



Frozen in Time

Wildlife photographer Daisy Gilardini boldly goes where few photographers dare: the coldest places on earth, the polar regions

Story by Stephanie Hounsell
Photography by Daisy Gilardini

When Daisy Gilardini was a little girl in Switzerland, she was fascinated with a small, stuffed seal pup her godparents gave her. Never having seen a seal in real life, she peppered her mom with questions about the cold-dwelling creatures. Her mom responded with stories about mysterious animals that lived on and under the ice in far-off lands — places the four-year-old could only dream about.

“I was mesmerized by those stories,” Gilardini says. “I dreamed to be able to see them (seals) in their natural environment.”

That desire never left. In fact, as the years went by, the pull only became stronger. And now, decades later, at least once a year, Gilardini once again finds herself playing with seal pups — only this time they’re real, not stuffed, and

she’s living the experiences she once only imagined.

Gilardini is an award-winning wildlife photographer based out of Vancouver, BC, who specializes in the polar regions — the Arctic and her favourite, Antarctica — as well as North American bears. In the past two decades, she has taken more than 60 trips to the polar regions, mostly on research vessels and icebreakers, and 20 expeditions in bear countries. She has been on two ski expeditions to the North Pole.

A different world

It’s like she’s in a different world when she’s on one of these expeditions, and that’s a huge part of the draw, she says. She can forget the stresses of everyday life with all its modern “conveniences” and stop to



hear her heart beat. "You are in the moment. It's the only time that I forget about everything," she says, explaining there are no bills, no in-boxes, and no to-do lists. "You forget about all the little things at home that are distracting, you're just there. You live day-by-day, hour-by-hour. It's really a different world."

It's refreshing for the mind, she says, because there's so much to think about at home. In the field, it's all about the basics, she says. Topping that list is survival — the cold is a force to be reckoned with and requires a lot of preparation and know-how, as well as stamina and mental perseverance. Because of the cold

temperatures, everything takes longer — from the camera when it starts to freeze, to her own body. But that's part of the gift, Gilardini says. She's forced to slow down. "Maybe physically I'm tired, but my brain is so refreshed. I get so much energy out of it," she says.

Her first trip to Antarctica didn't come cheap or easy. She saved for seven years to fund the 1997 trip that changed her life. At the age of 29, her eyes were opened to a world of pristine isolation. "I always think of Antarctica as a planet on our planet," she explains. "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 penguins approach you to interact, where seals want to play with you and birds don't fly away."

Animals aren't hunted in Antarctica, so they don't fear humans the way they do in the Arctic, where they're extremely wary of visitors, Gilardini explains.

On that first trip to Antarctica, Gilardini took a photo that remains her favourite: an iceberg in the shape of a heart. "That was the trip that changed my life and that image symbolizes perfectly my emotions," she says. "During that expedition I left a piece of my heart in Antarctica and, ever since, I have to go back every year to check on it."

As the coldest place on earth, Antarctica has such severe temperatures that Gilardini can travel there only during the warmer months, when the temperature is usually between minus five degrees C and five degrees C. The weather she faces in the Arctic is more challenging, since she visits year-round. It can easily be minus 40 degrees C in the winter, and even colder.

Gilardini relishes the challenges that come along with photographing in the extreme cold. First there's the physical toll. Dressing for the job is crucial. Layers, layers, layers. Operating a camera wearing hefty gloves is a challenge in itself, she says. Then there's the way the frigid temperatures attack her equipment, eventually freezing various parts of the camera.

But Gilardini seems made for the cold. If given a choice between camping on the edge of an ice floe and lying on the beach in the Caribbean, Gilardini would choose the former any time. Twice she braved the heat to travel to Madagascar, and both times she caught malaria. "I hate the heat," she says. "I cannot work in it. Twenty-five degrees and I'm dead. If you're cold, you can always dress. If you're hot, once you're naked, you're naked!"

Becoming a photographer

Her journey toward becoming a full-time photographer was a winding one.

Although she'd always loved animals

and as a child wanted to become a veterinarian, those plans fell by the wayside and she went on to start a successful finance and accounting business. But she wasn't fulfilled, especially after finally seeing Antarctica for herself and realizing how much she also loved photography.

Taking photos had been a part of her life since she was a teenager on the Champs Elysees in Paris trying out the camera she had just given her boyfriend for Christmas. Needless to say, she had a hard time putting that camera down.

She taught herself in the field by watching professional photographers and eventually her work was published.

Gilardini added North American bears to her list of specialties 15 years ago. In addition to polar bears, she photographs grizzly, black and Kermode bears.

Just like with seals, it seems Gilardini was destined to photograph bears. As a child, she had a collection of teddy bears — an animal that had been hunted to extinction in the Swiss Alps. "I used to consider them my friends, the creatures that would protect me during the dark nights," she says.

She went on to study the unique relationship between humans and bears before turning her camera toward them. Gilardini has garnered quite a bit of atten-

tion for her photos of mother polar bears with their babies. exiting the den with her cubs. "It was one of the most amazing highlights of all my photographic career because it's so rare," she says. "Seeing them emerging from the den is just the most amazing feeling you can have. It's such a big reward."

Last year, an image of a mama bear smuggling with her cubs, entitled Motherhood (this page), went viral, turning Gilardini into a media darling overnight. The photo, taken at Wapusk from 100 metres away, was awarded the grand prize at the Nature's Best Windland Smith Rice International Awards last year. The prize came with the honour of being displayed at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC.

Simplicity is key

Simplicity is at the heart of Gilardini's images. "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," she says.

She doesn't feel she creates or makes images, but that she witnesses nature's splendour and interprets it.

Gilardini aims to educate people about conservation issues and global warming through her images. But she wants to do it in a positive way, showcasing beauty that reaches people's hearts so they want to help protect it. "Awe-inspiring photography is a powerful force for the environment," she says. "Science is the brain, while photography is the heart that engages our emotions and moves us towards action and lasting change."

Despite loving the escape from everyday life that her favourite cold places offer, there are certain things Gilardini misses while she's in the field. Just what is it that she looks forward to most after a long, cold trip? "Pizza," she says with a laugh. 🍕

For a behind-the-scenes look into some of the photos on these pages, please visit www.outdoorphotographycanada.com.

For more information about Gilardini's work, visit www.daisygilardini.com.



tion for her photos of mother polar bears with their babies. Each year from mid-February to mid-March in Wapusk National Park, Churchill, MB, mother polar bears emerge for the first time with their young cubs from the maternity dens where the babies were born four months earlier. A select few photographers — including Gilardini — have captured those moments. It takes research, time and a lot of perseverance in the face of challenging conditions.

In 2005, Gilardini waited more than a hundred hours over 13 days in windy, minus 50 degree C weather before she was finally rewarded with a mama bear

Between accounting and photography, Gilardini was essentially working two jobs, leaving her exhausted. Finally, in 2006, she took the plunge and left the finance industry in order to devote herself fully to photography. Since then, her work has appeared in numerous top photo publications and she has won awards at some of the most prestigious international photo contests. She moved to Vancouver from Switzerland six years ago to be with her husband, whom she met while she was working as photographer in residence aboard the same ship where he was employed as artist in residence.

