

: KELVIN AITKEN

ICE BEARS

> MY FIRST CONTACT WITH A POLAR BEAR HAPPENED DURING A REST STOP WHILE TRAVELLING ACROSS ARCTIC SEA ICE. MY BREATH CAUGHT, TIME STOPPED, THE WIND HUSHED AND A THRILL OF EXCITEMENT, DISCOVERY AND FEAR TINGLED UP MY SPINE.

Our guides had been using jutting broken ice slabs as vantage points to find open water during a narwhal expedition on Lancaster Sound in the Canadian Arctic. My fellow adventurers and I had wandered away from the sleds on our separate ways to find icicles to photograph. Thinking I'd found a set of sled tracks I stopped to inspect some deep impressions in the snow. I distinctly remember the absolute silence of the Arctic landscape as I gazed at footprints the size of dinner plates – the imprints of a large male bear. The tracks looked so crisp and fresh I instinctively spun around to check I wasn't being stalked from behind nearby broken ice mounds. Nothing. The bear had long gone; our Inuit guide later told me the small dusting of ice crystals on the compacted prints indicated it had passed by about 24 hours earlier. My fascination with Nanook the Ice Bear, the Arctic's ultimate predator, had begun.

Found only in the Arctic from close to the north pole (one was recorded 300 kilometres from the geographical pole) down to about 84 degrees north, the

polar bear is the Arctic's apex predator. While Antarctica or the southern polar region is mostly land mass covered in snow and ice, the northern polar region runs out of dirt well short of the pole so that most of the territory covered by this species is 'at sea'. This makes the polar bear the world's largest amphibious marine mammal. The taxonomic name for the single species of polar bear is *Ursus maritimus*. The Family name *Ursus* is derived from the Latin word for bear and the species name *maritimus* refers to its marine or 'maritime' habitat. This species of bear may be the most unlikely marine mammal, but that's exactly what it is.

Moreover, its staple food is the ringed seal *Phoca hispida*. The only hunting grounds for the seal is on broken sea ice and associated fracture zones that provide natural breathing holes and cracks for this timid seal as well as cover for the foraging bears. The coat of the polar bear allows it to blend in with its environment and, with learned stalking skills, keen eyesight and a superb sense of smell, they're able to catch the blubber-rich seals which provide them with the vitamins, fats and protein needed to survive in the harsh Arctic environment.

Their senses, camouflage and impressive weapons (scythe-like non-retractable seven centimetre claws and large arched incisors) make the polar bear a formidable predator. The native Arctic Inuits have great respect for the power and hunting prowess of the bear. In past ages, to face such an animal with just a pointed stick was no insignificant matter and even today, with powerful rifles and snow mobiles, the power and speed of the bear make it an animal not to be trifled with.

Like most feared predators, they are superb masters of their environment and not just a man-eating 'monster' – or an adorable, cutesy fluff ball for that matter. Unlike sharks, crocodiles and snakes, the polar bear does have mammalian characteristics. They have fur (warm and cuddly), have eyelids (anything that does not blink automatically loses brownie points), suckle their young, have strong maternal bonds and their offspring are as cute and playful as any household puppy or kitten. These characteristics have the general public going all soft and gooey over them while their cold-blooded equivalents are met with an opposite reaction.



1 Fluffy, white, playful and cute. No wonder many people think of the Arctic's top predator as a "nice" animal. Saul Gonor



2 Female polar bears will often give birth on land as the cub, in its first few weeks of life, is as helpless as a human baby. Paul Jackson



3 The skin of a Polar Bear is actually black, as can be seen on the nose and under the short fur on the snout. Saul Gonor



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Their skin colour is actually black and very efficient in absorbing heat from the sun which is piped down their fur fibres, much like an optical fibre which bounces light and heat down its shaft. Their insulation is so efficient that they'll splay out on the snow like a bearskin rug to cool off after a sprint, social session or other extreme physical exertion.

Larger than all bear species, apart from the largest brown bears, the polar bear has a more streamlined body, lacking the shoulder hump of other large bear species. Comparatively it also has relatively small ears, a longer neck, proportionally smaller head and oversized front paws which make them strong swimmers. During the seal season the polar bear may swim hundreds of kilometres between ice floes and fixed shore ice hunting for seals and walrus. They'll also take smaller prey such as birds, birds eggs or small mammals when seals aren't available and will scavenge on whale carcasses, carrion or refuse, making them a nuisance around town dumps and bringing them into contact and conflict with humans.

