropical Studies. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

"Once you're out in the thick of it, you realize, wow, these bird nests are hard to find. Or this camera equipment is malfunctioning. What do I do?" says Deborah Visco, a graduate student at Tulane in [ecology and evolutionary biology](#).

The [Organization for Tropical Studies](#) (OTS), a consortium of universities and research institutions of which Tulane is a long-term member and active participant, provides opportunities for undergraduates, graduate students and faculty members to gain experience as researchers.

Visco is investigating the population demographics of the chestnut-backed antbird in Costa Rica and Panama. Her first foray into research in Costa Rica was through an

OTS graduate ecology course in 2009.

“OTS transforms lives,” say Thomas Sherry, Tulane University ecology and evolutionary biology professor and Visco's dissertation adviser.

OTS research fellowships have been “extraordinarily valuable” to his lab, Sherry says. They have helped him develop a more comprehensive understanding of issues associated with rainforest loss and fragmentation in the Sarapiquí (Caribbean) Lowlands of Costa Rica.

The undergraduate OTS tropical field course in Costa Rica and the savannah ecology course in South Africa (with up to 10 Tulane students per year participating on the two courses) also are “a great addition” to the biology curriculum and study abroad options, says Sherry.

Julie Denslow, adjunct professor of ecology and evolutionary biology, is serving as chair of the OTS 50th anniversary. Denslow took her first OTS course in 1971. She says that experience convinced her that she could be a biologist.

The problem-oriented approach of OTS field courses “breaks the intimidation factor of doing research and gets you not afraid to ask questions in the field,” Denslow says.