

Ann Bancroft

Join one of the world's best winter wanderers on a mission to save the planet.

This month's Hero of Science is a very special person who travels great distances; sometimes using a sleigh pulled by animals; and who will forever be closely linked to the North Pole. No, not Father Christmas, but record-breaking polar explorer Ann Bancroft. She is the first woman to reach both the North and South Poles, and has become a powerful voice for the environment. Get cosy and find out how Bancroft battled the planet's toughest conditions to make icy history.

An early adventurer

Bancroft was born in 1955, in Minnesota, US. Her childhood was full of outdoor exploration and she says she grew up in a family of risk takers, joining her parents and siblings on wild camping or canoe trips. She idolised British explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton, who led expeditions to reach the South Pole in the early years of the 20th century. When she was eight, Bancroft started organising her own small-scale expeditions, which included camping out in the garden throughout the winter months with her cousins and friends.

For Bancroft school was a challenge because she is dyslexic. Dyslexia is a common learning difficulty that can cause problems with reading, spelling and writing. She says that "For someone who was struggling in school, as I was, the natural world was a perfect place to feel at home and express myself."

Joining an expedition

In 1986, Bancroft's life changed forever. She was working as a teacher during the week and at an outdoor shop at weekends.

A history of polar heroes

Ann Bancroft is among a handful of great explorers who have made history in the Arctic and Antarctic. The race to the South Pole, in Antarctica, is one of the greatest adventure stories of all time. Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen and his team reached the South Pole on 14 December 1911, beating Robert Falcon Scott, from the UK, and his team by about a month. Scott and his team died on the way back because of a lack of food and terrible weather conditions. The first person to reach the North Pole, in the Arctic, is less clear, however. Robert Peary and Matthew Henson both claimed that they reached the North Pole on 6 April 1909, but Frederick Cook said he successfully completed the journey almost a year earlier, on 21 April 1908.



Roald Amundsen

WINTER WONDERLAND
The coldest natural temperature ever recorded on Earth was -94°C in Antarctica, in 2010.

Through people at the shop, she heard that a man named Will Steger was planning an expedition to the North Pole. She contacted him and, after an interview, won a place on the team. Bancroft was the only woman among seven men and 49 dogs on the expedition. The tough journey lasted 56 days in freezing temperatures, during which Bancroft and her team crossed hundreds of miles of ice by sleigh and on foot. Eventually, they reached the North Pole and Bancroft had made history as the first known woman to trek there.

Things quickly go south...

The expedition to the Arctic reignited Bancroft's love of adventure, and she knew that she wanted to complete more challenging journeys. In 1992, Bancroft became the leader of the first all-female team to ski across Greenland, which is in the Arctic. At the end of 1992, she led another all-women expedition to the South Pole, in Antarctica. The group finished its epic 1,000-mile journey in early 1993 after 67 days. Bancroft had made history again – this time as the first woman to have stood at both of the Earth's poles. Her expedition was also the first women's team to reach the South Pole on skis.

In 2001, Bancroft wanted to take on a new challenge, and decided to return to Antarctica with Norwegian polar explorer Liv Arensen. The pair skied 2,735 miles across the continent in 94 days, becoming the first women to ski across the entire continent.

Taking action for good

Bancroft was overwhelmed by the attention she received when she returned home after completing her first record-breaking Arctic trip. "It rocked my world in such a way, in particular being the first woman," she said. She wanted to inspire other girls to dream big and accomplish their own achievements, so she set up the Ann Bancroft Foundation, which mentors girls, helping them learn new skills and giving them experiences they might not otherwise have.

Standing up for the planet

Bancroft has seen more of the Arctic and Antarctic than most, and she has also seen first-hand the effect that climate change is having on those icy landscapes. She has taken action to protect these environments, raising awareness of pollution and climate change wherever she can. The explorer has also run a campaign about clean water since 2015. She says that one in eight people around the world lack access to clean water, and more than three million people die each year from water-related health problems. As part of a six-woman team, Bancroft has travelled the world educating people and organisations about the importance of clean water.

In 2020, Bancroft has drawn on her experiences to get used to a new way of life. Her advice to staying happy is to spend time outdoors, stick to your routine, do something to help others and, importantly, keep your sense of humour.

For someone who has filled her life with adventure and exploration, it is surely only a matter of time before Bancroft is able to set off on a new journey, making history wherever she goes.



DID YOU KNOW?

The Arctic covers parts of Canada, Finland, Greenland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the US, as well as the Arctic Ocean.