Polar experts point to ominous signs

By David Zizzo
Staff Writer

NORMAN — Watching the Arctic birds he had come to know so well, George Divoky knew something strange was happening.

"It was very subtle at first," he said, recalling the way many of the birds began dying in their nests. But it was clear. "There were these very ominous signs of change."

It was the mid-1990s, Divoky said, and "no one was talking about climate change."

They're talking now.

To give the public an unvarnished and diverse view of climate-oriented research produced by thousands of scientists, about 40 of those researchers are hosting "Polar Palooza, Tales From a Changing Planet," a series of presentations, one of which will be in Norman this evening.

"It is designed to be scientific traveling roadshow," said Kathy Licht, associate professor of earth sciences at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis.

Licht and Divoky, research associate at the Institute of Arctic Biology, University of Alaska-Fairbanks, were among a half dozen scientists who made up one of several Polar Palooza teams traveling to 26 U.S. cities. The education and outreach project is being sponsored by the National Science Foundation and NASA. At each stop, researchers who have traveled and lived in Antarctic and Arctic regions talk with students, teachers and the public. They present a high-definition video outlining their travels and experiments, and they display and discuss tools and artifacts, including dinosaur bones and a sample of ice cores drilled from the polar ice sheets.

Their message is a familiar one, one the researchers hope will have the credibility of coming from those who live with the science: The Earth is warming, and it's "absolutely" because of human activity.

"Ninety eight percent of scientists say there's no debate over that," Licht said.
Scientists are studying all manner of indicators, from lead and carbon dioxide in polar ice to behaviors of animals to patterns of weather, cloud cover and drought.

"We want to understand what the consequences are," said Julie Brigham-Grette, a professor of geosciences at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Scientists said those interested in global climate change study the polar regions because, for one thing, change happens there faster than in other parts of the world. Also, the ice caps can serve as an undisturbed repository of history, with layers of ice and snow storing information that can reveal the past climate.

The Polar Palooza tour is not "all gloom and doom," the scientists said. Its other, more optimistic message is that people can do a lot to reverse or at least slow down the trends, that technologies such as solar power and "carbon sequestration" can reduce global warming.

"There's economic opportunity in being green," Brigham-Grette said. "There are ways to turn the world around."