

Eilers in Antarctica to study seals

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Marianne Gillespie/Chillicothe Times-Bulletin

Chillicothe native Alice “Alex” Eilers gave a brief talk about her impending trip to Antarctica at the Chillicothe Public Library in late November. She began her travels this weekend as she embarked to Antarctica.

Chillicothe, Ill. — Chillicothe native Alice “Alex” Eilers plans on being up close and personal with Weddell seals in Antarctica.

“I’m an explorer. I love to travel,” said Eilers.

The 1985 Illinois Valley Central High School graduate left her home in Memphis, Tenn., to travel for her six-week excursion to the southernmost continent of Earth.

Looking for a fun and unique professional development opportunity, Eilers also was a teacher at sea in 2008 researching the leatherback sea turtle.

“Through that, I knew some other teachers who did this,” said Eilers about her Antarctic trip.

Paid for by the National Science Foundation, PolarTREC (Teachers and Researchers Exploring and Collaborating) affords 12 teachers the opportunity to study at both the north and south poles.

Eilers was one of more than 250 people to submit their applications for the program. Once the field was narrowed, the researchers who will be working during that time then interview the candidates.

She will be working with 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 and is expected to join them as they travel to McMurdo Station. They should have reached the ice Wednesday.

She interviewed with two potential projects, including one researching glaciers, but was chosen for researching Weddell seals in the Ross Sea.

“This was my first choice — with the age of students I work with this is perfect,” said Eilers.

While she admitted she did not know a lot about seals before the trip presented itself, she said she is a “big fan of seals now.”

Preparing for her trip has meant not only making sure she is physically ready, but also learning about the seals.

She said she knows the marine mammals will stink but is still excited to be up close and personal with them.

She expects their project to be tagging about 20 seals that they can find on the ice and glue the tags to the back of their fur. Other researchers will look for the seals in October to track them.

Before heading out to the ice, she will take part in “Happy Camper School,” which assists in surviving in Antarctica, and also where she will learn about modes of transportation around her new home at McMurdo Station, including snowmobiles and helicopters. With 24 hours of daylight, she and her companions will have time to travel and research.

While residents may think the weather there would be colder than Illinois, Eilers said she is expecting temperatures in the 20s or teens, but the wind will make the temperature feel cooler since it is the windiest continent.

The area is pretty much a desert, but not like sand residents may think of, but a winter desert.

Sharing in her experience will be many schoolchildren, especially concentrated in Tennessee, but also other areas, including St. Edward School — a school she attended — and Mossville Grade School, plus St. Philomena’s and Holy Family, both in Peoria. She also has a museum in North Carolina following her, as well as residents in Florida and California.

She is the manager of education at the Pink Palace in Memphis, which is a cultural museum and planetarium. She received her bachelor’s degree in elementary education from the University of Mississippi and her master’s degree from the University of Memphis.

“I absolutely love informal education,” said Eilers, who has taken interim positions for traditional classrooms.

She made more than 75 presentations about her upcoming adventure.

While she was in Chillicothe visiting her mom, Julene Eilers, she spoke at the Chillicothe Public Library for adults who were interested in her upcoming travel, as well as speaking to St. Ed’s and Mossville.

All ages are encouraged to ask the team questions through the website at www.polartrec.com or visit www.memphismuseums.org.