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Sealed Away

Memphis Pink Palace employee returns from polar research trip.

by [Louis Goggans](#)



Alex Eilers spent six months in Antarctica researching seals.

In January, Alex Eilers escaped the mild Memphis winter in favor of a much, much colder environment. Eilers, manager of education for the Pink Palace Museum, recently returned from her six-month stint in Antarctica, where she researched Weddell seals.

Eilers was one of 12 teachers selected from a pool of 250 applicants from across the country to participate in PolarTREC (Teachers and Researchers Exploring and Collaborating), a program that pairs teachers with scientists in polar regions.

More than 8,000 miles away from home, Eilers spent her days retrieving data from the seals and relaying the information back to students and others via an online journal.

"One of my favorite things was getting up close and personal with an 'apex predator' and being able to interact with it on such an intimate level," Eilers said. "I literally had the head of a 900-pound Weddell seal in my lap. If you could see the teeth on this creature, you'd be amazed."

On May 10th, Eilers, accompanied by her Alaskan research partner, Jennifer Burns, will discuss their journey in the Pink Palace Museum's Imax Theater. The reception will begin at 6 p.m., with the lecture following at 6:30 p.m.

Burns, professor of biological sciences at the University of Alaska in Anchorage, said she would provide some brief background on the objective of the research study.

"I will show [them] how you touch a seal, what they look like, what we are putting on them, what kind of information we are getting back from them, and why we should care," Burns said.

Over the six-week study, the group captured and sedated 21 Weddell seals. They attached satellite-linked computer tags on the seals that disclose their identity, where they're traveling, and what they're eating during the winter. The group also measured the sea mammals and collected hair, blubber, and blood samples.

"We're basically tracking the seals and analyzing what they're eating," Eilers said. "All this stems from what's going on climate-wise and where the animals are going."

Similar to lions, tigers, and bears, the seal is a predator, but Eilers said most of them are far from aggressive.

"I started to get a little bit nervous, but these animals are very docile," Burns said. "Considering that these guys are near the top of the food chain, I was very surprised at how easily we could approach them and how close we could get. It was just something that you would not expect."

Outside of the research, Eilers said that she got the chance to experience her first earthquake and her first helicopter and snowmobile rides. She also experienced living day in and day out without darkness, since Antarctica experiences 24 hours of sunlight for part of the year.

"I thought that I would get tired of the sun, but it was the exact opposite," Eilers said. "You feel like you're more energized when the sun is out. We didn't sleep. It [didn't] give you a chance to miss anything, because you're constantly working."