

Chillicothe Times-Bulletin

By Marianne Gillespie

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Eilers returning to Antarctica



PHOTO/ COURTESY OF ALICE EILERS

Chillicothean native Alice “Alex” Eilers attends to a Weddell seal during her trip to Antarctica in 2012. She will be returning to the continent at the end of this year.

What Chillicothe native Alice “Alex” Eilers thought would be a once-in-a-lifetime visit to Antarctica is now becoming a return trip.

Eilers returned to her hometown from Memphis, Tenn., last week to meet with a group of Catholic principals about her next expedition, which gives residents a chance to be involved as well.

She remains the manager of education at the Pink Palace Museum in Memphis.

As the 1985 Illinois Valley Central High School graduate did previously, she will take self-addressed, stamped postcards with her to mail from McMurdo Station. Last time she mailed 2,400 postcards, almost being over the weight limit with her suitcases. This time, she will send them ahead of her journey to wait for her arrival. Her goal is 10,001.

Anyone can participate in the postcard project, and she encourages classrooms, schools and families to get involved. She keeps a journal while she is there at www.polartrec.com/expeditions/weddell-seals-in-the-ross-sea-2014 for anyone to see what she is learning or ask questions about her trip.

The Chillicothe Public Library is a collection point for the postcards, which must be self-addressed and stamped. The deadline is Sept. 1.

This trip, which will be in November/December, focuses on the Weddell seals again. Her last trip in January/February 2012, the team put satellite tags on the seals. This time, the group will look at a question stemming from that last trip: the female seals molted later that year — did they have pups?

Eilers got an up close and personal look at the seals in her adventure.

“I was a little nervous walking up to them. They’re like a small lion or something,” Eilers said of their size.

They were slightly tranquilized to allow the researchers to put the satellite tags on them. She found them to be soft and warm.

“I thought they were going to be wet and cold. I put my hand under their flipper to warm up,” Eilers said.

The creatures’ movement on the ice made Eilers create a new word: glump. They moved faster than she thought they would, kind of like a caterpillar but not as graceful.

“Honestly, they’re like slugs on the ice,” she said with a laugh.

Her previous trip left her with excitement for this trip.

“The experience as a whole was just phenomenal. I had never been on a helicopter or a snowmobile,” Eilers said of her modes of transportation around the ice. She said she hopes to see young pups on this trip as they gain 150 pounds the first six weeks of life.

What also makes this trip exciting to Eilers is she is part of the grant scientist Dr. Jennifer Burns wrote. While some may ask why it would be of interest if the seals had pups earlier in the year, Eilers has an answer from an educator’s standpoint.

“What happens in one place then affects another,” she said. “It happens in the poles first, then other places and then affects us personally. We really need to open our minds and to not just the here and now but how it affects the future.”

This time Eilers is encouraging a couple other activities for those wanting to participate in her adventure.

“Get Fit” challenges participants to exercise both their bodies and minds. A quick and free registration at antarcticarevisited.com sets up the program as a “virtual path” is shown with stops along the way of various tidbits of information while traveling to Antarctica. Each stop is equivalent to 60 minutes of exercise or studying science. Classrooms or families can log in as a

group.

Another opportunity is creating a flag for Eilers to fly on the ice, which she then sends back to the classroom, family or individual who creates it.

“It’s one of the things I wish I would have done last time,” Eilers said.

Chillicotheans who want to decorate a flag should contact Eilers at (901) 636-2387 or email her at alex.eilers@memphistn.gov to make arrangements. There is a \$10 charge which includes the cost of the flag, envelope and return postage.

Her trip is part of the PolarTREC (Teachers and Researchers Exploring and Collaborating) program, which is funded by the National Science Foundation.

With the new Common Core standards, Eilers said third-grade social studies focuses on continents and includes information on McMurdo Station, which may make her journey helpful to teachers in that grade.

<http://www.chillicothebulletin.com/article/20140813/NEWS/140819707>

