

#UPGraduation2023: Lion-hearted PhD graduate attributes success to grit, determination and family support

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Dr Ashleigh Donaldson

“There is always a way to pursue your dreams, and anything is achievable with hard work and self-belief – exploit your strengths and try to find a healthy study-life balance.” This is the advice that University of Pretoria (UP) veterinary science graduate Ashleigh Donaldson has for aspirant academics and school-leavers – and she’s certainly walked the talk.

Having been fascinated from an early age by ecology and the natural world, Donaldson set a course for success in her chosen field, which has culminated in her graduating with a PhD as part of the University’s autumn graduation sessions. She’s also already been appointed as a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits).

Donaldson says that choosing a topic for a PhD thesis was not easy, but her fascination with carnivore ecology and conservation, coupled with the many family holidays spent in the bush, contributed to her interest in lions. The wild cats had been at the core of her master’s research, so it made sense to continue working with them for her PhD thesis, which was titled: ‘Efficacy and physiological effects of novel drug combinations used to immobilise free-living African lions’.

“Very little in-depth research has been undertaken to determine the effect of immobilisation on wildlife species, which would facilitate the collection of data needed for research purposes and management interventions,” Donaldson explains.

“Although certain drugs are commonly used, which do effectively immobilise lions, there is little data on how the drug combinations affect the animals physiologically. Lions are listed as a vulnerable species, so it was important for me to investigate the clinical and physiological effects of three different drug combinations for my PhD in order to contribute to ensuring the safety of these cats and to good research practices.”

The Witbank-born graduate says that from an early age, her parents and grandparents assured her that she could accomplish anything that she set her mind to.

“They supported my every interest and encouraged me to choose a career in a field that I loved, and not one that might be perceived as a safe option,” she recalls. “I took that to heart, and have never regretted my decision!”

Her decision to choose UP was yet another well-considered move.

“The [Department of Zoology and Entomology](#) at UP has a very good reputation,” she says. “I was drawn to the research being done in that department, which aligned with my interests. It also appealed to me that my degree in the [Faculty of Veterinary Science](#) involved searching for answers and finding methods to improve aspects of research in the fields of ecology and entomology, which are fascinating fields! I love the varied research that is undertaken both nationally and internationally. There is a constant push towards improving research practices and, from an academic perspective, I find it very stimulating.”

Donaldson completed her doctoral degree under the supervision of Prof Leith Meyer of UP's [Centre for Veterinary Wildlife Research](#), Prof Andrea Fuller of the Brain Function Research Group at Wits and Dr Peter Buss of SANParks Veterinary Wildlife Services.

“I have been able to work with leading experts in the field of wildlife medicine and ecology,” she says. “The opportunity to learn from them was an incredible way to expand my skills and pursue my passion.”

Prolonged years of research and study are demanding, and at times, Donaldson found time management and maintaining a healthy work-life balance challenging, but she discovered that the solution lay in effective planning. She acknowledges that the support of her parents and brother, as well as other students, helped her enormously.

As for the secret to her success, she says that three core strengths have enabled her to persevere and realise her dream: “my ability to collaborate with others, being flexible when dealing with academic and other challenges, and being determined to complete whatever I start.”

There's no doubt that she will carry those strengths into the future and draw on them in the next chapter of her journey.

“I was fortunate to be appointed as a postdoctoral research fellow at Wits University where, alongside colleagues from SANParks, I will spend the next two years investigating the effect of tuberculosis on the energetics and activity of lions. My dream for 2023 is to make a difference in the field with my research and to challenge myself with new projects.”