



Above Polar bear mother with cubs, Wapusk National Park, Canada. Opposite (top) Emperor penguin family, Snow Hill Island, Antarctica. Opposite (bottom) Spirit (kermode) bear, Great Bear Rainforest, British Columbia, Canada.



In conversation with **Daisy Gilardini**

Canada-based Daisy Gilardini specialises in photographing the stories behind environmental and wildlife conservation issues in cold places. Today, the former financier has a particular passion for bears...

Interview by Nick Smith

It's been a decade since I last met Swiss wildlife photographer Daisy Gilardini. Back in those days she was an emerging talent, and what becomes clear in our recent discussion is that she has used the intervening 10 years to rise in stature to a successful and established photographer who has made the extreme northern and southern territories her own, in a style of her own.

'Back then I was just starting out as a full-time photographer,' still making the transition from a professional career as a finance expert based in Switzerland. 'But it was at that point I gave up my interest in the accountancy world and decided to give myself a one or two-year sabbatical to see if I could make it as a photographer. If not, I'd go back to accounting.'

Today, the world of finance's loss is certainly photography's gain, and as a professional

photographer Daisy has not once looked back. She says that, in her late 30s, it was time to do 'what I loved most in life. And that was polar photography and travelling in the polar regions.' Her big hope was to find herself in a position where she could 'leave something behind of these disappearing, melting ecosystems. And here I am, still doing it, and loving it.'

Perhaps not surprisingly, Daisy says she prefers the world of photography to finance 'absolutely' and is a much happier and more fulfilled person these days, despite 'not making that much money. But money doesn't make happiness. Unfortunately, today's world revolves around money'. For her, life needed to be centred on something else. 'Now, I wake up in the morning and do what I like to do, which is something on another level, that's more spiritually fulfilling.'

What Daisy likes to do most is take photographs, especially of bears. And to do so she left the urban financial centre of Europe to take up residence on the west coast of Canada in Vancouver. Today she describes herself as mainly a wildlife photographer - 'bears and penguins' - specialising in the cold bits at the top and bottom of the planet. She goes on to further refine this as 'mainly bears', which is largely due to the fact that she has recently been heavily committed to producing her new book *Bear Tales*, a lovely monograph of grizzly, polar, black and spirit bears (the latter of which is a black bear with a genetic variation that makes it appear white.) Her book celebrates their aesthetic beauty and the wildness of their habitat as much as commenting on the fragility of their world. Daisy believes that in such contexts photography





Opposite (top) Adélie penguin, Mikkelsen Harbour, Antarctic Peninsula. *Opposite (bottom)* Adult king penguin among chicks, Gold Harbour, South Georgia. *Above* Alaskan grizzly bear, Hallo Bay, Katmai National Park, USA. *Below* Spirit (kermode) bear, Great Bear Rainforest, British Columbia, Canada.

has an important communications role to play in support of her scientific colleagues. 'While science provides the data to explain environmental issues and suggest solutions, photography symbolises the issues. Science is the brain, while photography is the heart.'

The big question for Daisy is what attracts her to such extreme environments when life was so comfortable before. She opens her response by explaining that she has little interest in warmer locations, simply because physically she is very uncomfortable in hot and humid climates. 'But I just love the isolation of polar places. I love getting on a ship and being totally cut off from our crazy world. I need to be cut off from Facebook, the internet and the news, which is always so terrible lately.' She says she has to force herself not to watch television, 'because you just end up thinking, "oh no, not again."' The Arctic and the Antarctic are like another planet on our planet, as they are totally different from anywhere else in our world. I love the connection with nature without the presence of people.' As Daisy explains her inner psychological need to roam the habitat of the bear, she realises that there is something of the bear in her spirit too. 'I can cope with being alone in the wilderness. But to be in a crowd

of people... I find that really challenging.'

While Daisy's life has changed beyond recognition over the past decade, so has her photography. 'Ten years ago I was just switching to digital and it was amazing how the learning curve was changing as everything became much

faster.' She tells an anecdote describing how recently she received an image request that required her to delve back into her archive in search of emperor penguins. 'It was interesting to look at those shots from back then. I looked at them and wondered what I was thinking in







Preceding spread Gentoo penguin colony in snowstorm, Pleneau Island, Antarctica. *Above* Polar bears hugging, Wapusk National Park, Canada.

terms of post-production. And so I ended up reworking the photo set. This is really because the technology, especially the software, is improving so much. But also developments in camera bodies are amazing, and I think the improvement is never-ending.'

But it's not just a case of an experienced photographer having better tools to polish up her promising archive portfolio. Today, Daisy believes that she has developed as a photographer too, finding herself 'much more mature in my approach to the wildlife.' A decade ago, she says that she would be excited to see a bear and 'would take photographs of it. Now, I say, "okay, so this is a bear. What am I going to do? How can I really capture the spirit of the bear? What are the angles I need?" And so there is absolutely a great improvement from the era of my film photography. When I look back at some of those photos I can't quite believe that they were ever published! Today they would go in the bin.'

Daisy is of course being far too modest. But her disapproval of her earlier output reveals that she is a photographer who is only content when she is moving forward creatively. Paradoxically, this is why she wishes that she could go back in time and experience again some of those early formative trips and apply what she knows now. Interestingly, she says

that 'back then I was trashing a lot of what I shot. But today I think I might have kept some of those images,' acknowledging that maybe your early reactions to what's on the card, might not be the best. We become wiser as we become older, she thinks, before admitting that she wouldn't be at the point on her career timeline where she is today, had she not been through the high-powered and pressurised environment of the financial world. 'It was a journey that brought me here. I couldn't give up accountancy now and expect to take the photos I take today.'

'It's a question of photographic maturity. You shoot for years and then finally you find your style.' In Daisy's case the style 'came naturally. I didn't pick it. But it is a long process. You get to mature in the sense that you have a character that symbolises your images.' A good example of a trademark Daisy style marker is the 'white-on-white' shot, maybe a polar bear in the snow. 'I shoot white-on-white because I love the clean, simple effect that allows me to reach the soul of my subject and hopefully the heart of the viewer.'

When it comes to editing, Daisy explains that when she is going through a sequence of variations on her computer screen, she will know which is the killer image, 'because my heart will react to it.' She describes a particular

image of a polar bear family (featured above and on the cover of *Bear Tales*) that she 'just knew was a winner. I knew it was when I took it, because of how it touched my heart. There is simplicity in there and I liked that too. That's why my images tend to have a lot of emptiness in them.' This helps ensure 'the message is direct.'

Daisy's artistic message is above all a plea for the future of the natural world. In the introduction to her book she describes how we literally live with bears from the moment we are born. As infants we have them as toys in our cribs, while as children we eat bear-shaped cookies. Our Neanderthal ancestors worshipped them, and in our earliest art there are cave paintings depicting these creatures. We name star constellations after them. And yet the modern world doesn't seem to respect or love them very much, and in our quest for material gain these giant mammals have been marginalised to the point where both they and their habitats are endangered. Daisy doesn't like that way of thinking, and so she's on a mission 'to show people through my photography just how wonderful and important for the ecosystem these animals are.'

To see more of Daisy's work, or to order a copy of Bear Tales, visit daisygilardini.com