Their large size, speed, sheer strength and water skills enable them to kill beluga or narwhal, especially when these whale species are trapped in *polyenyas* (isolated ice-bound breathing holes) or stranded in shallow fjords. They've been seen dragging an entire beluga out of the water onto the ice – no mean feat. During the peak hunting season they may just eat the blubber and fatty entrails of their prey, bulking up their own fat stores for the lean winter months. This enables other animals to also profit from the kill, with arctic foxes and glaucous-winged gulls (similar to the common southern silver or seagull) scavenging on the meat and picking the bones clean.

The late Dr Martin Ramsey, who spent many seasons studying polar bears, told me about a *polyenya* he came across during a helicopter survey. He witnessed a bear leap into the truck-sized breathing hole, striking and biting a beluga whale with such force that the whale was stunned and then drowned, as the bear knew that an incapacitating bite to the blowhole effectively subdued a beluga. The bear dragged the floating carcass across to the ice edge then bodily lifted the one tonne whale on to the ice where it stripped the blubber. I've personally witnessed the incredible power of these bears when one swam down 16 metres to a large Greenland shark tangled in our fishing lines, hauled it to the surface then dragged it vertically up about a metre onto the slippery sea ice.

1 An adult female emerging from a temporary "day den" excavated in snow bank. Paul Jackson

2 The magnificent, awesome, fearsome and amazing sight of a powerful adult Polar Bear is one of life's premier experiences. Paul Jackson

3 The dark markings on the head of this swimming male Polar Bear are blood marks left when it has buried its snout in a large seal or possibly a Narwhal or Beluga whale. Paul Jackson

4 Polar Bears will often have twins, sometimes even triplets, caring for them for many months as they are weaned then taught how to hunt for a variety of prey animals. Saul Gonor

5 Play fighting between adults is common when gathered in Churchill prior to the annual sea freeze, allowing them to access the ocean dwelling Ringed Seal. Saul Gonor

6 Taller than a man when standing up, the powerful Polar Bear is a feared predator across two continents. Saul Gonor

7 Dance lessons are a must if you want to join in the fun. Normally solitary, when food or circumstance bring bears together they can be quite social. Saul Gonor



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During the harsh winter months, when surface temperatures drop below -50 or -60 degrees Celsius, male or immature bears will migrate south to follow the seals on the expanding sea ice. Meanwhile, pregnant females dig dens in the snow, usually on land but sometimes on stable sea ice far from terra firma. The den can be simple or complex, from a mere hole to multi-roomed ice 'palaces'. Females drift into hibernation during the extreme dark winter months, ending their nine month pregnancy by giving birth then emerging in the spring to begin teaching cubs the way of life on the ice.

Twins are common, though at times even triplets are produced, and will be cared for by the mother for up to three years.

The cub remains dependant, feeding off her milk and sharing her kills until the next cub arrives. Once a female matures she's rarely without at least one infant by her side. Mothers usually shun the company of other bears as the cubs are often attacked and killed by males.

The most popular bear watching area is Churchill in northern Canada, where bears gather on the shore of Hudson Bay waiting for the winter ice to form, allowing them to venture out onto the newly-formed ice platform to hunt seals. During that time the normally solitary bears enjoy their 'vacation' from hunting, gathering in small groups, playing and wrestling until the heat generated by their efforts forces them to cool off on the ice

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1 Inuit wildlife officers inspect the carcass of an adult polar bear, which most probably died from starvation after failing to find enough seals in a well hunted area.

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2 A juvenile ringed seal (*Phoca hispida*).

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3 Do not try this at home. Paul Jackson



and snow. Huge heated tundra buggies with massive tyres take tourists out to observe the bears, allowing even the least physical punter a chance to see bears in their natural habitat. For the more adventurous and well-heeled, a private guide and skidoo expedition into the wilderness gives more flexibility and a more 'raw' experience.

Unless you're a regular dive visitor to the Arctic or you fall into the polar bear pool at Sea World, you'll never need to worry about being attacked by this impressive predator. Even then, mature animals have a natural aversion and caution towards human contact, unless very hungry or drawn in by smells of food or scraps from hunting expeditions. If a bear is

encountered near water it will often retreat into the sea to avoid contact. Most bear attacks, including all other bear species, have resulted from the bear being surprised by the appearance of a human hunter or hiker so basic bear attack avoidance starts with making lots of noise. Hikers in known bear habitat would take pepper spray or similar device. At home in the sea, being strong swimmers and divers, they have the potential to injure or kill a snorkeler or scuba diver in shallow water, but I've never heard of that occurring, even though some divers have entered the water near a swimming bear.

On my last trip to the Arctic we came across a lone bear hunting for prey along

