



DAISY GILARDINI
TRAVELS TO THE ENDS
OF THE GLOBE



Going to
extremes

By Robert Kiener

For the past 11 days, wildlife photographer Daisy Gilardini has been hunkered down in a snow-track van staking out a polar bear den. She's one of 20 photographers from around the world who've made the rugged and expensive journey by plane, train, and tank-tredded snow coach to the remote Wapusk National Park, just south of Churchill, Manitoba. All for a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to photograph mother polar bears emerging from their dens for the first time with their newborn cubs.

Gilardini and the others have paid as much as \$700 a day for this rare chance to photograph the elusive polar bear, braving extreme February weather with temperatures averaging minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit, wind gusts of 43 miles per hour, and blinding white outs that can make it hard to see your hand in front of your face. Winter weather here can be so severe that cameras and tripods regularly freeze up, battery life is cut short, and frostbite is an ever-present danger, with fingers, faces, and feet especially at risk.

But for Gilardini and her peers, the rewards outweigh the risks. Polar bears are notoriously hard to locate, much less photograph, and this remote Canadian setting is one of the few places it's possible to find mothers with young cubs. On their fourth day here the photographers were thrilled to spot a mother emerging from her den, her black snout instantly visible against the bright snow. They all raised their cameras and were soon disappointed when she sniffed the air and returned to her den.

Now it's been seven long days without another sighting. But today, after their guides spotted a mother and her two four-month-old cubs a few miles away, the eager photographers have piled into their vans and rumbled across the tundra in the hope of finding them. Soon one of the guides spots the mother and alerts everyone, "She's there!" The vans grind to a halt in the deep snow. In a flash the photographers scramble out and





take up positions some 100 yards away from the bear and her cubs, as close as Parks Canada rules allow.

Gilardini attaches a Nikon D4S, Nikkor 800mm lens, and 1.25 converter to her tripod and captures an unforgettable series of photographs of the mother and cubs. Oblivious to the bone-chilling cold, Gilardini continues snapping away, capturing shot after shot of the playful youngsters. She smiles when one of the cubs jumps atop its mother's backside and clings as if hitching a ride. Perfect! Gilardini's polar bear photographs caught fire, running in hundreds of newspapers and magazines and on websites around the world. They later became the subject of awards.

For love of ice

Vancouver, Canada-based Gilardini is no stranger to accolades. The Swiss-born, 48-year-old former accountant has been shooting professionally since 2006, and her wild-



life pictures have been published everywhere from *National Geographic* to *Smithsonian* to *Audubon* and featured by Greenpeace, the World Wildlife Fund, and other international organizations. Her images have been recognized in prestigious contests, including the BBC Wildlife Photographer of the Year and Travel Photographer of the Year. She's a fellow of The Explorers Club and a member of the International League of Conservation Photographers.

After fulfilling a long-held dream to visit and photograph Antarctica in 1997, a trip she says changed her life, Gilardini developed an "addiction and an obsession" for the polar regions. She happily recounts her first visit to Antarctica, explaining that she was so overwhelmed by the beauty of the White Continent that she couldn't think straight.

When her ship pulled into the South Shet-



land Islands and she found herself photographing a colony of chinstrap penguins, “I was so moved by the scene before me, including the landscape, the light, and the huge colony of thousands of penguins, that I couldn’t hold my camera steady. Everything I photographed on that visit was blurred,” she says with a smile. Captivated, she’s returned time and time again while also paying visits to the Arctic. All told, she’s been to the polar regions more than 60 times.

Hooked on photographing the world’s most extreme places, she gave up her accounting business in 2006, promising to return to it after two years if she wasn’t a success. She needn’t have worried. Her polar

wildlife and landscape photographs began selling quickly, and she signed with Getty Images as well as art galleries. In time she landed jobs leading photography workshops and symposiums on the same Antarctica- and Arctic-bound ships she first paid to sail on as a tourist.

She explains that the polar regions’ otherworldliness and her love for the mystery of wild places fuels her drive: “I think of Antarctica as a planet on our planet. Much of the world must have been like this before man changed it. The animals, from the seals to penguins to birds, have no fear of you. It’s one of the few places where you can establish a relationship with animals without fear.”

Head and heart

Photographing wildlife in both polar regions has taught her that patience and respect are paramount to producing good—and ethical—photography. Especially in Antarctica, she’s learned to pick a spot and sit down and wait for the animals to approach her. “There’s no sense in barging into a colony of penguins or seals. You’ll just disturb them and create chaos. Sometimes I will just sit down for an hour or more and won’t take a single shot. I am not snapshotting anymore. I am composing by looking for a good background. Then I just wait for something to happen or for the animals to come to me. You need them to trust you.”

DRESSED FOR POLAR ADVENTURE

LAYER IT ON. The air trapped in multiple thin, warm layers is an excellent insulator. And as the temperature climbs throughout the day, you can strip off layers as needed. Gilardini’s ideal scenario begins with polypropylene long underwear, followed by light fleece or polyester fiberfill, and over that a thicker fleece or down layer if the weather requires it, all topped with a waterproof and breathable coat.

PERSPIRATION IS DEATH. Sweat can trigger hypothermia. You absolutely have to avoid perspiring by taking off as many layers as necessary while walking or climbing. As soon as you stop, quickly don your warmest clothing to trap the heat generated by your physical exertion.

COVER YOUR HEAD. A good hat or balaclava is essential. “I personally find it really easy to regulate my body temperature by simply wearing or taking off my hat,” Gilardini says.

ATTEND TO EXTREMITIES. Because you’ll spend a lot of time waiting rather than moving, circulation to the hands and feet is problematic. On her feet, Gilardini starts with doubled socks—a pair made of fine silk topped with some heavy merino wools—then heavy boots. On her hands are polypropylene gloves topped with windproof climbing gloves. While waiting for action, she adds a pair of down mittens. Hand and feet warmers are also a good idea.



Gilardini also believes it's important that photographers respect animals. "I never push animals to behave a certain way," she explains. She won't bait or reward animals with food to produce a photograph. "You never want to acclimate them to humans." She's also on the watch for improper behavior among other people. On a trip to the Arctic she rebuked a photographer who was invading the nesting territory of arctic terns with the goal of getting dramatic shots as they dive bombed him. "It got me so angry. I told him to stop and respect the animals."

Trademark expression

The respect Gilardini pays her subjects and the patience she's willing to endure are what allow her to get the incredibly expressive wild-life photography that has become her trademark. As the International League of Conservation Photographers has noted, "Daisy Gilardini has a remarkable ability to establish a visual intimacy with the animals she photographs." Her Weddell seal pups yawn and seem to laugh. A white tern looks as if it's about to talk. Penguins are as curious as they are playful. "My goal is to capture an animal's soul," she says. "To me, an image is only successful when it touches your heart and generates some feelings. That's the only way to make something happen in the mind of the viewer."

While she's pleased that her image of the baby polar bear hitching a ride on its mother went viral, it's most important to her that the photo make viewers think twice about how their everyday actions can affect the planet. "It's as simple as this: Science produces data to explain issues, while photography symbolizes them. Science is the brain while photography is the heart." And Daisy Gilardini is willing to go to the ends of the earth to prove that. •

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On the Web

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