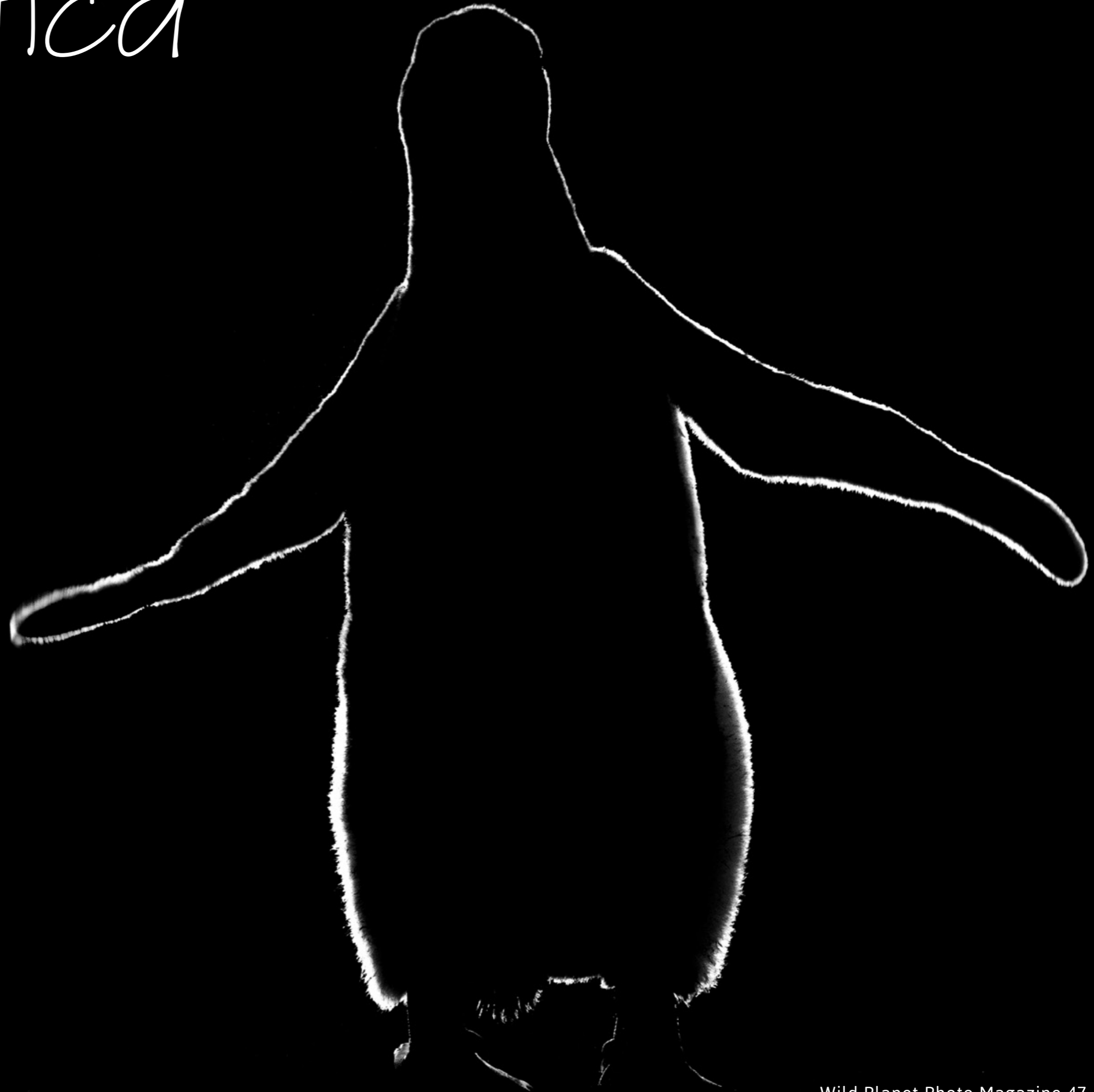


An Antarctica Addiction

A self proclaimed Antarctica addict, Swiss photographer **Daisy Gilardini** traded life as an accountant for a life behind the lens. With a vast Polar packed portfolio under her belt, Daisy speaks to WPM about her obsession with the rhythm of nature



When and why did you first catch the wildlife photography bug?

As a child I grew up with the idea to become a veterinary as I always loved nature and animals, but life quite often does not go the way you plan it. I ended up becoming a Swiss certified expert in finance and accounting. After my masters degree I opened my accounting firm and with a good business plan and organizing skills, I managed to match my love for travel, nature and photography with my day job commitments. I soon started taking off on self-assignments for several months a year and I had to hire an assistant to help me out with the accounting business.

