



Teacher spending summer researching in Arctic

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Northern Alaska will become Nick LaFave's home for six weeks this summer as he studies wolf spiders in the Arctic.

The Clover High environmental science teacher heads up to the Arctic in June as part of a polar research expedition with Duke University researcher Amanda Koltz. They will be studying wolf spider populations at the Toolik Field Station in the northern foothills of the Brooks Range.

Scientists have already noted that arctic wolf spiders are getting larger because of climate change, LaFave said. He and Koltz want to find out if the changes in the spiders will affect ecosystems in that cold climate.

"To me, it's a big picture study instead of just on specifically wolf spiders," LaFave said.

Sixteen teachers across the nation, including LaFave, were chosen to participate in PolarTREC, an educational research experience that allows elementary, middle and high school teachers to spend two to six weeks working with a research team in the Arctic or Antarctic.

On June 3, LaFave will travel to Alaska. The crew will head into Fairbanks to pick up supplies, then make the nine-hour journey north. He'll be traveling on the same path semi-trucks use to carry cargo in the show "Ice Road Truckers."

Once they arrive at Toolik Field Station, LaFave will be collecting research six days a week for the next six weeks.

"We'll be spending about half the day in field and half the day in lab," LaFave said. "One of our first jobs will be fixing one of our field plots that were trampled by caribou."

LaFave will be gathering data on wolf spider populations and taking a soil analysis. He'll be keeping an online journal so his students and anyone else can see what he's been doing. The team will host a few events where people can go online to see the research.

LaFave's wife, who is also a teacher, supports his expedition because she knows what an opportunity this will be for him and the students he teaches. His nearly 3-year-old daughter doesn't quite understand where her father will be going.

Toolik Field Station will be a primitive place to spend the summer. Phone service isn't available, but he'll be able to connect to the Internet.

Because the site is on permafrost — permanently frozen ground — water has to be shipped in from Prudhoe Bay, about 135 miles north. He'll only be able to take a two-minute shower twice a week. He can do a load of laundry every two weeks. Flush toilets won't be available.

The temperature now is just above freezing. The temperature is expected to range from the 40s to 60s, but it can dip as low as 20 degrees, he said.

“Our labs are not heated. We even got training on how to properly layer in the field,” LaFave said. “Life at Toolik will be a little bit different.”

LaFave wants to utilize his Arctic experience in his classroom and bring Koltz to speak to his classes.

“I’ve yet to meet a researcher that wasn’t enthusiastic. I’ve kind of been overwhelmed from the scientists that are doing this incredible work,” LaFave said. “They want to promote science as a career and so do we.”

This experience gives LaFave a chance to break down preconceived notions that some students have about scientists only being people wearing white coats and pocket protectors, he said.

“I think the goal is to remove the walls from the classrooms. It does a lot more than remove the walls,” LaFave said. “I’m hoping to take advantage of this and continue to develop opportunities for my students in the next several years.”

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