

Pink Palace Museum staffer reports on Antarctic research project

- By Linda A. Moore
- Posted May 10, 2012 at midnight



PHOTO COURTESY POLARTREC

Pink Palace Museum education manager Alex Eilers kicks up her chilled heels in Antarctica as part of a group studying and tagging Weddell seals. Her trip began in January, which is the Antarctic summer, but snow and ice prevail.

Six weeks in Antarctica was one amazing experience after another for Alex Eilers, education manager at the Pink Palace Museum.

There was that first sight of the glaciers.

She learned cold-weather survival skills and what to do in a whiteout.

And she won't forget the first time she held in her lap the head of 500- to 1,000-pound Weddell seal.

"This is an apex predator, at the top of food chain. Only Antarctic killer whales top this," Eilers said. "There's no way you can get that close to an animal like that. And then to look down and have this animal in your lap. It was unreal."

Eilers went to Antarctica in January, the Antarctic summer, to study the Weddell seals through PolarTREC, (Teachers and Research Exploring and Collaborating), a professional development program for educators. It is managed by the Arctic Research Consortium of the United States and funded by the National Science Foundation.

She'll share her story at 6 p.m. today at the Pink Palace. Eilers will be joined by researcher Dr. Jennifer Burns, a professor of biological sciences at the University of Alaska in Anchorage and an expert on the seals.

Eilers and Burns will discuss the research being done there and why it's important.

"We'll really talk a good bit about the science that's going on. We're going to throw in the personal aspects," Eilers said "It will be good for all ages."

Said Burns, "I just want to show people that it's a totally different place to work. Hopefully people following the blogs are interested in polar issues and will get a chance to see and ask about the work we're doing down there."

Eilers left Memphis for the McMurdo Station in early January, traveling to Chicago, Los Angeles and then to New Zealand. The last leg from New Zealand was a 14-hour flight.

And as the plane approached Antarctica, Eilers, the "newbie" on the flight, asked to sit in the cockpit.

"That was a real treat," she said. "What looks like a small tiny iceberg was a huge building-sized iceberg. You see all the mountains. I literally almost had tears in my eyes."

Before the team began scouting for seals, there was a week of training on how to use the cold-weather gear and learning how to stay warm. Pickle buckets over their heads simulated whiteout conditions.

"We were laughing at the beginning but quickly realized the point of the exercise," she said.

They also learned how to ride a snowmobile, find the seals and avoid falling through cracks in the ice.

"What's below you is not a continent. It is water," Eilers said. "You definitely didn't want to slip and go underneath the ice."

The researchers attached transmitters to molting seals that will serve two purposes for researchers, Burns said.

Following the animals, who are not endangered and not on display at any zoo, gives researchers an opportunity to study a healthy marine population, she said.

The seals are also able to travel to depths in the ocean in winter where people can't go and they'll transmit information about temperatures and the movements of other animals.

Before her trip, Eilers did lots of her legwork, making, about 125 presentations at schools, libraries, senior centers and universities.

Hundreds of people followed her blog; she mailed more than 2,400 postcards to Mid-Southerners from Antarctica and fielded about 450 questions from this area.

Eilers helped weigh, measure and tag 21 seals.

"We did do a lot of laughing. That was really important. Our team got along really well and that's what made everything so much fun," she said.

"When you spend 16 days with people, it's really nice that you get along and enjoy each other's company."

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Antarctic Adventures: The Sequel

Alex Eilers, education manager at the Pink Palace Museum, will share her adventures in the Antarctic today from 6-8 p.m. at the Pink Palace Museum. The lecture is free.

Eilers will be joined by researcher Dr. Jennifer Burns.

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