

AAALAC International Fellowship Adventure

Jennifer McMillan

I heard about the AAALAC International Fellowship years ago, and thought about applying multiple times and didn't, until the fall of 2023 when I realized my odds of winning were less if I didn't give it a shot. I didn't tell anyone except for the two individuals I asked to write letters of support. Needless to say, I was shocked to learn I was chosen as the 2024 AALAS registered recipient of the AAALAC International Fellowship Award. I have worked in the biomedical research field for over 23 years, but this was an opportunity in my career I will never forget.

The communication with the AAALAC Executive staff prior to my trip to the UK was great. Everyone was so supportive. When the itinerary arrived, the nerves began. I had travelled outside of the United States before, even to London, but had never done a trip like this by myself. I looked up the 6 different facilities I would be visiting, Google-mapped the hotels and train stations, and then decided it was going to be better if I just took things one day at a time!

I arrived in London, United Kingdom on a Saturday morning where I took the first of many cab rides to my hotel. I made myself comfortable in the lobby until my room was ready and then immediately went to take a nap! International travel can be tough. After waking up I was ready to hit the streets. Saturday afternoon and all-day Sunday I walked the streets of London. What an amazing city.

Monday morning the adventure began. I walked to my first facility, The Francis Crick Institute, a very large, modern, beautiful building. The visit started with discussions about research at the Crick Institute, and the research process in the United Kingdom. There were definitely a few differences I learned right at the start compared to research conducted in the United States. There are different licenses required prior to the researchers starting their animal work: the Personal License for each person carrying out procedures on animals, the Project License for the program of work, and the Facility License for the place in which the work is being conducted. There are also a number of named individuals at each licensed facility which include: a Named Veterinary Surgeon (NVS) to advise on animal health and welfare, a person responsible for the day-to-day care of the animals, called a Named Animal Care and Welfare Officer (NACWO), a Named Compliance Officer responsible for ensuring compliance with the regulations and licenses (NCO), in addition to a Named Information Officer (NIO) and a Named Training and Competence Officer (NTCO). The rodent and fish facilities at the Francis Crick Institute were quite impressive, but the opossums were the most memorable! The grey, short hair opossum is the 'model organism' in scientific research to represent all marsupials. Learning about the females and their young was fascinating and the technicians that cared for them were so knowledgeable and willing to share everything they knew. It was one of the most memorable parts of my trip.

Day 2 of my trip I visited the MRC Centre for Macaques at Porton Down. This was probably one of my favorite places, but I am a little biased towards monkeys. The Centre for Macaques is a primate breeding facility for academic research in the United Kingdom. Every enclosure was heavily enriched with deep bedding, complex wooden climbing structures, firehose, tires, etc.... All animal groups had visual access to the outdoors through large floor to ceiling windows. Some animals

were viewing action on an iPad strategically placed outside of the enclosure, and others were manipulating mirrors attached to each individual housing unit which allowed the animals to see what was happening in the hallway. Veterinary exams were taking place, and it was nice to see all staff involved in the process. Everyone really seemed to enjoy what they were doing. We handed out treats to some of the groups and individual animals were scored based on their willingness to approach the front of their enclosure and take the treat. We also talked a lot about animal training procedures, which was definitely a highlight.

I spent Day 3 in Oxford, England at the University of Oxford, one of the oldest Universities in the United Kingdom. The campus is beautiful, and I spent the day with the Nonhuman Primate Training Manager. The facility had just over 20 macaques in the building I toured. I had always worked in very large primate facilities, so it was a nice contrast to see a small colony. I observed chair training and the early phases of training to complete computer tasks while in a Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) scanner, which was very impressive. Additionally, I learned about the training process of new staff. We have Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), but DOPs (Direct Observation Practical Skills), which were utilized at this facility were new to me. These assessment tools were actually used at most of the centers I visited, something I hope to incorporate in some way into my training program back at home in the United States. That evening we visited one of the oldest pubs in the United Kingdom (although I heard that a lot) with a few other team members.

