

# Daisy Gilardini

Through her images of polar bears, seals and penguins, **Daisy Gilardini** has become one of the best known photographers of wildlife in Antarctica and the Arctic. Keith Wilson hears why she believes photography is vital to saving the creatures that she loves...



## Daisy Gilardini Profile

- Swiss-born Daisy Gilardini is a conservation photographer who specializes in the polar regions.
- In the past 20 years, she has made over 80 expeditions to Antarctica and the Arctic, including skiing the final degree to the North Pole.
- Her shots have been published widely in leading magazines such as *National Geographic*, *BBC Wildlife* and *Nature's Best*.
- Daisy is a photographer-in-residence with *Canadian Geographic*, and her images are used in campaigns by NGOs such as Greenpeace and WWF.
- Her work has been recognized by Wildlife Photographer of the Year, Nature's Best Windland Smith Rice International Awards and Travel Photographer of the Year.
- Daisy is a fellow of the New York-based Explorers Club and the Royal Canadian Geographical Society, as well as a Nikon Ambassador.

[www.daisygilardini.com](http://www.daisygilardini.com)

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ay 'Switzerland' and most people think of banks, cuckoo clocks, chocolate and Roger Federer. These might be cliché images of the small alpine country, but when it comes to the hard realities of banks and banking, Switzerland is a global giant. So, perhaps it is unsurprising that the young, animal-loving Daisy Gilardini, from Lugano, should decide to pursue a career in finance, rather than follow her childhood dream of becoming a vet.

Maybe it was the right decision after all, because success in her accounting business meant Daisy could save enough money to fund her travels to photograph wildlife. It was always going to be wildlife: when she was only four, Daisy's godparents gave her a soft toy seal and her mother told stories about the seals living under the ice. "At that age it was totally mesmerizing," she recalls. She grew up with a burning desire to see seals in their natural environment. "That's where my polar bug started and what brought me to Antarctica, because I cultivated this

desire to see them without knowing what that would lead to." Thankfully, it led her away from a career in accountancy to a life in the wild...

**Growing up in Lugano, was it photography or nature that became a keen interest first?**

It was nature, animals. We lived in a small farm town about 15km from Lugano, so I grew up picking up fresh milk in the farm, eggs from the chickens. We had dogs and rabbits and chickens and cows around us, and I grew up thinking I'd become a vet. But things didn't go that way, I went into finance, but I always loved nature and animals.

**When did you start taking pictures?**

Around 16 years old. It was my birthday and I got a beautiful bunch of roses and my sister had a little point-and-shoot, and I just wanted to take a picture of them. Later, my



**I couldn't even take any pictures at first, and the few I shot were all blurry because I was shaking so much**

*Previous page: A rare spirit bear sleeps as night falls in the Great Bear Rainforest, British Columbia, Canada. Spirit bears are actually black bears with a recessive gene that causes their fur to be creamy white in colour.*

*Below: The salmon-rich rivers running through the Great Bear Rainforest provide spirit bears with a plentiful supply of their staple food.*



boyfriend at the time was into photography and, when he was 18, I bought him a camera and we went to Paris for the New Year, and on the Champs-Élysées he said, "Why don't you take a picture?" That was it, from that moment I was hooked. Everywhere I went I was taking a picture. From then on, I started planning all of my vacations with the goal of photographing nature.

**Did you go to Antarctica first rather than the Arctic?**

Yes, and I fell in love with it. I first visited Antarctica in 1997 to realize my childhood dream of seeing seals in their natural environment. I had no idea that experiencing the remoteness of this part of the world

would change my life. I can still recall my first landing on Half Moon Island in the South Shetlands. I was shaking from the emotion of being surrounded by chinstrap penguins. I couldn't even take any pictures at first, and the few I shot were all blurry because I was shaking so much. After that trip, I felt a growing curiosity about the Arctic, and a couple of years later I was off to photograph my first polar bears, in Manitoba's Wapusk National Park. Today, after more than 80 expeditions, I'm still trying to understand this attraction I have.

**You're strongly associated with images of polar bears. Why do they mean so much to you?** →

*Above: Profile of a brown bear backlit against the setting sun at Kuril Lake, Kamchatka Peninsula, Russia.*

**\* THE POLAR BEAR LENS**

**THERE IS ONE LENS THAT DAISY ALWAYS TURNS TO WHEN PHOTOGRAPHING POLAR BEARS...**

**Is there a lens that you regard as your polar bear lens?**  
Yeah, the 800mm. My favourite combo is my 800mm lens combined with the Nikon D6, mounted on a Gitzo carbon fibre tripod and fluid gimbal head. That's my go-to lens in Svalbard, especially when photographing cubs emerging from the maternity den.

