



Life in the Freezer

Polar wildlife has fascinated Daisy Gilardini ever since she was a child and she's achieved a life ambition by becoming a specialist working in these awe-inspiring regions.

WORDS TERRY HOPE IMAGES DAISY GILARDINI

DAISY GILARDINI CAN pinpoint the precise moment when her future professional life became mapped out, and it happened when she was just a child, growing up in Switzerland. “Even at that early age it was obvious that I had a particular love for animals,” she recalls. “I had a huge collection of stuffed animals and everybody in my family – my parents, godparents and aunts – would cover me with them.

“One stuffed animal in particular influenced my life forever, however. I was just four years old when my godparents gave me a little stuffed seal-puppy toy. My mum explained to me that this was an animal that came from a very cold place, where it lived on, and under, the polar ice. I was mesmerised by those stories and, from that point on, I dreamed that one day I would be able to see them in their natural environment.”

Naturally, the path from then to the point Daisy is at now, where she's gained an outstanding reputation as a wildlife photographer specialising in the polar regions, came with just a few interesting twists and turns along the way. However, she always had the thought at the back of her mind that one day she would fulfil her ambition to see for herself the land that had so captivated her. She eventually got there after initially considering a career as a veterinarian and then founding a successful accountancy business, but when she finally arrived there was no doubt in her mind that she was following her heart.

“With a good business plan and solid organisational skills, I managed to balance my daily job commitments with my love for nature, photography and travel,” she says. “It still took me seven years to save the money necessary to realise my childhood dream of seeing ▶

ABOVE: The stunning polar environment has long held great appeal to Daisy, but it comes with a whole host of technical challenges.

OPPOSITE PAGE: The scope for wildlife photography in polar regions is immense and part of Daisy's remit is to produce images that will serve to highlight issues facing the creatures that make their home there.





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ABOVE: All species of bears appeal to Daisy, and she’s determined to eventually photograph them all.

seals in their natural habitat but, in 1997, I was finally able to embark on an expedition to Antarctica, and this turned into a trip that would ultimately change my life forever.”

The bug had truly bitten and there was no stopping now. For a time, Daisy would take off on adventurous self-assignments that could last for months on end, with assistants in place to keep the accountancy business going but, ultimately, she was feeling depressed and unfulfilled each time she returned to the office, and something had to give. In 2006 she bowed to the inevitable and wildlife photography became her full-time business, and it’s a decision she has never regretted.

Over the years Daisy has travelled the world in the course of her work and, alongside this, she’s also working on a long-standing and ongoing personal project that, for the past decade, has seen her focus on bears. These are creatures that fascinate her through their position as predators at the top of the food chain juxtaposed with the fact that they can be gentle and affectionate mothers. “I’d love to be able to photograph all eight species of bears,” she says,

“starting with the spectacled bear, which you find in the Andes Mountains. That could definitely keep me busy for a while!”

However, it’s the Arctic and the Antarctic that keep calling her back over and over, and she reckons to have made over 80 expeditions to the polar regions throughout her professional career. “I’ve tried many times to understand this irresistible attraction it has for me,” she says, “which I would define almost as an addiction or obsession. These extreme adventures transport me out of my ordinary world and take me on a voyage of self-discovery. The isolation from modern civilisation and all the distractions that comes with that enables me to focus on nature’s simple rhythms and stirs a deep feeling of awareness in me and inspires respect for these delicate ecosystems.”

By necessity, expeditions tend to be planned one to two years ahead of time. This is because they call for a high level of planning, from logistics through to sourcing gear that’s capable of standing up to the harshest of conditions. “Cold is a challenge to your equipment, as well as your body,” she says. “You have to take care of yourself first and be careful

not to freeze any of your extremities. If you’re not comfortable you won’t be able to focus on your job. You need to dress in layers and avoiding perspiration is vital to surviving these conditions.

“Once you’re comfortable, the technical challenge of operating a camera with all of its little buttons comes next, and this is something that’s not easy when you’re 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 and finally the back monitor. So you must be practised at working your camera in blind mode, always keeping in mind the settings you started with. You need to keep shooting and hoping for the best.”

Changing Times

The wildlife photography industry has changed dramatically since the beginning of Daisy’s career, more than 20 years ago now, and she’s had to adapt over this time to ensure that she’s able to remain commercially viable in a world where there are a lot more rivals than there once were, and many regular sources of income have taken a direct hit.

“With the advent of the internet and micro stock, the market has never been so compromised,” Daisy explains. “Everybody out there appears to be looking for free or super-low-cost images, without taking into consideration the time and effort that integrity and ethical photography demands, values that, unfortunately, are becoming rarer all the time.

“Once upon a time you could make a living by providing images to stock agencies. Today it’s much more complicated; to be at or near the top of the field, especially in a field as competitive as wildlife photography, it’s no longer sufficient to simply have a still camera and to go out and shoot. In this age of



LEFT: It’s important for Daisy to achieve images of her wildlife subjects that are animated and reveal something of the creature’s habits and personality.



LEFT: A toy baby seal inspired Daisy to travel to polar regions in the first place and she finally achieved her ambition to see them in their natural environment.

social media, we’re expected to be so many different things: storytellers, writers, journalists, drone pilots, videographers, sound technicians and more. We’re asked to capture life from the air and under the water, using everything from camera traps to action cams.

