

The Night I Felt Like a Seal

This book wouldn't be complete without the story about my closest encounter with a polar bear.

I was travelling with Andrew, my Inuit guide. It was early March, still very cold. I was on a long trip for National Geographic, looking for bears. We'd seen one on an earlier shoot, but I'd missed the moment when he'd grabbed a seal. So we were still hoping for that part of the sequence.

We'd camped for the night near Prince Leopold Island. I could hear the ice creaking and cracking as the tide rose and fell. Good place, I reckoned, for bears to come hunting. They would know the seals used those cracks as breathing holes. I was also thinking how fearsomely cold it was in the tent, even with the sleeping bag pulled over my head.

Eight hours later I woke to the sensation of something repeatedly touching my feet. For a few seconds I lay quiet. Andrew was snoring on his side of the tent. Who was it then outside? Slowly I emerged from the depths of my sleeping bag and looked down to the far end of the tent.

Silhouetted through the backlit canvas was the unmistakable profile of a very big bear. A tiny corner of my caribou-fur sleeping mat was twitching as he pawed at it. I wouldn't say I was scared, but I did feel rather concerned. It's one thing to be separated from a bear by the wood of cabin walls. But flimsy tent material?

I nudged Andrew awake, who was remarkably laid back. His suggestion was: "Stick your head out the tent flap. He'll go away."

To which I could only reply, "How about you stick your head outside the tent, Andrew."

As ever, he was right. This bear was so wary that, in the time it took us to pull our boots on and look outside, he was ambling across the ice away from the camp.

Lancaster Sound, Canadian Arctic, April, filming for *Arctic Kingdom – Life at the Edge*, National Geographic.





Bonding of the Wanderers

I was trying to film very young wandering albatross chicks being fed, but we'd arrived a few days early and they hadn't yet hatched. But up on the hill crests, adults were displaying – magnificent males with their 3-metre wingspan, beaks raised to the heavens, completely engrossed in their courting. I was able to crawl on hands and knees in the gullies between the raised clumps of tussock grass until eventually I was lying on my belly right underneath their outstretched wings. The birds weren't bothered in the slightest, and my most vivid memory is actually of the sloppy slap of their big webbed feet as they padded around in the gloopy, muddy grass.

Bird Island, South Georgia, Antarctica, March, filming for *The Blue Planet*, BBC.

Bird-snatching

This was eye-and-hand coordination so deft that I could barely follow the action with a camera. The Inuit choose their hunting points along the cliffs where millions of little auks come every summer to breed. They wait semi-concealed behind little walls that might have been built last year or 500 years ago; there's no way to tell – the birds and the hunters have been coming here for a long, long time.

The little auks sit on their ledges, but they're ready for mobbing behaviour whenever gulls or gyrfalcons fly overhead. The great flock takes off, climbs to intercept the intruder and gives it a hard time. Then all the birds circle once or twice before landing. Having seen off one hunter, it's then they may fall prey to the other. As the birds fly past his blind, the Inuk thrusts his pole out at full length, whipping it through the air parallel with and just below the flying birds. Then in a split second he twists it into the vertical position so that the birds effectively fly into the net. Here he's about to catch two birds at once.

An experienced hunter can catch 300-400 auks in an afternoon. The dead birds are left to cool for 24 hours before the next stage in preparing the delicacy *kiviag*. The hunter first stuffs the carcasses, 300 or more of them, into a bag made of sealskin. He sews this up tight, smears the stitching with rancid fat to keep the flies from laying their eggs on it and then leaves it under a pile of very heavy stones.

The carcasses rot in the airless sack for six months and are then eaten raw with the feathers pulled off. I was told it tasted like very ripe cheese. I took the locals' word for it.

Siorapaluk, Greenland, July, filming for *Human Planet*, BBC.