**That's quite a big beast, the 800mm?**  
It is. It's heavy, but it's a very sweet lens and I really love it. I say to people in my workshops, only carry what you can. For me, sometimes it means I only carry that lens, it's the way to go because when I'm on a ship it allows me, if the bear is far away, to get those beautiful environmental shots, and then the closer it comes the more portraiture it becomes.

As a kid, I grew up with a huge collection of teddy bears and other stuffed animals. I used to consider them my friends, creatures that will protect me during the dark nights. During my early childhood, I knew very little about the polar regions. At that time, scientists were still a bit confused about climate change, but in the 1990s, with a massive increase of studies and publications, the general public started to acknowledge the problem. While I grew up in the middle of this movement, the dream to be able to see seals and polar bears in their natural environment before it melted away became increasingly pressing.

**The polar bear is now one of the 'New Big 5'. Do they deserve their place on this list?**

Absolutely! I am delighted that people have voted for polar bears to be one of the New Big 5 of wildlife photography, not only because they are my favourite animals but because they need to be protected. They're critical to helping scientists understand changing environmental conditions in their habitat. Polar bears face huge challenges in their fight for survival. Habitat loss due to climate change is one of the main reasons, but not the only one. As apex predators, polar bears are affected by high concentrations of toxic pollutants, which they ingest through the food chain, affecting their health and having a negative effect on their cubs' survival prospects. Polar bears may be at the top of their food chain, but they have one predator of their own: humans.

Every year, 3-4% of the estimated population of 26,000 – that's the equivalent of 800 to 1000 individuals bears – are killed by humans. Half of these are in the Canadian Arctic. Thanks to initiatives like the New Big 5, we have an opportunity to lend a voice to living beings that can't speak for themselves. We're ambassadors on their behalf, raising awareness of the serious issues they face.

**What was it like to photograph a polar bear for the first time?**

It was in 2000, and I was photographing in Churchill, Manitoba, in Wapusk National Park on a huge tundra buggy, a giant truck, so you're actually looking down on them, but they come very



**Above: A baby harp seal on the pack ice near the Magdalen Islands on the Gulf of St Lawrence, Quebec, Canada.**

**Above right: This cub's cute face probably explains why polar bears scored so highly to be included in the New Big 5 (see [www.newbig5.com](http://www.newbig5.com)) of subjects for wildlife photography. Photographed at Wapusk National Park, Manitoba, Canada.**

**Right: An aerial view of king penguins on the Falkland Islands, South Atlantic, photographed with a 28mm wide-angle lens.**

close. They are curious and even put their paws on the vehicle and come to sniff you, so you can be 20cm face-to-face with the polar bear! I photographed them in November, which is the time of the highest concentration of polar bears around Hudson Bay, because that is where the ice will form earliest, compared to the Arctic Ocean, and they need the ice to hunt for seals. That's also when they are their most hungry because they're just coming out of the fasting season, the summer, and they have used up all their fat reserves. So, you see these guys waiting for the ice to form, because they need to go hunt. It was a humbling experience.

**How close can you get to polar bears in the high Arctic? Obviously, not as close as shooting from a tundra buggy in Churchill...**

Photographing them all around Russia, and in Svalbard where I spend quite a few months a year,

“**Dostoyevsky said, 'beauty will save the world'. That's why I try to focus on the beauty and not the ugly**

it's a totally different approach. You usually shoot from a ship, so you're on an elevated platform, which, for photography, is not always the best. In April, when I go to see them hunt and mate on the pack ice, the tactic is to park the ship on the ice and just wait for them to come. Even if you don't see them around, they're going to smell and hear you, and if they're interested they're going to come. That's the beauty, it's on their terms.

**What about photographing cubs? How close are you allowed to get?**

My main photography with the polar bear cubs is in Wapusk, but we are on the land, we're not in the buggies, so we have our own food and we can approach them to 100 metres, that's the Parks Canada regulation. They usually stay near the den, so you just stop 100 metres from them, but we still need huge lenses.

With the big lenses, you can have such an intimate observation when they play with the cubs. Having photographed them so much, I can predict their next move, what they're going to do, when they're going to play, when she's going to nurse.

**Apart from your favourite lens, the 800mm, what else do you pack when you go to somewhere like Svalbard?**

The lens I use the most if I'm not photographing polar bears is my →





80-400mm. I love that lens, it's very sharp. In Antarctica, I never take the 800mm because the seals and penguins are easy to approach, so my go-to lens is the 80-400mm and the 500mm, the small one, the f/5.6, which is lighter.

#### And cameras?

If I'm shooting fast-moving animals, it'd be the D6. Usually, 80 per cent of the time, I use a tripod, the Gitzo carbon fibre tripods, with the fluid gimbal head if I have my 800mm. If not that lens, the usual ball-head. But it's the 80-400mm with the D6 for anything that moves fast, and for anything in low light it's the D850.