Day 4 was by far the busiest day. I left Oxford in the morning to head back to London where I spent the day at the Sainsbury Wellcome Trust. This was a shower in facility which was new to me. Everyone was so nice and eager to talk about the work they were doing. I saw multiple rodent areas where technicians were doing tunnel handling for health checks, providing forage during cage change, and 'smart' mouse cages and rats engaged in computer testing. This was also the facility where I learned all about the Fiddler crab, another first for me. Their tank set up was very impressive and even included tides. The technician involved in the care of these animals was extremely dedicated to his work. Following this visit I took the train to Cambridge where I was scheduled to meet colleagues for dinner.

I visited multiple sites on Day 5, all sections of University Biomedical Sciences, which is part of the University of Cambridge. We started at The Barcroft



Centre (aka 'The Farm') where I saw sheep, horses, and pigs, all species I had never seen in the research setting.

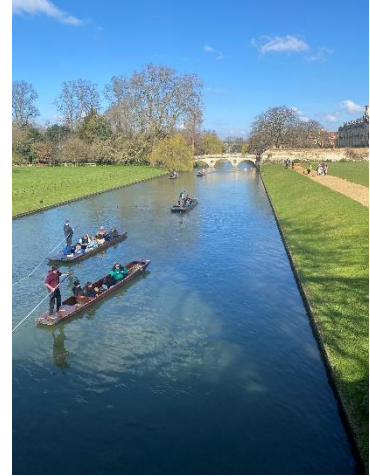
The next stop was part of the Department of Animal Behaviour where I saw birds and fish. The day finished at the Biomedical Services Innes Building where I spent time with the marmosets, and I even got to feed them marshmallows! This was one of my favorite days filled with so many different species that I had never seen in a



lab setting. We even fit in a stop at the Cambridge American Cemetery and Memorial, a grave site for American military that fought in World War II, a very memorable experience.



My free weekend was spent in Cambridge, and it did not disappoint. I did a Shared Cambridge College Backs Punting Tour which I would definitely recommend! Had lunch in the busy weekend market which sold just about every type of food you could think of, did some local shopping and visited the King's College Chapel (breathtaking), the Fitzwilliam Museum, and the Museum of Zoology, which was amazing. It was the perfect walking city, and there was so much to look at!



Day 6 did not disappoint either. I think my host thought I had seen everything the week prior and there was nothing else to learn, but that was definitely not the case! At the Laboratory for Molecular Biology on the Cambridge Biomedical Campus, I had the opportunity to meet with technical and scientific staff, and they were very happy to talk about the work they were doing. I heard from a group that developed an Artificial Intelligence (AI) program to evaluate mouse gait analysis. I learned all about their Environmental/Green Committee which has been very successful in increasing sustainability initiatives. The Operations Manager talked about the Technician Commitment, a United Kingdom initiative aimed to ensure visibility, recognition, career development and sustainability for technicians working in research – AWESOME! I also observed ultrasound techniques being used on female mice to identify pups starting at day 5 which was very cool. The cage wash area and facility tours were also impressive. I was able to see a little of everything.

The Fellowship ended with the Institute of Animal Technology (IAT) Congress which was held in Aberdeen Scotland. The bit of Scotland I saw from the train and taxi were beautiful. The IAT Congress was lots of fun. I was able to catch up with some of the people I had met at the facilities I visited the week before, and then met lots of new people. The talks and posters were great. I was able to attend a workshop on personnel training and gave a talk on Compassion Fatigue Resiliency. Although Karaoke night was full of laughs and performances I won't ever forget, it was the Gala at the end of Congress which was most memorable. It was the perfect social event to see everyone all dressed up ready to celebrate the end of a successful week, and for me to celebrate a successful 2-week adventure filled with new connections and a surplus of information I could share with my team at home!