“Many people think that being a wildlife/nature photographer is all about non stop fun, being outdoors and having the opportunity to explore wonderful places. Every time I would take off for an assignment, my dad would say, ‘Going on holiday again...?’

“The reality, however, is that the ‘fun’ part is just a tiny percentage of the job. We spend endless hours ▶



LEFT: Using Nikon 500mm and 600mm lenses, Daisy looks for tightly framed close-ups that are all about symmetry and shapes.



ABOVE: Although top of the predator list, polar bears can make gentle and caring mothers to their young.

RIGHT: The fascination of polar regions shows little sign of wearing off for Daisy, but she's struggled to travel over the past year.

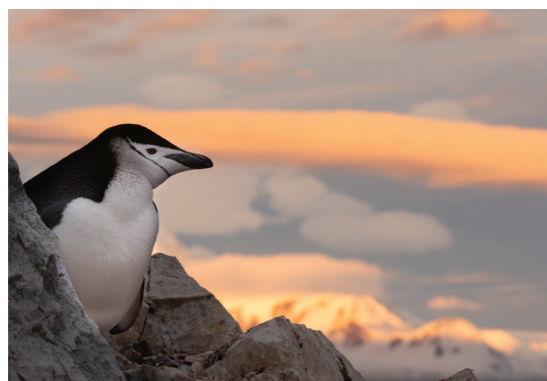
in front of the computer, editing our images to get them to a point where they can be published. We write articles, captions for social media and blogs, while also contacting editors and sponsors and keeping up with new advances in technology and software. These are all indoor, office tasks that nobody considers to be part of the job."

To make a living out of wildlife photography these days, individuals need to be a combination of highly organised and flexible. Daisy stopped working with stock libraries back when the royalties from licence fees dropped to unsustainable levels, offering just a few pennies an image in many cases. Now her income is made up from a number of different sources, including image licensing, delivering workshops and talks, the sale of fine art prints to collectors, either online or through galleries, producing books and fostering brand ambassadorships.

RIGHT: The art of wildlife photography is in getting into position and then knowing exactly the right time to depress the shutter.



RIGHT: Daisy is looking to achieve a lot more than 'pretty pictures,' and is instead hoping to capture the souls of her subjects.



Like many other wildlife photographers, she also sees her role as being more than providing 'pretty pictures,' and she's aware of how important her work can be in terms of drawing attention to the pressures human intervention has put the natural world under.

"I've been so lucky to have the opportunity to visit the polar regions many times over the past twenty years," she says, "and I've seen first-hand the changes that have taken place. While similar in some respects, the two poles are also opposites in many ways. The Arctic is an ocean surrounded by land, while Antarctica is a continent surrounded by sea.

"In Antarctica there's more precipitation now in the form of snow, due to more evaporation, and this translates into delays in the reproduction cycle of the penguins, as they need pebbles to build their nests. There are also decreasing penguin species, such as chinstraps and Adélies, while others, such as gentoos, are thriving. I've also noticed higher temperatures and more rainy days during the summer months.

"Meanwhile, in the Arctic the entire region is warming at twice the rate of the rest of the world. Sea ice cover reached its annual summer minimum on September 15 last year, the second-smallest cover ever recorded. The Arctic sea ice is also shrinking, not only in area but in thickness as well. It's no longer

uncommon to see polar bears swimming in open water and to witness ice caps pouring millions of litres of melted water into the ocean."

As a conservation photographer Daisy feels it's her duty and obligation to give a voice to creatures that can't speak up for themselves. Accordingly, she sets out to capture the souls of the animals she encounters in order to reach and touch the viewer's heart and, hopefully, to stir them to take action

"While science provides the information necessary to explain the what's and why's of issues and identify possible solutions, photography brings those issues to life," she says. "Science is the brain, while photography is the heart. We need both of these things to touch people's hearts and minds."

Looking ahead Daisy is hoping for a less frustrating year than 2020, when it was so difficult to travel in the way she was accustomed to. However, being a positive person, she's been determined to see her glass as being half full, rather than half empty.

"The past year's forced pause from travelling has allowed me to catch up on projects I'd neglected for years," she says. "I finally had the time to publish a new website with an online store, and I'm catching up on editing the roughly 500,000 images which have been sleeping in my hard drive till now.

"Even if I haven't been able to travel physically, I'm actually travelling every day through this editing. That said, I'm looking forward to leading workshops again and sharing my passion for the outdoors." **PP**

More information:
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Daisy's Gear

DAISY'S CAMERA BRAND of choice is Nikon, a choice originally made because so many of the photographers who inspired her as she was starting out – the likes of Thomas Mangelsen, Galen Rowell, David Doubilet and Moose Peterson – were also working with the system.

"Over the years I realised that wildlife photography can be really harsh, not only on your body but also on your equipment," she says. "I work in some of the most challenging conditions on the planet and have to be able to cope with cold, rain, snow, ice and low light. My camera has to be robust, reliable and super-fast.

"Nikon has always excelled in providing equipment I can rely on in the most remote and challenging areas in the world. That allows me to focus entirely on capturing images. My body of choice when working with wildlife is the Nikon D6, coupled with a 500mm or 800mm lens. I use the Nikon D780 as a second body, usually paired with an 80-400mm lens. When in the field, I always carry a mirrorless Nikon Z 7 as well, with a 24-70mm lens for landscape photography."

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