

Mum Kathy is happy to lead life on the wild side

Leading expeditions to some of the most remote locations in the world takes common sense, an ability not to panic and staying power – all skills Kathy Wilden, from Norwich, has learned as a busy mother of three.

As a director of Biosphere Expeditions, an award-winning, not-for-profit holiday conservation organisation, the 42-year-old's adventures include coming face to face with a semi-wild leopard and enjoying a rare chance to see the largest animal that has ever lived on earth, the blue whale.

But Kathy, who is a trained dive master, mountain leader and off-road driving expert and runs the strategy for the organisation and the city branch of the business from an office in Ivy Lane, Earlham, equally enjoys spending time at home in Bramerton with her children aged eight, six and four.

"I always say that you need common sense to lead expeditions – and anyone who is a parent would be able to cope with most situations," she said.

It was while working as an economic development officer in Waveney that Kathy first met her fellow director and co-founder, Matthias Hammer, who had just completed his PhD at Cambridge and was looking to set up a business.

"We became friends and talked about the project a lot more informally and decided to combine his background in biology and my background in business."

The organisation, which offers hands-on conservation volunteer work to the general public providing invaluable help to scientists in the field, was set up in 1999 and the first expedition was run a year later with immediate success.

"It was to Poland, I remember it well. It was a project to look at the wolf population," said Kathy, who is originally from Norwich.

"Hunters were claiming that there were far too many of them and they should shoot 50 but our fieldwork showed that there were only 50 so they would all have been dead if it had gone ahead. The research we did really helped to prevent the cull."

While other trips have longer-term goals, a recent adventure to coral reefs off the remote and mountainous Musandam peninsula of Oman in the Strait of Hormuz, an important waterway between the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf, has resulted in helping to start the process of getting it declared a Marine Protected Area.

From an initial base in Oulton



Adventure: Kathy Wilden has a close encounter with a leopard in Namibia and, left, gets ready for a diving expedition.

Broad, in Suffolk, the organisation moved to Norwich about three years ago but also has offices in Germany, where Matthias is based, France, the US and Australia.

"We take about 500 people a year, 40pc are from the UK. We have grown slowly but we are not trying to expand massively, that's not what Biosphere is about."

Trips start from £960 and go up to £1,800 without flights which have to be arranged separately.

The most recent adventure to be added to the list is to Namibia and involves collating research to help

protect leopards, cheetahs and caracals in the Khomas Hochland area.

"We are approached by more than 100 scientists a year. We ask them to fill in a long form which includes who they are affiliated with," said Kathy.

The next stage is to look at whether they can sell the holiday to volunteers – it helps if there is at least one inspirational animal involved – and then the logistics of a trip are investigated.

"In Altai Republic where I am going next for a snow leopard project, the location is a two-day

drive," said Kathy.

"Either me or Matthias will go and check out a trip before it is added. Sometimes we find we can't get enough food in or we can't get everyone to the base camp but normally once it gets to the stage of us going out it is already well researched and pretty certain."

Projects usually last two weeks but Biosphere Expeditions will be involved for longer with back-to-back trips.

Kathy is never away for more than a month and said, although she misses her children, they are in very good hands with their dad and she gets to tell them about her adventure when she returns.

"It's very hard to leave the children but they have a very capable father who looks after them very well," said Kathy.

"They enjoy following me around the world on maps and when I come back I can tell them about what I have seen. My six year-old son's eyes lit up when I said I had seen the largest animal on earth – even bigger than dinosaurs."

→ For more information about Biosphere Expeditions visit www.biosphere-expeditions.org

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Science talk to consider progress in DNA issues

People interested in biology are being invited to a free talk about advances in DNA sequencing this month.

The Inspire Discovery Centre's monthly science café will be presented by Dr Kirsten McLay from the Genome Analysis Centre on Wednesday, May 19 at 7.30pm at the Maddermarket Theatre Bar.

The science café gives people a chance to hear directly from the scientists and discuss a range of topics.

This month's talk is entitled Advances in DNA Sequencing Technology? It will aim to explain what genomics is and what its applications are.

The audience will be given a general view of how DNA sequencing is carried out and how much it costs. Key topics in the talk will include the major milestones in DNA sequencing technology, improvements in the system and advantages of Next Generation Sequencing Technology.

Customers offered free energy pack

Customers of energy giant EON can claim a free energy fit starter pack, which includes an energy monitor worth £45, to help cut their bills.

The pack can be requested by any existing or new customer who manages their account online and pays for their energy by Direct Debit or prepayment meter – regardless of which tariff they are on.

Visit www.eonenergyfit.com for more information about how to claim one.

Object in sea was dead seal

The coastguard and police were called out to Walcott after villagers spotted a suspicious object in the sea which turned out to be a dead seal.

It happened at about 6.15pm on Wednesday after a report of a "black object with white on it" which was concerning locals. The coastguard arrived at about 7.30pm. A spokesman said a team drove to Walcott – with one member going into the sea to have a look – while a lifeboat was also launched. The body could not be recovered because it would have capsized the boat.