In a new credit-bearing course offered by Cornell’s College of Veterinary Medicine, Ari Fustukjian, from the Class of 2014, and nine other veterinary students left the gorges of Ithaca and headed for the jungles of Belize.

Instructed by Dr. George Kollias, the Jay Hyman Professor of Wildlife and Zoological Medicine, the course was conducted at The Belize Zoo and the Tropical Education Center. Equal parts hands-on care and conservation education, Dr. Kollias hopes the experience will become an annual event.

“The highlight for me was determining the species and sex of a crocodile,” said Fustukjian, noting that the only way to accomplish this was to look at a particular set of plates (scutes) located on the underside of the crocodile at the base of his tail. “It had been a mystery for a couple of years, simply because the Zoo never had enough physical help to safely see the animal’s underside.”

Anesthetizing some aquatic reptiles is risky, Fustukjian said, because their diving reflex could kick in and they just wouldn’t wake up from the procedure. Because of this, a team of Zoo staff and Cornell students worked together to position the crocodile safely on his back, confirming once and for all that the 400-pound, 10-foot-long reptile was an American Crocodile.

This was just one of the experiences, though, that contributed to Fustukjian’s rating of “fantastic” for the course.

“We saw and were allowed to work on species that we would never have access to in the states,” said Fustukjian. “And we learned how to think on our feet and work with the resources that were available to us, resources that were much different than what we’re accustomed to here.”

The course included field trips, lectures on the life of a tapir and the scarlet macaw breeding project, immobilization and safe capture of wildlife, rifle and blowpipe demonstrations (used for safely anesthetizing wildlife), and various hands-on procedures with native animals, including gender determination of flamingos, castration of a jaguar whose genes were over-represented in the local ecosystem, and physical examinations of howler monkeys and a boa constrictor.

Although this was the first time the course was offered in Belize, Dr. Kollias expects that it won’t be the last. Many of the animals in the permanent collection at The Belize Zoo are highly socialized, which minimizes the stress of handling them and provides eye-opening opportunities for learning and discovery. In addition, the international field trip gave the participants an opportunity to strengthen the professor-student relationship, resulting in an enhanced level of mutual trust. Finally, the experience provides students with a career exploration opportunity powerful enough to widen their perceptions of the field of veterinary medicine in two ways, Dr. Kollias said.

“One of the most important things that we want to do is to expose students to the field of wildlife conservation and preservation as a professional option as well.”