Every time I was back in the office I was feeling depressed and unfulfilled. I started writing articles and looking for magazines interested in publishing my work. It was like having two full time jobs. My days would start at 7am and finish at midnight, seven days a week. The key to success is belief in your work, patience, passion and perseverance. In the end, I finally succeeded in having my work published. In 2006 I became a full time photographer.

You've admitted that you have an addiction to the Polar regions of the world. What is it about these areas that captured your lens?

My love for wildlife and the polar regions started long ago. I was only four-years-old when I received a stuffed seal puppy toy as a gift from my Godparents. My Mom explained that the seal puppy came from a very cold place and lived on and under the Polar ice. I was mesmerized by those stories. Thereafter, I dreamt of being able to see them in their natural environment. It took me seven years to be able to save



the money necessary to pay for a trip to Antarctica but that trip totally changed my life. I still remember the first landing on Half Moon Island in the South Shetlands. With a lump in my throat I was shaking from the emotion of being surrounded by hundreds of Chinstrap Penguins. I couldn't even take a picture that day, and the few I shot were all blurred because of the shaking!

Many times I tried to understand this irresistible attraction to the Polar

Regions, which I would define almost as an addiction or obsession. These extreme adventures transport me out of my ordinary worldliness leading me on a voyage of self-discovery. The isolation from modern civilization and all the distractions that come with it brings me back to appreciate and focus on the simple rhythm of nature. The healing feelings of re-discovering the primordial connection with nature and the interconnection among all species on earth inspires deep respect

and awareness for the importance of these delicate ecosystems.

My passion for the natural world has grown into a lifelong commitment to disseminate conservation messages and inspire respect and preserve our fragile planet. It is extremely exciting and fulfilling to give a purpose to your life.

In the past you've said that those polar areas of the world have helped you to 'appreciate and focus on the simple >



> rhythm of nature'. Can you explain what you mean by this and why that has been important for you?

My favorite destination is the coldest, driest and windiest continent in the world: Antarctica. I always think of Antarctica as a planet on our planet. It looks like everything stopped at the time of creation. Everything is in harmony, pristine and pure, probably because no humans ever colonized this continent. It is one of the few places on earth where animals are not scared of us, where seals want to play with you and birds don't fly away.

It is a place of peace and science where one can reflect without any distraction from the outside world. No TV with the negative daily bombardment of bad news, no internet, no mobile phones, no stress. You can be in the moment, cut off from the hysteria and drama of our 'modern' society, connect with mother nature and feel the oneness of the universe. That is what brings me back year after year.

You've joined over sixty expeditions to Antarctica and the Arctic, most of them on research vessels which are also used for ecotourism. What's the most interesting wildlife photography story you've experienced to date?

Every year from mid-February to mid-March a big event takes place in Wapusk National Park in Manitoba, Canada. The Polar Bear mothers, who entered the maternity dens in October to give birth to their cubs in November, are ready to exit for the first time with their four-month-old newborn. They know that on the Hudson Bay pack ice the seals are giving birth to their cubs and that means easy food for them. On the other

hand, it's extremely difficult and rare to witness the exit of the bears from the dens and one has to face extremely challenging conditions.

During one of the five sightings we found a mother bear resting with her two young cubs in a day den on the way to the pack ice. Day dens usually consist in wind-protected areas as snowdrift refuges or tree shelter. She was extremely calm when our vehicle reached the location and we could photograph her and the cubs for a few hours before she suddenly decided it was time to leave. She rushed downhill in deep snow when one of the two cubs decided it was much more convenient to hitch a ride on mama's behind. He jumped and reached out holding on with a firm bite on the mother's fur backside: an extremely funny and totally unexpected behavior.

It is a place of peace and science where one can reflect without any distraction from the outside world

Wildlife photography is all about patience and perseverance, and despite the challenging conditions and the long hours waiting, the experience of witnessing something so rare is simply priceless. That image along with some video footage in January 2016 went viral on social media. It all started from an article published by the Huffington Post and the Daily News in UK and from there it spread everywhere from newspaper to TV and radio all around the world. Millions of views only on the CBC News channel.

For two full weeks all I did was release >



with tens of little buttons while wearing huge gloves. Finally, you have to work around the fact that after a while parts of the camera will freeze: batteries first, then the control panels as well as the big back monitor. So you must be skilled to work your camera in blind mode and remember the setting you started with. Keep shooting and hope for the best.

What advice would you offer readers looking to improve their technique?

Practice, practice and practice over and over again. Know your camera perfectly well. Once in the field, things can happen very fast and you don't want camera technicalities to be an obstacle between you and your subject. The goal is to operate the camera without even looking at it. If you live somewhere with a lot of birds around you, that is a great boot camp. If not a dog or a cat running and playing will certainly do the trick.

