

## STREETSCENE ALEX EILERS



Photo by Steve Roberts

*Alex Eilers: Antarctic Adventurer*

Story by [Leah Fitzpatrick](#)

Admittedly hooked on the museum world, Alex Eilers cherishes being an informal educator as the Pink Palace Museum's manager of education, but that hasn't stopped her from preparing to soon step foot in new territory, that of Antarctica. In fact, Eilers began training for her expedition to study Weddell seals in Antarctica more than a year ago, when PolarTREC (a professional program that gives teachers an opportunity to do hands-on field research in polar regions), selected her for the mission amongst 250 candidates. She embarks on her journey January 6, with an expected arrival date on the southernmost continent four or five days later.

Eilers lights up, "A science continent is all Antarctica is, and lots of research is going on there which is fascinating."

For this experience, Eilers shed her comfortable role of educator and became a student, as she knew nothing about Weddell seals when she was selected. To find out more about the species and her purpose in this mission, she headed to PolarTREC headquarters in Fairbanks, Alaska last February

and received training on things like satellite phone use, what extreme weather gear to bring and how to maintain a trip blog on the PolarTrec site, which anyone can follow by going to [polartrec.com](http://polartrec.com) and clicking on upcoming expeditions before she leaves and on current expeditions once in Antarctica. The goal of the project is to get rubber ID tags in between seals' flippers and glue 20 satellite tags to their heads to keep track of yearly data, in addition to taking claw, whisker and fur samples to know the seals' diet. The satellite tags will only remain on the seals through October, when another team comes to remove them, and will measure the salinity and temperature of the water and how far the seals live below the ocean surface since they have been known to dive more than 2,000 feet.

"Seals haul out on the ice, so we will go to those spots to try and get the tags on, and because they don't have any land-based predators, they have no reason to be nervous," she says.

Along with three principal investigators (Dr. Jennifer Burns of the University of Alaska Anchorage, Dr. Daniel Costa of the University of California Santa Cruz and Dr. Eileen Hofmann of Old Dominion University), a videographer and two or three graduate students will accompany Eilers. She will stay in a dorm at McMurdo Station, which is about 850

miles away from the South Pole, and maintain daily journals until she leaves on February 20. While there, Eilers also promises to mail all the pre-stamped postcards turned in to the Pink Palace drop box before January 5 from the U.S. post office in Antarctica for those wanting a memento with the McMurdo Station postmark, and of course, she'll share her research in an upcoming Pink Palace exhibit.

"I hope to raise awareness of what is going on down there with the sciences, and if I could inspire a student to go into a related field, that would be epic!" she beams.