**Quite a few Nikon pros have switched to the Z series mirrorless range, are you tempted?**

I have a Z 7, I mostly use it for landscapes. For wildlife, not so much, but I'm looking forward to the Z 9, which looks like it will be the game-changer as far as mirrorless and wildlife photography are concerned. Also, I use the mirrorless for video quite often.

**How important is video to you?**  
As soon as the quality was good



**In Antarctica, I never take the 800mm because the seals and penguins are easy to approach**

**Above: What's so funny? A Weddell seal appears to laugh for the camera in the spring sunshine, Antarctica.**

enough to shoot with my DSLR, I started doing it. Before the pandemic I used to do a lot of presentations. It takes a presentation to the next level; you add another dimension hearing the noises of the penguins, or the wind, it makes you feel you're there. For photography, these are powerful tools to reach people's hearts, because only by touching the feelings of people can we predispose them to better welcome a message of hope, an environmental message, and they feel the connection with the subject you're shooting. The sound allows you to better convey this and open someone's spirits to the cause you are trying to promote.

**How do you choose between stills and video when shooting?**

In the beginning, I was mad with myself because I was not disciplined enough to commit to my video, I would always switch to stills images in the middle. I wouldn't get the shot or the video! So, when I committed to video I pushed the record button and then I would put my hands behind my back. That taught me that I need to get my still first, because deep inside I'm not a camerawoman, I'm a photographer. I have learned from experience in the field and a lot of frustration when to shoot stills and when to shoot video.

**You moved to Canada a while ago; it's a vast country, so what do you most like photographing there?**  
Bears! Love brought me to Canada because I married a Canadian, and it was not a big deal to convince me to

## \* CONSERVATION PHOTOGRAPHY

**INCREASINGLY, WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHERS ARE DESCRIBING THEMSELVES AS CONSERVATION PHOTOGRAPHERS...**

#### What is the difference between a wildlife photographer and a conservation photographer?

We both take a picture the same way but the most important thing it is what we do with the picture. Do we connect that image to a message? Do we want to raise awareness? How do we do that? The wildlife photographer is happy with a pretty image that they can put on a wall or sell as a print. I started like that. I realized there are many challenges facing these creatures, and that's when the conservation message began. While science provides the data necessary to explain issues and propose solutions, photography symbolizes these issues. We need to reach people's hearts and minds to move them to action.

move here. British Columbia has spirit bears and black bears right here in my backyard, so that was a big bonus. Alaska, with the grizzlies, is just a two-hour flight, Wapusk National Park is a few hours' flight.

#### The spirit bear is extra special...

Yes, it's magical. When I was in Switzerland I always heard about this spirit bear and all the legends around it, but it was so rare and elusive. When I moved to British Columbia, I thought, 'well, I have to give it a try,' especially when there was the Enbridge pipeline going right through the great bear rainforest, their habitat. I went back five years in a row and had this amazing experience with this spirit bear that I would visit every year, to see her growing. I don't go back every year now, but I follow the guides and last year there was the pandemic, so there weren't that many people in the forest to look for them. Hopefully, she's still alive.

#### How have you managed during the pandemic and lockdowns?

All my travel assignments and workshops have been cancelled during this time so I've put my time and energy into editing images that have been resting in my hard drives for far too long. I find it refreshing and creative, as I've found time to study new software and experiment with new editing techniques. I also created a new website, which

includes an online store to promote my limited edition fine art prints. I've focused also on writing new captions for my followers on social media. Through various platforms – @NatgeoTravel, @NatgeoWild, @Sealegacy, @cangeo, @cangeotravel, @the\_explorers\_club, and of course my own @daisygilardini – I can reach tens of millions of followers.

#### What do you include in captions?

I like to feature a mix of biology, ecology and conservation messages. I also try to liven things up with the occasional funny anecdote, personal feelings about the species and the locations I visit, as well as tips on techniques and equipment I use. People enjoy positive and beautiful images, even if they come with a message that is not as bright, so I believe in the power of beauty. Dostoyevsky said, 'beauty will save the world', and I think so too. That's why I try to focus on the beauty and not the ugly.

#### What are your goals and ambitions for next 10 years?

Well, climate change is not going away and my dream is to tell the story about how humans were able to save the world and the species and break this ugly cycle that we're in. I will continue to document the changes in the polar regions. That will be my main goal, and to be a voice for these species and an ambassador for this region.

#### What's your single best piece of advice to someone who wants to follow in your footsteps?

I believe that the key to success in photography – and in life – is doing what you love. Over the years, I have come up with what I call the '3P' rule, which is passion, patience and perseverance.

Passion: the love and passion you put into your photography will shine through your images.

Patience: there is a lot of frustration in wildlife photography. You can spend hours and hours – even days or weeks – at the mercy of the most challenging weather conditions, without getting the shot you're looking for. Patience is crucial.

Perseverance: never give up! You will succeed, if you continue to persevere enough! 🍌

#### Next Month

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