However technique (in camera and post production) is only a small part of the equation. Patience, perseverance, excellent composition skills, great use of light, creativity and knowing how to tell a story are the fundamentals of good photography. Your image, whether or not tack sharp, is going to be successful only if it is able to make a connection with the viewer, generate emotions, and convey a message.

You're known for your bear portfolio. Where did your affinity with bears stem from?

As a kid I grew up with a huge collection of teddy bears and all sorts of stuffed animals, which are still on display in my bedroom today. I used to consider them my friends, the creatures that would protect me during the dark nights. Today >

> interviews and reply to emails. It was an interesting and intense experience. For sure gratifying, but also scary as I totally lost control of my image copyrights. Everybody was using the images without asking let alone paying license fees. Personally I am very thankful for all the coverage but what really is most important is the great opportunity I had to give a voice to creatures that cannot speak up.

Polar Bears are a vulnerable species and our every day actions have huge

impact on our planet. 'What we do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make,' a quote from Jane Goodall.

How do those extreme temperatures affect that kit you take into the field with you? The weather changes so fast with extreme conditions, how does this affect your technique?

As a wildlife photographer specialized in Polar regions, the challenges in the

field are mostly related to the extreme environment in which I operate. The cold is a challenge for your equipment as well as your body. Firstly, you have to take care of yourself in order not to freeze any of your body parts: face, hands and feet being the most exposed. If you are not comfortable you will not be able to focus on the job. Dress in layers and avoid perspiration are vital to survive in these situation.

Once comfortable, then comes the technical challenge to operate a camera

Daisy's Polar Bear expedition in numbers

- February 17th to March 3rd 2015 – 13 days in the field
- 800mm super telephoto lens (sometimes used with a 1.25x or 1.4x converter)
- 117 hours of waiting in front of a polar bear den
- Winds gusting to 60/70 km/h
- Average temperatures -45/50C (with wind chill)
- 12 hours of effective shooting
- 5 polar bear sightings



> they simply make me smile, bringing back the child that still resides deep in all of us.

I was raised in Switzerland at a time where there were no bears were to be found and I never questioned why I loved the bears so much. Focusing my work on the three species of North American bears and studying the origins of human relationships with them led me to understand the deep bonds between the two species and the problems that come with it.

In our life we start dealing with bears even before we know how to walk or talk. They enter our cradles and sleep with us even before we know what they are. As we grow older, bears continue to be in our lives. Our first book is probably about a bear and when we start watching TV we get to know all the famous bear stars such as Winnie the Pooh, Yogi and Paddington just to name a few.

Relationships between bears and the first form of human species started roughly 80-60 thousand years BC when Neanderthal were known to worship bear caves. Later on in modern human species, more evidence was found to prove the tight relationship with bears. With Homosapiens came the first examples of art in the form of cave paintings and the findings of bear skull altars proved that since the Palaeolithic period, bears have been venerated in a form of religious worship.

Researchers who studied the origin of this worship found a few interesting hypotheses. The fact that the bears disappear in hibernation during the winter

and that the remains are difficult to find because they usually crawl away to die, created an air of mystery around this animal. But more importantly two other facts led human kind to anthropomorphize bears: the habit of the bear of standing on two legs and the human-like appearance of its skinned carcass gave many cultures a sense of kinship.

From your research, experience and travels, what interesting differences have you found among the behaviour of the different species of bears?

The biggest difference between the North American species of bears

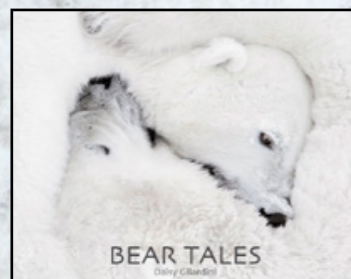
is the fact that only Polar Bears are totally carnivorous. The diet of Grizzly Bear and Black Bears is 80 per cent vegetarian which makes them omnivorous – just like humans. They are opportunistic and if the chance arises they will feed on meat and fish but basically they are not hunters. Based on this fact of course my behavior and my approach to the three species is totally different. While during the salmon run I feel very comfortable with Grizzly and Black Bears walking at a close distance – knowing their focus is on the fish – I'd never feel comfortable with a Polar Bear closer than 100 meters unless I am on a vehicle a zodiac or a ship.

When you're out in the field, you're looking for a position or a place where 'something is going to happen,' and let animals get used to your presence which can take a long time. How do you go about doing this in such a stark environment? >

In our life we start dealing with bears even before we know how to walk or talk



Bear Tales



Bear Tales is a collection of photographs which celebrate one of the most symbolic creatures in the animal kingdom and the fragile ecosystems that it inhabits. In the last 10 years, photographer

Daisy Gilardini, has roamed extensively in bear country, from the Arctic to Alaska and the Great Bear Rainforest in British Columbia, focusing on photographing while studying and understanding the challenges the three species of North American bears, grizzly, polar, black and kermode bear, are facing.

