

At the Ends of the Earth

Trekking across the stark landscape of snow on an island halfway between Norway and the North Pole, an evolutionary biologist raises his pale eyes to a red-rimmed sign marked with the outline of a polar bear and branded with a stiff warning: "Gjelder hele Svalbard" (Valid for all of Svalbard). The native people living on the Svalbard Islands build wooden boards pierced with outward facing nails that are secured tightly onto every opening on building structures. When the biologist inquires into this practice, they tell him the tales of polar bears tearing doors off buildings. In Svalbard, that sign can mean the difference between life and death. The biologist himself realizes this sobering truth when he ventures out onto the ice with his team; they must carry guns because polar bears sleeping unseen behind a rock may wake up and hungrily eye the group of two-legged mammals.

"Polar bears are the world's largest land predator," the biologist says to a lecture hall of students, faculty, and researchers. Dr. George Diggs recently traveled to the exceedingly cold regions of our globe, exploring his interest in extreme environments as seen in the Arctic (North Pole) and Antarctica (South Pole). His travels culminated in a Biology Seminar titled "To the Ends of the Earth: Life at the Polar Extremes" held at 4:30 p.m. on March 5, 2015. With the temperature outside the IDEA Center at 34°F, Dr. Diggs spoke of temperatures in the negative digits. The audience shivered, guilty retracting their complaints about the weather in Sherman.

Another tremendous difference between Sherman and the islands up north is the concept of perpetual day and night. In northern Svalbard, the sun doesn't set for almost 140 days. Dr. Diggs admits that the constant presence of the sun took quite some adjustment (especially when attempting to fall asleep). The opposite occurs in the winter. Svalbard endures a long winter when it is dark all of the time. Pale eyes glazing over for a moment, the biologist allows himself to recall the native people speaking of their avid anticipation to see the sun again after those long dark hours.

In addition to the native people living on continents that surround the Arctic Ocean, several birds make their home in this area. The biologist gestures enthusiastically as he moves to slides of photographs depicting the different types of birds. "The arctic terns have the greatest migratory movement of any bird," he says, excitement building in his chest. "They migrate to Antarctica and back, traveling over 50,000 miles in a year." These birds actually link the two poles, the two ends of the Earth, the polar extremes of our entire world. The audience sits in shocked wonder. How far have they traveled in their lifetime? How impossible it seems to wrap one's head around birds migrating from the top of the globe to the bottom!

Dr. Diggs closes his presentation and thanks his attentive audience. The students, faculty, and researchers go their separate ways as strangers (or friends) to their various scheduled activities. Leaving the lecture hall, they walk in silence to the rhythm of thoughts swirling around in their minds, returning again and again to the almost unsettling idea of strange and extreme worlds existing at the ends of the very Earth they tread upon.