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Bartlett woman assists Antarctic research team

By Julie Ray

Alex Eilers is a Bartlett resident, manager of education at the Pink Palace Museum, PolarTREC teacher and friend to the Antarctica Weddell seals. All that might sound fairly normal until the Weddell seal friend description. Weddell seals live in the region surrounding Antarctica, and spend their time on sea ice and in the water. The opportunity for the adventurous Bartlett resident came about through her education position at the Pink Palace and an application to be involved in the PolarTREC program.

Each year the National Science Board offers grant monies to fund research. Dr. Jenn Burns, a professor of biology at the University of Alaska-Anchorage, sent an application to the National Science Board for a grant to study the Weddell Seals in the Ross Sea located in Antarctica. Only twelve grants are awarded. Once Burns was awarded her grant, the next step was to select a team to assist in the research study. One informal educator a year is chosen to be a part of the research team and Eilers was that educator for the Weddell Seal project.

Once the research team is in Antarctica the task is to catch, tag and study individual seals. A Weddell Seal can weigh over 1000 pounds; so that the most obvious question is-how does one actually catch a Weddell seal?

"That is easy," says Eilers, "you just walk up to them!"

Eilers explained that the seals have no natural enemy in their environment. Fear is a learned behavior and the seals have never had a reason to learn to fear humans.

Once the seal is captured, an exam is conducted and a small tag, which is a satellite-linked dive recorder, is attached to the fur of the seal and will transmit data showing where, how often, and how deep the seals are diving. A website to see the real time tracking can be viewed at www.seaturtle.org. A Weddell seal search on the website may be required

as the site is primarily a sea turtle tracking program, though other animals are tracked through the site, such as bald eagles, alligators and, of course, seals.

For more information about this project, please join Alex Eilers and Dr. Jenn Burns at the Pink Palace IMAX theatre, May 10 at 6:30 p.m. There will be a Q & A at 7:30. Eilers also has a detailed journal posted at <http://www.polartrec.com/expeditions/weddell-seals-in-the-ross-sea> .