

# Seal Deal

Pink Palace Museum employee to study seals in Antarctica.

by [LOUIS GOGGANS](#)



- **Alex Eilers**

No matter how much locals complain about cold weather this coming winter, you can bet Pink Palace Museum employee Alex Eilers will be a whole lot colder.

In January, Eilers will travel more than 8,000 miles to Antarctica to study Weddell seals. She was one of 12 teachers selected from a pool of 250 applicants to participate in PolarTREC (Teachers and Researchers Exploring and Collaborating), a program that pairs teachers with research scientists in polar regions.

Eilers, who works as the manager of education at the Pink Palace, said she's delighted to embark on the cold venture but even more thrilled that it's going to help her build students' interest in polar science.

Prior to being chosen for the trip, Eilers had never heard of Weddell seals, which spend the bulk of their time on sea ice and in the water.

Weddell seals, known for being deep divers, can stay under water for about 80 minutes while searching for food, such as fish, krill, squid, and crustaceans.

"Everything is going to be a new and exciting experience for me, from working with the seals and scientists to seeing penguins in their natural habitat," Eilers said.

Eilers and her scientist partner will conduct field research on the seal to learn how they dive and forage for food during the winter, as well as where they go during the coldest months of the year.

They'll also be measuring the health of the seals by taking samples of their whiskers, claws, and fur. This will allow them to determine what the mammals have been eating throughout the year.

As part of their research, the team will briefly capture seals and conduct exams. Satellite-linked recorders, which transmit data on how often and how deep the seals are diving, will be placed on the seals before they're set free.

Eilers leaves for her post at McMurdo Station, Antarctica, on January 7th, where she'll remain for a little over a month. While stationed there, Eilers will maintain an online journal that students can access.

She'll journal facts about the Weddell seal's adaptations and predators. She'll also provide information on some of the continent's famous explorers and the Antarctic weather. Before she leaves, Eilers is allowing students to submit additional ideas for her to cover in her journals.

Through her Pink Palace position, Eilers works with students from Downtown Elementary, Bartlett Elementary, John P. Freeman Elementary, the University of Memphis Campus School, Kirby Middle School, and Northwest Preparatory Academy.

The students will receive "polar points" from their participation in various online activities regarding the Weddell seal and Antarctica. Those with the most points receive prizes upon Eilers' return.

"This is a real experience. So even if the students aren't the ones going, they're going to Antarctica via the Internet," Eilers said. "It's going to expose the students to a region that they've never seen before and more than likely will never see themselves. It's also going to highlight some of the hard science we're doing: some of the animal physiology and some of the animal adaptations down there."

Eilers said she's currently trying to secure a grant that would pay for her scientist partner to travel to Memphis and provide follow-up programs to some of the schools that participate.