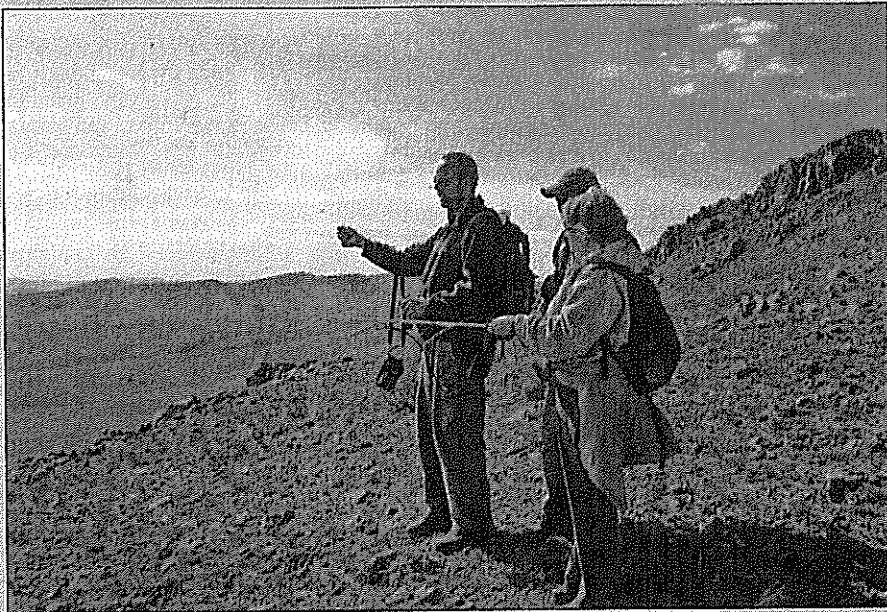


A world of learning

Teacher travels to Mongolia as part of graduate program



Submitted photo

Local teacher Jacqueline Montgomery recently took a trip to Mongolia to obtain her master's degree. She is pictured practicing radio telemetry, a practice used to locate the endangered Pallas cat on a Mongolian wildlife reserve.

By RACHEL MORGAN

Staff Writer

Like any teacher, Jacqueline Montgomery is required to obtain her master's degree, but instead of attending a nearby university or taking online classes, she chose to take a different route - she's earning her degree by traveling and studying animals around the globe.

Montgomery, a math and physics teacher at Miami Trace High School, is participating in the inaugural year of the Global Field Program, part of the Project Dragonfly at Miami University in Oxford.

"(The GFP) is a way for teachers to get credit hours to stay certified," Montgomery said. "The goal... is to help

teachers build an alliance of education, to benefit the ecological community, student achievement and global understanding."

She recently returned from a 10-day trip to a primary research site for the Pallas Cat Conservation Project and to Hustai National Park, where she and 20 other United States educators observed two local endangered species, the Pallas cat and the Przewalski's Horse.

The group also went bird watching in the Tulle River Valley.

The Pallas cat, while an endangered species, does not receive the attention of bigger cats that are endangered, Montgomery said.

"There are a lot of conservation efforts focused on big cats," she said. "A lot of the

money goes there. But there's a whole population of smaller cats that are really kind of ignored. Studying Pallas cats would be a way to raise awareness for smaller cats."

The group focused their conservation efforts on finding collared male cats already identified by conservationists within the Pallas cat research site in order to obtain their sperm to artificially inseminate female cats in captivity.

The group used radio telemetry, using they used an antenna which emits a louder noise when it detects a collared cat in the vicinity, Montgomery said.

While in Hustai National Park, the group studied the Przewalski's Horse - called the Takhi by locals. These

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horses are considered to be one of the only true wild horses left in the world and there are only 208 left in existence, Montgomery said.

"They have a different number of chromosomes," she said. "They are more closely related to zebras (than to horses)."

A van full of the group helped the Mongolian herders, on motorcycle, herd the Takhi horses. Montgomery cites this as one of the most memorable experiences of the trip.

Montgomery said the most challenging aspect of the trip were the physically grueling days. Oftentimes, the group work at 5 a.m. 7 a.m. and did not stop until 10 p.m.

"It was physically draining," she said.

Montgomery also admits she had to overcome her germophobia while on the trip - as the group only took one shower during the entire 10 days and she had to follow the country's traditions, despite the germs.

She recalls a day when the group visited a nomadic Mongolian's ger - a type of mobile tent. It is Mongolian custom to share your best food when you have visitors, so the host was passing around a traditional Mongolian yogurt to her guests.

"She served it out with her best bowl and one spoon," Montgomery said. "I was like fifth to get it, but I ate it. If you don't eat (what you offer,) they got really offended. I got over my fear very quickly."

Montgomery wasn't the only educator from Ohio -

there were teachers from Fayetteville, Columbus and Cleveland, as well. There were also two professors on the trip - one from the Cincinnati Zoo and one from Miami University.

She is one of 150 educators who were accepted into the first year of the GFP. As part of the program, these educators will engage in conservation work in the field in countries across the globe - studying cheetahs in Namibia, observe tag leatherback sea turtles in Trinidad, study howler monkeys in Belize, explore the rainforest in Costa Rica, research marine and land ecosystems in Baja and studying the relationships between the local wildlife and Maasai people of Kenya.

The GFP master's degree program is based on the successful Earth Expeditions program through Project Dragonfly and the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Gardens. Since its inception in 2004, Earth Expeditions has given more than 750 educators from 43 states and several counties the opportunity to engage firsthand in scientific research at conservation areas around the globe.

Montgomery's trek through Mongolia was the first of three trips that she will take through the program. She will also complete online coursework during the school year, after which she will have earned her master's degree in zoology.

She hopes to teach a course at MTHS in zoology once she obtains her degree.

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