The book can be ordered online for \$69 USD plus shipping at:

www.daisygilardini.com/books-prints/

> My philosophy in life is live your dreams and follow your heart, so specializing by focusing on a particular subject is not a choice it is a question of doing what you are passionate about. I love the isolation and the harsh environment of the Polar regions. I know how to cope with the elements and waiting is just a form of meditation. Being in the present is something very rare nowadays and being in the field allows me to be focused only on the animals without any distractions.

For the last two decades I have been concentrating all my photographic efforts on two big bodies of work – the Polar regions and North American bears (Grizzly, Black, Polar and Kermode Bears). In this period I have joined more than 60 expeditions to the Polar Regions and 20 expeditions in bear countries.

Knowing your subjects and the ecosystem where they live in is crucial in order to be able to anticipate behaviors and catch the action at the right moment.

Returning to the same locations year after year will give a better understanding of the light conditions and spending an incredible amount of time with the animals will give you the opportunity to know single individuals and come up with something new and different. It takes time and knowledge to capture their personalities and freeze in a single shot during a fraction of a second those anthropomorphic expressions that will be essential to make the connection with the viewer. Photography is a universal language and I strongly believe in the sheer power of it in creating emotions and touching people's hearts while delivering positive messages.

You focus on simplicity from an art

60 Wild Planet Photo Magazine



perspective when shooting your images. What components are you looking for in a composition?

During the years I have developed my own language and style. I don't create or make images rather I feel humbled in front of mother nature and think I am just an interpreter and witness of it. While shooting wildlife and landscapes I focus on composition and my final goal is to convey emotions by simplifying the shapes. Simplicity is the magic word and I would like to mention two of my favourite quotes: 'Simplicity is nature's first step,

and the last of art,' – Philip James Bailey. 'There is nothing quite so complicated as simplicity,' – Charles Poore

I love extreme high and low key images where the emptiness of details in the frame allows the character and soul of my subject to shine and vibrate through this two-dimensional medium which is photography.

This image of two sparring Polar Bears is extremely striking and portrays great balance and composition. It almost has a yin and yang simplicity. Can you tell

us the story behind this shot and your thinking behind it?

'The Hug' was shot the last day of one of my Polar Bear expeditions. All week I focused on sparring bears and had plenty of images showing the full bodies in the tundra environment. When I saw these two young bears sparring I decided to add a 2x teleconverter to my 600mm lens and go for the close-up. I was shooting from the elevated platform of a tundra buggy (a huge truck) and the bears were 30 meters away but on a slope so the elevated view was even more accentuated. It was a >

Wild Planet Photo Magazine 61






For this reason I have very strong opinions on wildlife photography ethics and follow these rules religiously:

- Respect wildlife and distances
- Give space and keep quiet
- Don't chase the animals
- Let them approach you
- No baiting with dead or alive baits

Unfortunately, nowadays wildlife and nature photography is an extremely competitive field where the word ethics sometimes (too often) gets lost. Ethical is an adjective describing something related to moral principles and we all know that those vary a lot depending on culture and locations.

Photography is an extremely powerful tool to deliver messages. It is in fact the only universal language understood by everybody, no matter which country you are from, no matter the language or level of education. As environmental photographers it is our duty to capture the beauty of places and species at risk and raise awareness through the universal power of the images we capture. While science provides the data necessary to explain issues and suggest solutions, photography symbolizes these issues. Science is the brain, while photography is the heart that engages people's emotions and move them to action, for nature and for us. 

> risky move as while sparring the bears are extremely fast and focusing in these conditions is difficult. I knew I got the shot the moment the two heads crossed in a yin and yang position. Today this is still one of my favorite shots, is on the cover of my book Bear Tales and hanging in my bedroom. What I love of course is the yin and yang feeling but also the tenderness that shines through the image.

What is your most used lens while out in the field?

While photographing Polar Bears I shoot mostly with my Nikkor 800mm f/5.6 E FL

ED VR lens which I simply adore for its sharpness and fast focus. In Antarctica I would say my preferred lens is my Nikkor 80-400mm f/4.5/5.6G ED VR. It is a sharp lens which gives me plenty of flexibility for its weight and focal length.

You're passionate about conservation and are a member of the International League of Conservation Photographers. In your opinion, what's the most pressing issue within the wildlife photography world today?

I am a member of the International League of Conservation Photographers,

a non-profit organization. Its mission is to further environmental and cultural conservation through ethical photography. Awe-inspiring photography is a powerful force for the environment, especially when paired with the collaboration of scientists and decision makers.

As a nature photographer what I do inevitably has an impact on the places and the creatures I am documenting. It is essential to limit this impact to a minimum with the hope that the positive influence my images will have in bringing awareness to the public is much greater than the consequences of my intrusions.